

**THE AIRBORNE CONCEPT IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY, 1960-2000:
STRATEGY VERSUS TACTICS IN SMALL WARS**

by

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STATEMENT

I declare that “The Airborne Concept in the South African Military, 1960-2000: Strategy versus Tactics in Small Wars” is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at UNISA for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

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Abstract

The thesis commences by elaborating on the concept of vertical envelopment as a form of military manoeuvre and defining airborne operations as comprising parachute, helicopter and air-landed actions. It goes on to describe strategy and tactics as they apply to the discussion before briefly tracing the development internationally of vertical envelopment and the thinking of the South African military about airborne operations during the Second World War.

Events leading up to the decision by the South African military to acquire helicopters and to train paratroopers in 1960 are examined and the early operational employment of helicopters is analysed. The establishment of 1 Parachute Battalion is discussed in the light of the absence of a clear understanding of how it should be employed. Moving on to the commencement of the conflict known as the Southern African Thirty Year War, the issue of strategic versus tactical application of an airborne capability during operations in Namibia, Angola and Rhodesia is defined.

Strategic application is then illustrated by specific independent airborne strikes, and the requirement for an airborne brigade to plan and conduct such operations is highlighted. The establishment of 44 Parachute Brigade and the difficulties experienced in its development are reviewed before scrutinising the tactical use of airborne forces in support of other ground forces.

The high point in organisation and capability of the airborne forces of the South African Defence Force at the time of the ending of the Thirty Year War is appraised and the unfulfilled potential of the capability is elucidated. Faced with change and uncertainty, the employment of the paratroopers in urban operations during the height of the civil unrest is examined. This is followed by probing the response of the paratrooper organisation to severe budget cuts, enforced reorganisation and relocation, the ending of conscription and integration into the new South African National Defence Force following the country's first democratic elections in 1994.

The thesis concludes with an evaluation of the airborne actions during the incursion by South Africa into Lesotho in 1998 and an assessment of the implications of the loss of a strategic airborne capability.

Key terms

Airborne operations; Paratroopers; Thirty Year War; Border War; Bush War; Liberation Struggle; South African Defence Force; SADF; South African National Defence Force; SANDF; 1 Parachute Battalion; 44 Parachute Brigade; Vertical envelopment; Helicopters; Strategy; Tactics; Insurgency; Counter-insurgency; Namibia; Angola; Lesotho; Rhodesia; Constand Viljoen; Jan Breytenbach; Manoeuvre; SWAPO; Cubans; MPLA; FAPLA.

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PREFACE

I am a retired Army officer who spent some 47 years in the military. I began as a private soldier and retired with the rank of brigadier general. During this time I spent 30 years serving in or working closely with airborne forces. The expansion and contraction of the airborne capability in the South African military was part of my experience, and during my final years of service life, I was appointed to head a project concerned with resuscitating this capability. Much has since been done to restore the situation, but the question of why the capability declined has never been answered satisfactorily.

My interest in airborne matters prompted me more than 25 years ago to commence research of the South African capability. The research for this thesis has been a culmination of that work, and has presented an opportunity to delve deeply into original documents and to compare these to interviews with participants. It has enabled an assessment to be done of the two prevailing schools of thought concerning airborne forces: merely another tool in the arsenal of a tactical commander to achieve goals on the battlefield; or a capability with the potential to achieve objectives independently of other ground forces with results of strategic importance during conflicts or crises.

This thesis examines the concept of vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre, during South Africa's part in the Thirty Year War. In an effort to contextualise the thesis, a deliberate effort has been made to link political agendas, strategic issues, military tactics and technology in an integrated analysis.

In the thesis the names South West Africa and Rhodesia are used when discussing periods before their current names had received formal international recognition. Thus the name Namibia is only used in those parts of the thesis dealing with the period after 1968, and Zimbabwe for the period after 1980.

Because the thesis deals with an essentially military subject, extensive use is made of military terminology. The list of definitions for this terminology should be consulted where any uncertainty arises. In addition, military abbreviations have been used, principally in the footnotes and especially where military archival sources have been cited. These abbreviations too, are explained in the terminology list.

LIST OF MILITARY TERMINOLOGY AND ABBREVIATIONS

Note 1: Because the thesis is principally concerned with South African Airborne Operations, the SADF/SANDF terminology and abbreviations have been favoured.

2: Additional explanations are provided in the endnotes to this list.

1. Military Ranks and their Abbreviations

Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs)

Lance Corporal (Lance Bombardier in the Artillery)	:	LCpl (LBdr)
Corporal (Bombardier in the Artillery)	:	Cpl (Bdr)
Sergeant	:	Sgt
Staff Sergeant	:	SSgt
Warrant Officer Class 2 (Sergeant Major)	:	WO2
Warrant Officer Class 1 (Sergeant Major)	:	WO1

Officers

Junior Officers

Second Lieutenant	:	2Lt
Assistant Field-Cornet ⁱ	:	Asst Fd Ct
Lieutenant	:	Lt
Field Cornet	:	Fd Ct
Captain	:	Capt

Field Officers

Major	:	Maj
Commandant ⁱⁱ	:	Cmdt
Lieutenant Colonel	:	Lt Col
Colonel	:	Col
Brigadier ⁱⁱⁱ	:	Brig

General Officers^{iv}

Brigadier General ^v (One Star)	:	Brig Gen
Major General (Two Star)	:	Maj Gen
Combat General ^{vi}	:	Cbt Gen
Lieutenant General (Three Star)	:	Lt Gen
General (Four Star)	:	Gen
Commandant General ^{vii}	:	Cmdt Gen
Field Marshal/General of the Armies (Five Star):	:	FM/Army Gen

2. Military Organisations, with their Abbreviations and Ranks of Commanders

Section ^{viii} (usually eight to ten men)	:	Sec	:	Cpl
Hawk Group (22 men – paratrooper org)	:	Hawk	:	2Lt/Lt
Platoon (about 35 men – infantry)	:	Pl	:	2Lt/Lt
Troop ^x	:	Tp	:	2Lt/Lt
Company (100 – 150 men)	:	Coy	:	Maj ^x
Combat Team ^{xi} (Reinforced Sub-unit)	:	Cbt Tm	:	Maj
Squadron ^{xii}	:	Sqn	:	Maj
Battery ^{xiii}	:	Bty	:	Maj
Battalion (500 – 800 men)	:	Bn	:	Cmdt/Lt Col
Battle Group ^{xiv} (Reinforced Unit)	:	Battle Gp	:	Cmdt/Lt Col
Commando ^{xv}	:	Comdo	:	Cmdt/Lt Col
Regiment ^{xvi} (about 1000 men)	:	Regt	:	Col
Group ^{xvii}	:	Gp	:	Col
Brigade (2500 – 5,000 or more men)	:	Bde	:	Col/Brig/Brig Gen
Division (more than one Brigade)	:	Div	:	Maj Gen
Corps ^{xviii} (more than one Division)	:	Corps	:	Lt Gen
Army (more than one Corps)	:	Army	:	Gen
Army Group (more than one Army)	:	Army Gp	:	FM/Army Gen

3. Abbreviations for Specific Military Units and Formations

1 MA	:	1 Military Area (Kavangoland and the Caprivi) ^{xix}
1 Para Bn	:	1 Parachute Battalion
1 RC	:	1 Reconnaissance Commando
1 RR	:	1 Reconnaissance Regiment
1 SSB	:	1 Special Service Battalion
2 MA	:	2 Military Area (Ovamboland and Kaokoland) ^{xx}
2 Para Bn	:	2 Parachute Battalion
2 RC	:	2 Reconnaissance Commando
2 RR	:	2 Reconnaissance Regiment
2 SWA Spec	:	2 South West African Specialist Unit
3 Para Bn	:	3 Parachute Battalion
3 SAI	:	3 SA Infantry Battalion
4 RC	:	4 Reconnaissance Commando
4 RR	:	4 Reconnaissance Regiment
4 Para Bn	:	4 Parachute Battalion
5 RC	:	5 Reconnaissance Commando
5 RR	:	5 Reconnaissance Regiment
10 SA Div	:	10 South African Division
13 SA	:	13 Sub-Area (Eastern Caprivi)
14 Para Bn Gp	:	14 Parachute Battalion Group
15 Sqn	:	15 Squadron, SAAF (Super Frelon helicopters)
16 Sqn	:	16 Squadron, SAAF (Alouette III helicopters)

17 Sqn	: 17 Squadron, SAAF (Alouette III helicopters)
19 Sqn	: 19 Squadron, SAAF (Puma helicopters)
28 Sqn	: 28 Squadron, SAAF (Transall C-160/Hercules C-130 aircraft)
32 Bn	: 32 Battalion
44 Para Bde	: 44 Parachute Brigade
44 Para Regt	: 44 Parachute Regiment
44 Pathf Coy	: 44 Pathfinder Company
44 Sqn	: 44 Squadron, SAAF (C-47 Dakota aircraft)
101 Bn	: 101 Battalion
ABS	: Amphibious Boat Squadron, SAN
MAC	: Marine Amphibious Company, SAN
Marine Bde	: Marine Brigade, SAN
SACC	: South African Cape Corps
SAS	: Special Air Service (British and Rhodesian)
RAR	: Rhodesian African Rifles
RLI	: Rhodesian Light Infantry

4. Other Abbreviations

2IC	:	Second in Command
AA/AAA	:	Anti-Aircraft/Anti-Aircraft Artillery
ABS	:	Amphibious Boat Squadron
ACO	:	Air Contact Officer
AFB	:	Air Force Base
AGL	:	Above Ground Level
ALO	:	Air Liaison Officer
AMSL	:	Above Mean Sea Level
Arm Scor	:	Armament Corporation of South Africa
AOP	:	Air Observation Post (describing a light aircraft used for artillery spotting)
ATk	:	Anti-Tank
APLA	:	African People's Liberation Army (PAC)
AU	:	African Union
ANC	:	African National Congress
APC	:	Armoured Personnel Carrier
AWOL	:	Absent Without Official Leave
BDF	:	Boputhatswana Defence Force (also used for Botswana Defence Force)
CAF	:	Chief of the Air Force
C Army	:	Chief of the Army
C Army S Ops	:	Chief of Army Staff, Operations
CAS	:	Close Air Support
CB	:	Confined to Barracks
Casevac	:	Casualty Evacuation
CCB	:	Civil Cooperation Bureau
CDF	:	Ciskei Defence Force

CDS	:	Container Delivery System (Air Supply)
CF	:	Citizen Force (part-time soldiers)
CGS	:	Chief of the General Staff
Cmdr	:	Commander
Comd	:	Command
C Navy	:	Chief of the Navy
CO	:	Commanding Officer/Candidate Officer
COIN/COINOPS	:	Counter-Insurgency/Counter-Insurgency Operations
Comdo	:	Commando
ComOps	:	Combined Operations (Rhodesian Designation)
Comops	:	Communication Operations
CP	:	Command Post
C SADF	:	Chief of the SADF
C SANDF	:	Chief of the SANDF
CSM	:	Company Sergeant-Major. The senior NCO in a company
CTF	:	Combined Task Force
DB	:	Detention Barracks
dd	:	Dated
DHQ	:	Defence Headquarters
DVR	:	Van Riebeeck Decoration (for distinguished service in action)
DZ	:	Dropping Zone (for paratroopers or parachuted cargo). "Drop Zone" in US terminology
DZSO	:	Dropping Zone Safety Officer
EEl	:	Essential Element of Intelligence. A question that must be answered satisfactorily before an operation can proceed
Encl	:	Enclosure
EW	:	Electronic Warfare
EZ	:	Extraction Zone (for delivering supplies by means of LAPES)
FAC	:	Forward Air Controller
FAF	:	Forward Airfield (Rhodesian designation)
FAPLA	:	Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola
FLOT	:	Forward Line Own Troops
FNLA	:	Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola
FRELIMO	:	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique
GOC	:	General Officer Commanding
Gp	:	Group
HAA	:	Helicopter Administrative Area
HAHO	:	High Altitude High Opening (free-fall parachuting with oxygen)
HALO	:	High Altitude Low Opening (free-fall parachuting with oxygen)
HAPO	:	High Altitude Parachute Operations (includes HAHO & HALO)
HC	:	Honoris Crux (decoration for bravery)
HE	:	High Explosive
HF	:	High Frequency
HQ	:	Headquarters
IFV	:	Infantry Fighting Vehicle
Insum/INSUM	:	Intelligence Summary

IO	:	Intelligence Officer
IP	:	Impact Point. Point of intended landing on a DZ (qv) of first paratrooper or parachuted cargo.
IS	:	Internal Security
JMMC	:	Joint Military Monitoring Commission
KIAS	:	Knots Indicated Air Speed
LAPES	:	Low Altitude Platform Extraction System (Air Supply)
LDF	:	Lesotho Defence Force
LMG	:	Light Machine-gun
LO	:	Liaison Officer
Log	:	Logistic/Logistics
LRDG	:	Long Range Desert Group (Second World War)
LWM	:	Louw Wepener Medal (for bravery)
LWT	:	Light Workshop Troop
LZ	:	Landing Zone (for helicopter insertions)
MAC	:	Marine Amphibious Company
MAOT	:	Mobile Air Operations Team (SAAF)
MDC	:	Military Disciplinary Code
MK	:	Umkhonto we Sizwe (ANC)
MMI	:	Military Medical Institute
MMM	:	Military Merit Medal (previously Commandant General's Commendation Medal)
MNOT	:	Mobile Naval Operations Team
MO	:	Medical Officer (doctor)
MPLA	:	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola
MPV	:	Mine Protected Vehicle
MRV	:	Mine Resistant Vehicle
NATO	:	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCO	:	Non-Commissioned Officer
NDB	:	Non-Directional Beacon
NS/NSM	:	National Service/ National Serviceman/men (conscripts)
OAU	:	Organisation of African Unity
OC	:	Officer Commanding
OFS	:	Orange Free State
OOTW	:	Operations Other Than War
OP	:	Observation Post
Op	:	Operation
Ops	:	Operations/Operational
Opso/OPSO	:	Operational Order
Opsum/OPSUM	:	Operational Summary
PAC	:	Pan-Africanist Congress
Par	:	Paragraph
Para	:	Parachute
Pathf	:	Pathfinder
PED	:	Parachute Evaluation Detachment
PF	:	Permanent Force (regular soldiers)

PISA	:	Parachute Industries of Southern Africa
PJI	:	Parachute Jumping Instructor
PLAN	:	People's Liberation Army of Namibia (SWAPO)
PLEDS	:	Platform Load Extraction Delivery System (Air Supply)
PPA	:	Popski's Private Army (No 1 Demolition Squadron – Second World War)
PSO	:	Peace Support Operations
PZ	:	Pick-up Zone (for helicopter extractions)
RAF	:	Royal Air Force (British)
R&R	:	Rest and Recreation
RDF	:	Rapid Deployment Force
Recce	:	Reconnaissance
Ref	:	Reference
RENAMO	:	Resistência Nacional Moçambicana
Rfn	:	Rifleman
RhAF	:	Rhodesian Air Force
RP	:	Release Point. Position in the air where first paratrooper or parachuted cargo leaves the aircraft.
RPG	:	Rocket Propelled Grenade (usually RPG-7)
RRAF	:	Royal Rhodesian Air Force
RSA	:	Republic of South Africa
RSM	:	Regimental Sergeant-Major. The senior NCO in a battalion.
S&R	:	Search and Rescue
SA	:	South Africa/South African
SAAF	:	South African Air Force
SADF	:	South African Defence Force (see SANDF)
SAM	:	Surface-to-Air Missile
SAMHS	:	South African Military Health Service
SANDF	:	South African National Defence Force ^{xxi}
SAN	:	South African Navy
SAP	:	South African Police
SAS	:	Special Air Service
SD	:	Southern Cross Decoration
SENLO	:	Senior Liaison Officer
SF	:	Security Forces
Sitrep/SITREP	:	Situation Report
SM	:	Southern Cross Medal
SO	:	Staff Officer
SO1	:	Staff Officer 1 st Grade (commandant/lieutenant colonel's rank)
SO2	:	Staff Officer 2 nd Grade (major's rank)
SO3	:	Staff Officer 3 rd Grade (captain or warrant officer's rank)
SOP	:	Standard Operating Procedures
Spec Forces	:	Special Forces
SSO	:	Senior Staff Officer (colonel's rank)
SWA	:	South West Africa (Namibia)
SWAPO	:	South West Africa People's Organisation

SWAT	:	Special Weapons and Tactics
SWATF	:	South West Africa Territory Force
Tac HQ	:	Tactical Headquarters
TALO	:	Tactical Air Landed Operation/Tactical Assault Landing Operation
TAU	:	Tactical Airfield Unit
TDF	:	Transkei Defence Force
TGFA	:	Tropa Guarda Fronteira Angolana
Trg	:	Training
UDF (Military term)	:	Union Defence Force ^{xxii}
UDF (Political term)	:	United Democratic Front
UHF	:	Ultra High Frequency
ULLADS	:	Ultra Low-Level Aerial Delivery System (similar to LAPES)
UNITA	:	União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola
UN/UNO	:	United Nations/United Nations Organisation
UNTAG	:	United Nations Transitional Assistance Group (in Namibia)
USA/US	:	United States of America/United States
USSR	:	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VCP	:	Vehicle Check Point
VDF	:	Venda Defence Force
VHF	:	Very High Frequency
VP	:	Vulnerable Point
WO	:	Warrant Officer. Senior level NCO
ZANLA	:	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANU)
ZANU	:	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZAPU	:	Zimbabwe African People's Union
ZIPRA	:	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZAPU)

5. Military Terminology Used in this Thesis

Abort	:	Cancellation of an operational parachute drop before it commences, usually after the aircraft have taken off.
Airborne	:	The transport and delivery of troops to battle by air. Airborne operations include parachute landings, helicopter landings and tactical assault landings (TALO) from fixed wing aircraft. During the Second World War and for a short period afterwards, gliders were also used in airborne operations.
Airhead	:	Designated area in a hostile or threatened territory which, when seized and held through an airborne action, ensures continued air landing of troops and supplies, provides a base area from which to manoeuvre and from where a withdrawal by air can take place. Usually established around an airfield.
Appreciation	:	Formal, logical process of reasoning by which a commander considers all conditions, circumstances, factors and possibilities affecting the situation, makes deductions and reaches a conclusion, in order to arrive at a decision as to the course of action to be taken, so as to accomplish his mission.

Area Operations	:	Operations to dominate an area so that the enemy is denied freedom of action and movement. Usually a part of COINOPS (<i>qv</i>) and involving extensive patrolling.
Arms of Service	:	The three traditional divisions of the Armed Forces into Army, Navy and Air Force. The SADF raised the Medical Service to the level of a fourth arm of service and the SANDF has continued this practice.
Battalion Group	:	A permanent or semi-permanent reinforcement of an infantry battalion with armour, artillery, engineer and/or other combat corps.
Battalion-minus	:	A battalion that is not up to full strength (<i>qv</i>) in terms of constituent sub-units or numbers of personnel.
Battle Group	:	A temporary grouping of sub-units from various combat corps to form a composite unit for executing a specific mission. Usually under command of a commandant/lieutenant colonel (see Combat Team).
Battle Space	:	The physical environment in which a conflict is waged.
Beachhead	:	Designated area on a hostile shore, usually the landing place for an amphibious operation, which, when seized and held, ensures the continued landing from the sea of troops and matériel and provides a base area from which to manoeuvre and from where a withdrawal by sea can be carried out.
Black-is-beautiful		Colloquial term for a cream used to camouflage the faces and arms of white soldiers so that they would not shine or stand out in the bush.
Bridgehead	:	An area of ground to be taken and held on the enemy's side of a water obstacle, usually a river or lake/dam. When seized and held, it ensures the continued landing across the water of troops and matériel and provides a base area from which to manoeuvre and from where a withdrawal across the water can be carried out.
Casevac	:	Casualty evacuation.
Citizen Force	:	That part of the former SADF (<i>qv</i>) that consisted of part-time soldiers, sailors or airmen. They were mostly conscripts (but some volunteers) who had completed an initial period of full-time training and were under an obligation to render further periods of service, at times up to 90 days continuously every year. They formed the bulk of the SADF and were grouped into part-time CF units for their service.
Combat Team	:	A temporary grouping of combat elements around a sub-unit (usually an infantry company or armoured squadron) to form an enlarged, composite sub-unit for executing a specific mission. Normally under command of a major (see Battle Group and Company Group).
Combined	:	A military term used to describe a multinational grouping of armed forces (see also Joint and Integrated).
Company Group	:	A permanent or semi-permanent reinforcement of an infantry company with non-infantry elements, usually sub-sub-units (<i>qv</i>) such as an armoured car troop, or an engineer troop (see Combat Team).
Contact	:	An encounter with the enemy where gunfire is exchanged.
Conventional	:	<u>Forces</u> : Those forces (excluding irregular forces – <i>qv</i>) capable of conducting operations using non-nuclear weapons.

War: Armed conflict between conventional forces in which nuclear weapons are not employed. Conventional Operations or Conventional Warfare are terms commonly used in the military to differentiate from Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) Warfare, Counter-Insurgency Operations (COINOPS), Asymmetrical Warfare and Operations Other Than War (OOTW), none of which are considered “conventional”. In some countries Guerrilla Warfare, Revolutionary Warfare and other terms are used to describe insurgent actions that fall outside the ambit of conventional operations. The term “Conventional War” was used extensively by the South African Defence Force, and was and is equally extensively and commonly used by other countries and writers on military topics (*vide* Frank Kitson: *Low Intensity Operations*, p. 6). The SADF Military Dictionary defines Conventional War as “non-revolutionary armed conflict in which nuclear weapons are not employed.”

- Corps : The corporate structure of those soldiers trained to carry out a particular military role, such as infantry, armour, artillery, engineers, instructors, musicians, etc. An infanteer can thus be said to be part of the Infantry Corps, a gunner part of the Artillery Corps, etc. A corps can also refer to a tactical grouping of more than one division in the field under one headquarters.
- Counter-Insurgency: Actions to counter campaigns by insurgents (*qv*).
- Cut-off Group : A group of soldiers positioned to cut off escaping enemy (see also Stopper Group).
- D-Day : The day on which a military operation commences (normally the attack).
- Dixies : A set of two rectangular aluminium mess tins that fit one inside the other. They have folding handles and can be used as bowls or plates to eat from, or as pots/pans to cook in. Each soldier is issued with such a set.
- Establishment : A non-tactical military organisation, such as a school, college, training centre or depot.
- Firefight : Skirmish following a contact (*qv*).
- Formation : A permanent grouping of units (*qv*); for example a brigade, division or corps. Usually commanded by a general officer. “Formation” also alludes to a mobile tactical disposition of forces in order to carry out an operation or action (eg, extended line, single file or arrowhead formations). The term is also used to describe the disposition of a group of aircraft while flying (eg V-formation, line abreast, line astern). See Lift and Wave.
- Garrie : Common military slang for a light utility vehicle such as a Land-Rover or Jeep. Origin apparently in Egypt during the Second World War.
- Gunners : The term commonly applied to artillerymen. Gunner is also the rank designation of an ordinary soldier in the SA Artillery.
- Gunship : Alouette III helicopter fitted with a 20mm automatic cannon fired through the side door by the flight engineer.
- Hawk Group : A specially-tailored organisation used by the paratroopers to fit into two Puma helicopters. It took the place of a platoon, and consisted of only two sections of ten men, as opposed to the three sections in a platoon. There was also a Hawk Group commander and his sergeant (often only a

corporal). The more generally used Afrikaans term was *Valkgroep* or simply *Valk*.

- H-Hour : The time at which an attack commences.
- Hold/Holding (verb): Waiting by an aircraft in the air, to be called when needed or to carry out a mission at a designated time.
- Holding Area : Area where the aircraft waits in the air.
- Insurgency : In his celebrated work, *Low Intensity Operations* (1971) British General Sir Frank Kitson describes Insurgency as: "The use of armed force by a section of the people against the government for the purposes of overthrowing those governing the country at the time." This is a fairly universal interpretation of the term.
- Insurgent : The South African Concise Oxford Dictionary defines an insurgent as "a rebel or revolutionary". The term derives from "insurrection", which is a violent uprising against authority. The SADF Military Dictionary uses the definition: "Indigenous or foreign national who aims to overthrow a government by force." It is an internationally accepted military term for such irregular fighters, who could use any number of unconventional methods to wage war, and who do not necessarily consider themselves bound by any rules or conventions of conflict.
- Integrated : A military term describing a grouping or an action comprising more than one combat or combat support corps of the Army (see also Joint and Combined).
- Intelligence Requirements: Information required to facilitate planning, usually concerning the enemy or geography of the area in which an operation is to take place.
- Irregular Forces: Forces that are not part of a conventionally organised, trained and equipped army. Often not wearing standard army uniforms.
- Joint : Military term describing a grouping or an action involving more than one Arm of Service (*qv*) (see also Combined and Integrated).
- Lift : Total number of transport aircraft delivering the airborne force and its equipment on one flight. A lift can consist of several waves (*qv*).
- Mustering : Specialist field of training, such as machine-gunner, driver, chef, clerk, etc.
- National Service: The initial period of full-time conscription. When introduced for all white males in 1968 it was of 9 months' duration, but by 1972 it had been extended to 12 months and in 1978 to 24 months.
- Objective : The physical area to be captured or destroyed. An objective could contain several specific targets (*qv*) of importance, each of which might have to be attacked and captured in order to take the objective.
- Order Group : The subordinate commanders who form the group directly under the senior commander and to whom he issues his orders. It also refers to the meeting at which these orders are issued.
- P-Hour : The time at which the first paratrooper or cargo being delivered by parachute in an operation leaves the aircraft.
- Parabat : Common military slang for a paratrooper. Combination of the words "parachute" and "battalion". Often shortened to "Bat" or "Bats". Not an official term and generally not favoured by regular airborne soldiers.
- Paradak : A C-47 Dakota aircraft, fitted for military static-line parachuting.

- Permanent Force: That part of the former SADF consisting of professional (full-time) soldiers, sailors and airmen. In the original concept of the UDF, the Permanent Force was envisaged as a corps of instructors who would train the Citizen Force for a combat role. With the introduction of national service (*qv*) and the intensification of the Bush War, this changed, and the Permanent Force formed the senior leader element of National Service and Permanent Force units, becoming professional combat soldiers on a par with regular soldiers throughout the world. They continued to train the Citizen Force, however.
- Pro Patria : Campaign medal awarded to qualifying members of the SADF for services rendered in the combating or prevention of terrorism. Most servicemen who completed the required period of time in a declared operational area received this medal. Sometimes disparagingly called by soldiers the “Pro-Nutro Medal” (a reference to a breakfast cereal) because it was awarded in such large numbers.
- Ratpack : Common military slang for ration pack, usually a 24-hour pack of food for one individual.
- Recce : Reconnaissance. Also commonly used military slang for a Special Forces operator.
- Rifleman : The rank designation of an ordinary soldier in the SA Infantry Corps.
- Sappers : The term commonly applied to military engineers. Sapper is also the rank designation of an ordinary soldier in the SA Engineer Corps.
- Staging Airfield : The airfield at which final preparations are done and from where an airborne operation is launched. From it, the troops are flown directly to their DZ or LZ, unless distance requires a Forward Staging Airfield to be established closer to the objective (*qv*).
- Stick : A small group of soldiers of indeterminate size carried by an aircraft. Usually between four and six for an Alouette helicopter, but could be as many as 20 or even 32 being despatched by parachute from one door of a fixed wing aircraft.
- Stop Drop : Cancellation of any parachute drop.
- Stopper Group : Also “stop group”. A group of soldiers placed on an appreciated escape route to prevent the enemy from getting away when an objective occupied by them is attacked (see also Cut-off Group).
- Stop Line : A line of soldiers positioned to prevent enemy that are being attacked from escaping.
- Strength : The number of people in a military organisation, such as a unit or sub-unit. Normally, there would be an approved strength of a certain number of people. Less than the approved number would be described as “under strength”, while more than the approved number would be “over strength”.
- Sub-sub-unit : One of the constituent elements making up a sub-unit (*qv*). Such a sub-sub-unit could be a platoon or a troop. Properly commanded by a lieutenant or a second lieutenant in the South African context.

Sub-unit	:	One of the constituent elements making up a unit (<i>qv</i>). Such a sub-unit could be a company, squadron or battery. Properly commanded in the South African context by a major. (See Sub-sub-unit)
Target	:	A specific point or complex within an objective (<i>qv</i>), to be destroyed or captured during the battle to take the objective. There can be several targets within an objective.
Task Force/Group:		A temporary tactical grouping, usually for a specific task or mission. A task group is usually based on the size of a unit (<i>qv</i>), while a task force is normally of formation size (<i>qv</i>), i.e. consisting of several units or even task groups.
Telstar	:	An aircraft of any type that is used as a radio relay station by remaining airborne high above or near to where troops are deployed. Its presence came close to guaranteeing that the troops would be able to maintain communication with their higher HQ. Also used at times to assist ground troops with navigation in featureless terrain.
Theatre	:	Designation for the greater space in which military operations are taking place or did take place. There is no fixed agreement on how to define a Theatre of Operations. In the Second World War reference was made to the European Theatre and the Pacific Theatre. In the Southern African context of the so-called Thirty-Year War of Liberation in South Africa between 1960 and 1990, references are variously made in different publications to the Southern African Theatre, the Angolan/Namibian Theatre and the Rhodesian Theatre. The SADF also used the terms Western Sub-theatre and Eastern Sub-theatre.
Unit	:	A battalion, regiment or similar organisation, normally commanded by a lieutenant-colonel/commandant, but sometimes by a colonel.
<i>Valkgroep/Valk</i>	:	See Hawk Group.
Wave	:	A formation (<i>qv</i>) of two or more transport aircraft, simultaneously dropping paratroopers and equipment, or simultaneously landing with troops and equipment during an airborne operation. One lift of aircraft could consist of successive waves passing over the DZ or landing on an airfield.

6. Other Terminology

Assegai	:	A long-bladed, double-edged spear, sharpened so it can be used for cutting and stabbing as well as throwing. A shortened haft version was used for stabbing by the Zulu serving in King Shaka's <i>amabutho</i> .
Bakkie	:	A light pick-up truck.
<i>Cuca</i> shop	:	A small shop in rural Owamboland, usually housed in a traditional hut or a corrugated iron shack, where beer, cigarettes and basic household items like soap, candles, salt, etc could be bought. Beer was the primary commodity for sale, and the name <i>Cuca</i> came from a popular brand of Portuguese beer that was produced in Angola under Portuguese rule.
<i>Gomma</i>	:	Sometimes <i>gommo</i> or <i>gommel</i> . A rocky, bush-covered hillock, mainly in the eastern parts of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.

Koevoet	:	A counter-insurgency unit of the SAP. Policemen, not soldiers. The name means “crowbar”.
Kraal	:	An enclosure where livestock is kept. Also a collection of huts adjoining such an enclosure, forming the accommodation of a tribal family.
Mujiba	:	A young herdboyc in Rhodesia. They served as the eyes and ears of the insurgents during the war in that country.
Omarumba	:	Dry river bed in southern Angola and Northern Namibia. Rarely flowing, but sometimes with pools of water during the rainy summer months.
Shana	:	An open, shallow grass-covered depression in the flat bush-covered plains of southern Angola and northern Namibia. Often filled with water in the rainy summer months. Also sometimes spelled <i>Oshana</i> or <i>Chana</i> (or even <i>Shona</i>).

Endnotes

- i. Field Cornet was a rank traditionally used in the Boer commandos and was adopted in South Africa in the 1950s to first replace the ranks of captain and later lieutenant during the concerted effort by the National Party government to South Africanise the military. Second lieutenants were known as assistant field cornets and lieutenants as field cornets.
- ii. In the UDF/SADF the rank of commandant was substituted for lieutenant colonel in the 1950s. It was a traditional Boer rank in the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1994 the SANDF reverted back to lieutenant colonel.
- iii. A brigadier and a brigadier general are of equivalent rank, but whereas most countries use the term brigadier general and classify those who have the rank as general officers, the British and most former British colonies use the term brigadier and do not consider it to be a general officer rank. Prior to the early 1920s, the British still considered the rank to be that of a general officer and used the term brigadier general. South Africa followed the British custom until 1998, when all brigadiers again became brigadier generals.
- iv. The star ranking system for general officers is based on the American rank insignia and has become generally accepted throughout the world, although the actual stars are not necessarily used by all armies. Very few countries have a five-star general (or field marshal/marshal, as it is known in some countries). South Africa only ever had Field Marshal Jan Smuts, though he was a field marshal in the British, not the South African Army.
- v. The rank of brigadier general was replaced by brigadier by the British Army in the 1920s to rid it of the surfeit of general officers on strength after the First World War. All the dominions followed suit. South Africa reverted back to brigadier general in 1998. Most non-Commonwealth countries have always used and continue to use brigadier general.
- vi. In 1957, the rank of major general was replaced with the old Boer designation combat general (*veggeneraal*) as part of Minister of Defence Frans Erasmus’s efforts to give the SADF a more South African character. In 1968 it again reverted to major general.
- vii. With the change of name of the Union Defence Force (UDF) to South African Defence Force (SADF) on 1 April 1957, the post of Chief of the General Staff was replaced with Commandant General SADF. This was an old rank and appointment of the head of the forces of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek. It now became the equivalent of the international rank of full general (four-star). This meant it became both a rank and an appointment. The anomaly that this caused when Admiral H.H. Biermann was appointed to the post in the early 1970s (an admiral could not be a general) resulted in the designation being changed to Chief of the SADF and the Army officers who succeeded Biermann thereafter reverted to the rank of general, in accordance with international custom.
- viii. In the US Army and armies based on the US system, a section is called a squad.
- ix. A troop is normally the armour, artillery and engineer equivalent of an infantry platoon.
- x. In the USA and countries that have adopted the US system, a company and its equivalent is commanded by a captain. In the SADF, a shortage of qualified officers frequently resulted in companies being commanded by captains and even, on occasion, by lieutenants.

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- xi. A combat team would normally be an Infantry company reinforced with elements of armour and engineers, or an armoured squadron reinforced by elements of infantry or engineers.
 - xii. A squadron is normally the armour or engineer equivalent of an infantry company. The Air Force use of the term squadron is different, and for their organisation it is placed on approximately the level of an army battalion.
 - xiii. A battery is normally the artillery equivalent of an infantry company and is properly the smallest element of artillery that is employed.
 - xiv. A battle group would normally be an infantry battalion reinforced with a squadron of armour, a troop of engineers or/and a battery of artillery. However, it could be an armoured/tank regiment, reinforced by other elements.
 - xv. A commando is a traditional, peculiarly South African military term and tradition, loosely equivalent to the militia forces of many other countries. Stemming from the time of the Dutch settlement at the Cape and developed by the Boers into an effective and economical part-time organisation, it became an area protection force, principally rural but also extending across urban areas, during the time of the apartheid government. In many other countries the term commando has been adopted for highly trained special forces or shock troops, principally in acknowledgement of the abilities of the Boer commandos during the Anglo-Boer War (South African War) of 1899-1902. The SADF special forces regiments were divided into commandos, as was the Rhodesian Light Infantry.
 - xvi. The term regiment has different meanings in different countries. It can refer to a grouping of several Infantry battalions or it can be used interchangeably with the term battalion. In many countries with a strong British tradition, it refers to the equivalent of an infantry battalion in the armour, artillery and engineers.
 - xvii. In the South African Army context, a "group" was a peculiar term referring to an organisation within a geographically delineated area consisting of several part-time commando units located within that area. Groups were often reinforced with regular forces if their area was subject to a lot of internal unrest. They were the equivalent of a counter-insurgency brigade, but did not have the capability or authority to operate outside their designated areas.
 - xviii. A corps can also refer to the corporate structure of those soldiers trained to carry out a particular military role, such as infantry, armour, artillery, engineers, etc. An infanteer can thus be said to be part of the Infantry Corps, a gunner as part of the Artillery Corps, etc.
 - xix. During 1979, 1 Military Area became Sector 20.
 - xx. During 1979, 2 Military Area became Sector 10.
 - xxi. In April 1994, with the advent of democracy in South Africa, seven military forces were incorporated to form the SANDF. These were the SADF, the armed wings of two liberation movements (MK from the ANC and APLA from the PAC) and the armies of four former homelands (The Transkei Defence Force, the Ciskei Defence Force, the Bophuthatswana Defence Force and the Venda Defence Force).
 - xxii. In 1957, the name of the Union Defence Force (UDF) was changed to South African Defence Force (SADF). See note xxi above.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH BACKGROUND

1.1. WAR HISTORY AND MILITARY HISTORY

It was a cornucopia, an extraordinary Aladdin's cave of historical materials . . . It's very patchy -- quite a lot of stuff has been destroyed over the years. It hasn't all survived but there are enough files there to tell the stories of the real people at the real sharp end doing real brave stuff.¹

This quote, ascribed to the eminent historian, Professor Keith Jeffery of Queen's University in Belfast, describes his reaction to being the first chronicler to be granted access to the previously classified files of MI6, the British secret Foreign Intelligence Service. It is a comment that aptly describes my research, particularly as it emphasises three important aspects that are very relevant to my thesis. Firstly, the thesis is based primarily on previously classified archival source material, delightfully abundant, yet confusingly vast; secondly, the archival material is often incomplete, frustratingly like a jig-saw puzzle with sometimes important pieces and therefore detail missing, yet the bigger picture can still be seen; and thirdly, the quintessence of the matter and the people involved can now be identified, extracted and examined.

It is the third of these aspects that is of particular importance to my overall approach to this thesis, for it enables me to confront the specifically military issues. This highlights a dichotomy in the study of armed conflict that is reflected here: war history as opposed to military history. The genre often referred to as "war history" reflects trends in the history of conflict that emphasise the broad spectrum of political, diplomatic, economic, social, cultural, and even psychological components of war.² The actual military component, in the form of organisations, tactics, and technology, as well as the application of military strategy, the conduct of campaigns and the course of battles, constitutes "military history", which has a far narrower focus. It is important to make this distinction, because this thesis falls squarely within the field of military history.

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1. Professor Keith Jeffery, in an interview with the BBC on 21 September 2010, available on the Internet at <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-11378601>.
 2. Prominent historians who have espoused this war history trend include A.J.P. Taylor in his *The Origins of the Second World War* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1961); and N. Ferguson in his thought-provoking *The Pity of War* (London, Penguin Press, 1998).

In South African historiography, the period from the 1970s to the early 2000s saw liberal academia relegating military history to virtual obscurity because of the antipathy to violence and war in the apartheid era. While military history has always been a staple of history writing in many countries, it had become less respected among professional historians in South Africa by the end of apartheid and the advent of democracy in 1994. Some conservative historians, such as J.H. Breytenbach, with his monumental six-volume work, *Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899–1912* (1971, 1973, 1977, 1978, 1983 and 1996), and F.J. du T. Spies, with *Operasie Savannah Angola, 1975–1976* (1989), both commissioned by government departments, kept military history alive in Afrikaans academia, while *Scientia Militaria: The South African Journal of Military Studies*, published by the Faculty of Military Science (Military Academy) at the University of Stellenbosch, provided a forum that helped prevent its total demise.³ Throughout this period, writers continued to produce popular military histories of the so-called Border War, or Bush War, for which there seemed to be a ready market among white South Africans who had been conscripted and had participated in the war. Writers who produced these publications included Al J. Venter, *The Zambesi Salient* (1974); Willem Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!* (1983) and *South Africa's Border War* (1989); Fred Bridgland, *The War for Africa* (1990); Helmoed-Römer Heitman, *War in Angola: The Final South African Phase* (1990); Jim Hooper. *Koevoet!* (1988) and Peter Stiff, *Nine Days of War* (1989).

However, in serious historical circles, military history had fallen into disfavour, if not disrepute. In the wake of the conflict that had characterised life in the country for so long and where conscription had played a major role in the militarisation of white society, things military became anathema to most serious historians. What little research was done into South African military history, tended to focus on wars of a century and more earlier, such as John Milton's *The Edges of War* (1983), chronicling the Frontier Wars of 1702–1878 (sometimes now referred to as the Wars of Dispossession). This is not to say the long, low-intensity war the country experienced between 1960 and 1990 was ignored; but interest in the military lay more with political and social scientists than with historians. Philip Frankel's *Pretoria's Praetorians* (1984) is an insightful study of civil-military relations in South Africa during this time, and although not a historian, he places it within a definite historical framework.

3. One such article is the insightful study of Boer strategy by F. Pretorius, "The Second Anglo-Boer War: An Overview", *Scientia Militaria*, 30, 2 (2000).

With the centenary of the South African War of 1899–1902 (perhaps more frequently referred to as the Anglo-Boer War) the country experienced a resurgence of interest in that conflict. Professional historians embarked on fresh studies, but these were almost all war histories, not military histories. War history provides a way of widening the lens on war and society, looking at gender and identity, and this approach dominated studies of the conflict between Boer and Briton, broadening it to include the effect of the war on other races. This approach is epitomised in *Writing a Wider War* (2002), edited by Greg Cuthbertson, Albert Grundlingh and Mary-Lynn Suttie. In line with this, more recently, a revealing study appeared on Jews in the Boer armed forces during the war: *Boerejode* (2010) by David Saks. The Boer emphasis on masculinity was critically examined by researchers like Sandra Swart in her article on the manipulation of gender identity under wartime conditions.⁴ In the compendium *A Century is a Short Time* (2005), edited by Ina Snyman, Ian Liebenberg, Gert van der Westhuizen and Mariaan Roos, this trend is extended even further, with writers from a variety of disciplines other than history giving their perspectives of the conflict. Although the article by Apollon Davidson and Irina Filatova about Russian military observers to the South African War⁵ could undoubtedly be regarded as military history, its fascinating diplomatic angle gives it a wider appeal. This dominant historiography of the South African War (particularly with the 100-year commemoration of the conflict) has tended to relegate other wars, including the so-called Thirty Year War in southern Africa, of which the Border War was a part.

As was the case in the USA during and after the Vietnam War, there has been a reluctance to valorise South Africa's recent wars, so this tendency in the wake of a divisive war to focus on war history in modern conflicts has not been restricted to South Africa. But it has been perhaps more apparent in South Africa, where a pre-occupation with notions of liberation from racial oppression resulted in marginalising the nature of military conflict, its techniques, technologies, strategies and tactics. Instead, the emphasis was on militarisation and gendering: the effect of war on society. This was exemplified at an international conference on War and Society held at South Africa's Military Academy in 2001, where Professor Bill Nasson delivered the Turner Lecture, entitled, "Battling for History: The Impact of War upon Modern South

4. S. Swart, "'You were men in wartime': The Manipulation of Gender Identity in War and Peace", *Scientia Militaria*, 28, 2 (1998).

5. A. Davidson and I. Filatova, "Seeking the Secrets of War: Russian Military Observers at the South African War (1899–1902)", *Kleio*, 30 (1998).

Africa”.⁶ His remarks about the more mundane aspects of traditional inward-looking military history were derisively nuanced, reflecting the disdain in which some historians hold the genre. War history in South Africa has been profoundly influenced by scholars of the history of war and society, such as Nasson, particularly with his *The South African War 1899–1902* (1999)⁷ and *Springboks on the Somme* (2007), as well as Albert Grundlingh’s *Fighting their Own War* (1987) about black South Africans’ part in the First World War, his most recent *War and Society* (2015) and his several contributions to anthologies in the same vein. In their probing joint work, *The War at Home* (2013), about the women and families affected by the South African War, Nasson and Grundlingh highlight the tragic social dimension of conflict.⁸ The concentration by these two eminent historians on the South African War and the First World War have influenced the approaches to war which social historians in South Africa have adopted and which have become evident in the works of those war historians now writing about the country’s apartheid wars, such as Gary Baines in *South Africa’s “Border War”* (2014). Baines engages with the differing perceptions of participants and with the effects of conscription and military service on society and on memory.

With the passage of time, however, the trend to uncover a detailed military narrative seems necessary. Writing about war without its military dimension blunts the analysis and focuses attention on the effects rather than the nature of warfare. Evidence of an acknowledgement of this was becoming apparent early in the first decade of the 21st century, when signs of a renewed interest in the military side of conflict were seen. However, this was accompanied by an awareness that analysis, rather than mere narrative, was essential for studies to have credibility. Rocky Williams provided a compelling comparative overview of the guerrilla campaigns of the Boer republics and Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress, in his chapter, “From the Magaliesberg Campaign to Sasolburg” (2006).⁹ In 2012, the centenary year of the establishment of South Africa’s first unified defence force, the South African Military Academy published a compendium, *The South African Armed*

6. This was later published in *Scientia Militaria*, 31, 1 (2003).

7. Revised and re-published as *The War for South Africa: The Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2011).

8. The full title of this work is *The War at Home: Women and Families in the Anglo-Boer War* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2013).

9. The Williams chapter appears in I. Snyman, I. Liebenberg, G. van der Westhuizen and M. Roos (eds), *A Century is a Short Time: New Perspectives on the Anglo-Boer War* (Pretoria, Nexus, 2005), pp. 58–88.

Forces 1912–2012, as a commemorative issue of its journal *Scientia Militaria*. This showcased a preponderance of military history articles, many of them incisively analytical and constructively critical. It is this military history emphasis that I have followed in my thesis, where the historical conduct of a particular form of military manoeuvre and the application of tactics associated with it, are analysed.

Those who have favoured war history frequently had no military background or experience, and understandably saw conflict through a lens constructed around their own specialist non-military fields of interest and expertise, or their concern with the social impact of conflict, especially in light of the influence of social history from the 1970s. It is therefore not surprising that John Keegan and Brigadier General Robert A. Doughty, who have been prominent internationally as military historians, both taught military history at famous military academies. This would have provided them with a firm foundation to combine military and academic disciplines.

Keegan, a long-time senior lecturer at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, and a distinguished academic, authored many books that are distinctly of the military history genre. His *The Face of Battle* was first published in 1976 and in many ways set the tone for modern military history writing. The prominence he gives to the role of topography in war impacts directly on tactical and military-strategic issues in much of his writing. His insightful study of *The American Civil War* (2009) is a prime example of this. Despite the accusations levelled at Keegan that he has shown a naïveté regarding the political dimension of war,¹⁰ his work is widely acknowledged.

Doughty, long-time chair of the Department of History at the US Military Academy, West Point, authored *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (2005), in which he focused tightly on strategy and operations with amplifying discussions about the impact of changing technology, the evolution of French doctrine, the impact of politics on the command structure, and interaction between French, British, and Russian military strategies and operations.

In South Africa, although war historiography continues to dominate among serious historians, military history is increasingly rising to greater prominence, but with a sharper analytical focus rather than the dry narrative that characterised many past publications. Recent

10. See, for example, R.K. Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion?", *International Security*, 25, 2 (Fall 2000).

examples are two important general histories by academics. These are *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, (2015) by Lieutenant Colonel Ian van der Waag, head of the department of Military History in the Faculty of Military Sciences at the University of Stellenbosch, housed in the South African Military Academy at Saldanha; and *The SADF in the Border War, 1966–1989* (2013)¹¹ by historian Leopold Scholtz, who served as a part-time officer in the South African Army.

Not all historians have embraced this differentiation of genres within the study of armed conflict. Stephen Morillo and Michael Pavkovic, for example, in *What is Military History?* (2013), refer only to military history in their exposition of the discipline, and appear to subsume war history within this term. They prefer to speak of “interdisciplinary influences” on military history, and by their own admission, their definition of the term “military history” is extremely broad.¹² Despite their use of the term, their interpretation promotes the idea of war history, rather than military history. This absence of a distinction creates other difficulties. Jeremy Black of the University of Exeter, for example, who also sees military history as a broad discipline in *Rethinking Military History* (2004), decries the Eurocentric, big-power approach to the subject and the emphasis on technology in modern histories with a military theme. This could be seen as an attempt to shift the focus from specifically military issues back to the wider scope of war and all its ramifications, but highlights the apparent reluctance of war historians to grant recognition to more specialised studies of conflict.

Similarly, John Lynn of the University of Illinois, in *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (2004), challenges the belief that technology has been the dominant influence on combat, and rejects the notion of a “Western way of warfare”, replacing it with more nuanced concepts of varied and evolving cultural patterns of combat. This too, draws attention away from the specifically military aspects. In this thesis, technology and Western military thinking could not be avoided. Although my study is concerned with conflict in Africa and is thus not Eurocentric, Lynn’s other pleas cannot be heeded in this military history. The specific military application that is considered in my thesis (airborne operations) is dependent on technology, and the technology is mainly Western, as are the tactics that the technology enables.

11. The full details of these works are: I. van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball, 2015); and L. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966–1989* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2013).

12. See S. Morillo and M. Pakovic, *What is Military History?* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013), pp. 64–69; and 3–5.

Categorising historical themes, tendencies, approaches or genres sometimes results in artificial boundaries that historians are unlikely to adhere to (and indeed, are probably impossible to adhere to). And this is how it should be. There is always overlapping of fields in any study of conflict, because war touches on almost every aspect of the human experience, and the military, as an organisation, is a part of a country's social fabric. Yet it is important to accept that while history has a wider scope, the military component of a war needs to be studied in detail for a better understanding of war. It is, after all, the executive arm in conflict. Perhaps the widely acknowledged military historian, Hew Strachan, of Oxford and St Andrew's universities, has best succeeded in this, with his clear focus on the military dimensions without excluding the wider context within which the events unfolded. His works in this vein include *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (1988); *The First World War in Africa* (2004); *Big Wars and Small Wars* (2006); *The Direction of War* (2013); and *The First World War* (2014). Strachan's clear grasp of the importance of strategy at the political level has not meant that he has veered away from embracing the military history school of thought.¹³ Following this approach, my thesis takes a military line, but in addition an attempt is made to contextualise the military events within the broader political and social picture of what was taking place at the time.

1.2. POSITIONALITY

It is important for me to state at the outset that I have undertaken this research first and foremost as a military professional. My military background and specialised career-path is my motivation in tackling this particular subject. I believe that there has been a bias, partly due to ignorance, in South African military circles, on the role and employment of airborne forces. This is specifically with regard to their tactical, as opposed to strategic use. It is a bias that I believe impacts negatively on both organisation and training, and consequently on the potential of airborne forces. It was a tendency in the old South African Defence Force (SADF), and in this thesis I have attempted to show why this was so. My concern has been that I have observed the tendency as even more pronounced in the new South African National Defence Force (SANDF) after 1994. I am convinced that the bias is rooted in historical experience, and that this needs to be understood before it can be corrected. My hope is that the thesis will in some way

13. J. Kirkup and B. Farmer, "Britain's Wars 'have no strategy' says Top Military Advisor", *The Telegraph*, 8 Jan. 2014.

contribute towards a better understanding and more balanced thinking on this matter. For this reason, I have decided to include the operation by the SANDF into Lesotho in 1998. Although it was a post-apartheid military action, it illustrated the continuing effects of the bias that I have identified.

I have tried to maintain credibility among a potential military readership by employing internationally accepted military terminology when referring to broader concepts; hence my use of the neutral word “insurgent”. The word is common and official in almost all armed forces where English is used. Contrary to what many civilians think, “insurgent” does not have a negative connotation, other than being applied to irregular forces. The old SADF described the insurgents as “terrorists”; the liberation movements called them “freedom fighters”. I have deliberately avoided using either of these terms. In the Terminology List, I have penned the following definitions:

Insurgency: In his celebrated work, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-keeping* (1971), British General Sir Frank Kitson describes insurgency as “The use of armed force by a section of the people against the government for the purposes of overthrowing those governing the country at the time”.¹⁴ This is a fairly universal interpretation of the term.

Insurgent: The *South African Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines an insurgent as “a rebel or revolutionary”. The term derives from the word insurrection, which is a violent uprising against authority. The *SADF Military Dictionary* uses the definition “Indigenous or foreign national who aims to overthrow a government by force”. It is an internationally accepted military term for such irregular fighters, who might well use any number of unconventional methods to wage war, and who do not necessarily consider themselves bound by any rules or conventions of conflict.

I do not believe these definitions reflect negatively on any of the liberation movements; in fact, I feel they apply very specifically and in an absolutely neutral manner to all of them: South African, Namibian, Angolan, Mozambican and Zimbabwean. Even the current SANDF uses the term “insurgent” and offers training in “counter-insurgency” (the term does have a hyphen in British English, but not in American English). Every credible English-language military journal in the world uses the term. When I was studying at the Spanish Army Staff College in Madrid,

14. F. Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-keeping* (London, Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 3.

they used the term *insurgente*. It is not a derogatory term, but simply refers to a manner of waging war and to those who wage war in this manner. It does not carry the same meaning as “terrorist”. Terrorism can be used in all forms of warfare: conventional, insurgency or nuclear. The South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO) used its armed wing, the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), to wage an insurgent war, making their fighters insurgents. But FAPLA, the armed forces of Angola’s MPLA government, and the Cuban armed forces, fought a conventional war against the SADF, and were never referred to as “insurgents”. The word is used in the same context in this thesis and in all the professional military journals I have employed as sources.

Much of what has been written about the Thirty Year War from the perspective of the security forces of Portugal, Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa has reflected, either directly or inadvertently, the social phenomenon of the militarisation of society through conscription. However, this is not the intention in this study. Instead, the emphasis falls on a particular type of military operation. Issues such as militarisation, masculinity, elitism and the effect of conscription on the broader population are only addressed in passing. These matters are not central to the main thrust of my argument, which would have differed little had the soldiers all been volunteers as opposed to conscripts. Paratroopers, in any case, whether conscripted or not, were all volunteers, because in the SADF nobody was compelled to undergo parachute training. An overview of the historiography on the topic is therefore undertaken from the narrower perspective of military history and not war history.

1.3. THE THIRTY YEAR WAR AND AIRBORNE OPERATIONS

The appellation Thirty Year War requires elaboration. There is a growing tendency to refer to a single, broader regional war encompassing all the southern African liberation conflicts waged from about 1960 onwards. See, for example, Colin Leys and John S. Saul, *Namibia’s Liberation Struggle* (1995),¹⁵ and Ian Van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa* (2015).¹⁶ The late Rocklyn Williams, a former Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) operative, also espoused the term in “The Other Armies: Writing the History of MK”, his chapter in Ian Liebenberg et al, *The Long March: The Story of the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa* (1994).

15. C. Leys and J.S. Saul, *Namibia’s Liberation Struggle: The Two-Edged Sword* (London, James Currey, 1995), pp. 2 and 5.

16. Van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p. 246.

What were therefore previously seen as the separate liberation struggles in Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique or South Africa, are increasingly viewed as campaigns within a broader, regional liberation war. The overall aims of the freedom fighters in all these insurgency campaigns were similar, as were those of the three government security forces in their counter-insurgency campaigns. The liberation movements were frequently operating as close allies and the three white minority governments had a loose and surreptitious alliance. Furthermore, the conflicts all took place in approximately the same thirty-year period. What have been variously referred to in a large body of literature as the Portuguese Overseas Wars in Angola and Mozambique; the Rhodesian Bush War; the South West African Border War; and even the conflict in the townships of South Africa, are therefore now increasingly regarded as different campaigns within the Thirty Year War. It remains to be seen whether the ending of this African Thirty Year War will be as significant to this continent as was the Peace of Westphalia to Europe in 1648, marking the end of that continent's Thirty Years War and establishing the primacy of unitary state power.

In this thesis, although it touches upon several of the regional campaigns, only one military aspect of southern Africa's Thirty Year War is considered, namely airborne operations. In conflict situations in which military forces are deployed, airborne operations entail the delivery of ground troops by air to engage in combat. This can be done by parachute, by helicopter or by the landing of fixed-wing aircraft. In military terms, this enables a form of manoeuvre known as vertical envelopment to take place, adding a third dimension to mobile warfare. During the Thirty Year War that was waged in southern Africa, the military actions of the Portuguese, the Rhodesian and the South African security forces included many airborne actions. For the most part these involved the deployment of troops by helicopter, but also on many occasions by parachute, and at least once by means of an air landing. Most of these deployments took place as tactical actions in support of larger operations by ground forces; but there were some that had strategic intentions or results and were carried out independently of other ground forces.

Their significance to the military strategy and tactics employed by the security forces during the war, their alignment and comparison with contemporary military operations in the wider international arena, and their continued relevance in post-liberation Africa have not, until now, been conceptually examined. This thesis focuses on the employment by the SADF of its

airborne capability in the tactical and strategic roles during the Thirty Year War, and the one employment of an airborne force by the SANDF, post-1994. It needs to be stressed that this study does not extend to special forces, other than a few selected airborne operations carried out by these forces. Special forces have a different role and undergo different training to paratroopers, although both are trained in military parachuting.

Although they are rarely decisive in conventional military operations (see Terminology and Abbreviation List for an explanation of the term “conventional”), airborne forces do provide an aerial dimension to the battlefield that increases the scope and flexibility of action of commanders. Yet airborne operations need to be seen in a wider context and should be analysed conceptually in terms of the theory of manoeuvre. In so doing, airborne forces are seen to have played a decisive role in many military operations that would not generally be termed conventional; the sort of operations that have become increasingly frequent in the decades since the Second World War. These include counter-insurgency operations, interventionist peace support operations, hostage rescue operations, relief or reinforcement of beleaguered forces and even humanitarian relief operations, particularly in Africa.

In their acclaimed work, *Soldiers* (1985) military historians John Keegan and Richard Holmes state:

The fact that large-scale airborne assaults may be a thing of the past limits, but by no means ends, the usefulness of parachute units. They are accustomed to operating with light scales of equipment and can be quickly flown in to trouble-spots. The rigours of parachute training – rightly or wrongly – encourage élitism, so that airborne soldiers enjoy high morale, which makes them an asset . . .¹⁷

Yet, despite the continued use of an airborne capability by the military forces of most countries, it has always had its detractors. The criticisms are perhaps best encapsulated in a working paper written by Marc DeVore at the Security Studies Program (SSP) of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Political Science Department.¹⁸ However, such criticism must be weighed against the actual employment of airborne forces in the broadest sense. DeVore, for instance, bases his Eurocentric arguments on an examination of the airborne forces of only three countries, all of them prominent first-world powers, namely the Soviet Union,

17. J. Keegan and R. Holmes, *Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle* (London, Sphere Books, 1985), pp. 201–203.

18. M. DeVore, *The Airborne Illusion: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Working Paper, June 2004.

Great Britain and the United States. Other than mentioning the French, he has avoided reference to those countries engaged in small wars and insurgencies, where airborne forces played a significant role.

In addition, some of the historical statements on which he bases his argument are incorrect and he fails to give due consideration to wider military issues such as morale, surprise, psychological disruption, strategic deterrence and poor generalship. His tendency, like that of most detractors, is to fault the capability selectively instead of identifying the shortcomings in its employment. He glosses over advances in airborne technology since the Second World War, is dismissive of airborne actions in “small wars” and does not address the conceptual approach to vertical envelopment. He therefore fails to embrace the broader airborne theory. He does not include a revolutionary aspect such as helicopter mobility in his discussion, nor does he display any grasp of the concept of vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre. Furthermore, his writing reveals an unfortunate lack of technical and tactical knowledge of military parachuting and airborne planning. Such analyses display a first-world bias that excludes a continent such as Africa, where in excess of 30 significant airborne operations have been carried out since the Second World War, several of them during the Thirty Year War.¹⁹

1.4. DECLINE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN AIRBORNE CAPABILITY

The capability of the airborne force used in an airborne operation is determined not merely by the people who compose it, but by a combination of its size, organisation, doctrine, training, equipment, aircraft, weapons and experience; but importantly, also its command and control mechanisms. The SADF possessed a formidable airborne capability of brigade strength by 1989/1990. This included a full-time parachute battalion group and three additional part-time parachute battalions as well as part-time units of field and anti-aircraft artillery, combat engineers, signals, logistical and technical support, as well as pathfinder, anti-tank, despatcher and air-supply elements.²⁰ To transport the paratroopers the South African Air Force (SAAF) had

19. M. Alexander, Course JSC 34/95, “The Employment of a SANDF Parachute Brigade for Interventionist Peace Support Operations in Africa”, Staff Paper for the Officer Commanding the SA Defence College, 25 October 1995, Annexure 7 to Appendix C.

20. Confidential document, “Magsontwerp vir Valskermmagte: Implementeringsstudie”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/C/305/2/1, 28 June 1988; Letter from C Army (D Plan) to C SADF (CS Plan), “Establishment of a Full-Time Parachute Battalion Group”, Ref. C ARMY/D PLAN/502/1/1 6 Oct. 1988; Confidential document, “Presentation to D Plan and Commission of Inquiry into the Proposed Location of a Full-Time Parachute Battalion Group to Serve as Chief of the Army’s Reserve”, Ref. 44 PARA BDE/305/2/1 16, June 1989.

seven C-130B Hercules, nine C-160Z Transall and more than 20 C-47 Dakota aircraft (in the process of being upgraded to turbo-prop versions) that had the capability of dropping a total of 1,300 soldiers in one lift.²¹ The air supply systems were the most modern and sophisticated in the world, enabling the delivery by parachute of heavy equipment and light armoured vehicles.²² For a country of its size, the capability was extraordinary, and did not simply exist on paper; it was a practiced and demonstrable capability with well-trained, experienced and competent personnel and an efficient operational headquarters. This included both the Army and Air Force commanders and staff officers necessary to plan and conduct an airborne operation, and fully trained soldiers and aircrews to execute the operation. The equipment was in place and the component elements were practiced in the procedures of airborne operations. There was a viable ability to project force by air at short notice and for that force to stage a feasible military operation with the necessary sustainment for a limited period of time.²³

In the next decade, that capability shrank and deteriorated significantly, with evidence of this decline becoming apparent well before the advent of democracy in 1994. After the election of the new democratic government the downward tendency in the airborne forces continued and increased. In the course of my research, it became apparent that the South African airborne capability showed a gradual growth and development that coincided with increased involvement in external military operations and a perceived threat from across the borders, but a marked and rapid decline that coincided with the country's withdrawal from such operations in 1989 and its escalating commitment to the employment of military force internally, against the country's own citizens.

This decline culminated, during the years after democratisation in 1994 and the resultant disappearance of any apparent military threat to the state, in the almost total demise of the capability. This was illustrated during an airborne exercise held near Bethlehem in the

21. J.W.R. Taylor (ed.), *Jane's All the World's Aircraft, 1987-88* (London, Macdonald & Janes, 1976), p. 142; H. Potgieter and W. Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force* (Cape Town, Struik, 1981), pp. 81, 91, 96.

22. Information leaflet, "Exercise IRON EAGLE 90", Headquarters, 44 Parachute Brigade, Pyramid, 2 July 1990; Anon., "Exercise Iron Eagle: Firepower, Mobility and Surprise", *Armed Forces*, August 1990; and Anon., "What is LAPES?", *Ad Astra*, 14, 5 (May 1993).

23. Confidential, "Bevelswaardering vir Oef YSTERAREND 90 (Lugstormoefening te Murrayhill)", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/308/1/1/YSTERAREND 90, 8 March 1990; "Opleidingsinstruksie 15/91: Oef YSTERAREND 90", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/308/1/1, 30 May 1990; Anon., "Exercise Iron Eagle: Firepower, Mobility and Surprise", *Armed Forces*, August 1990.

Free State during 2001, when numerous critical shortcomings were identified.²⁴ In a subsequent investigation into the SANDF's airborne capability, it was pointed out that there was no longer an operational airborne headquarters in existence; there were only two companies of paratroopers and one of air-landed troops available for deployment; there were no longer any parachute field artillery, anti-aircraft artillery or combat engineers available; the average age of paratroopers was the mid-thirties; there was a dire shortage of aircraft and aircrew; there was no airborne logistic system in place; and there were no trained parachute medical officers.²⁵ The naïve comment by a general officer of the SA Army (a former member of the SADF) at the time was that the SANDF had no need of a permanent airborne HQ and a permanently grouped airborne formation; if the need arose to deploy a parachute force, there was sufficient expertise spread throughout the Army, so a headquarters and an airborne force could quickly be put together for any contingency if this proved necessary.²⁶ This revealed a disturbing inability to grasp the basic requirements for a successful airborne operation, and a complete lack of understanding of rapid deployment. In effect, it meant a return to the highly unsatisfactory situation that had prevailed 25 years earlier.

The state of the airborne forces at the turn of the century raises the question why this once potent capability had been allowed to decline to this extent. But the reasons for the prevailing attitude at a senior level in the SANDF at the time also need to be researched. There can be no doubt that the rapidly changing political milieu, the simultaneous dramatic curtailment of defence spending due to a drastically reduced defence budget and the ending of conscription all contributed to the reduction in the size of the airborne forces, as it did to all other elements of the greater armed forces. The almost simultaneous ending of the local conflict and the Cold War and the priority to integrate former forces to form a new Defence Force certainly also played a role. Yet these circumstances do not provide a satisfactory explanation for the indifference to and acceptance of the loss of inherent capability in terms of planning capacity, organisation and status, as well as the apparent failure of the clumsy and

24. Restricted Report, Exercise IRON EAGLE: 44 Parachute Regiment: 20-23 August 2001, Ref. RJTF S/R/308/1, August 2001.

25. M.Alexander, "Investigation into the Airborne Capability of the SANDF", Power Point slide show presentation, 2004.

26. Airborne Symposium arranged by PISA, Pretoria, 24 October 2001.

inefficient command and control system foisted upon the airborne forces at the time: shortcomings that are addressed and analysed in this thesis.

The effect on the airborne forces of the dramatic changes sweeping across South Africa in the 1990s cannot be brushed aside, but it is too simplistic to ascribe the drastic regression in both organisation and thinking regarding the airborne concept to this. Van der Waag, referring to those in power under the new dispensation after 1994, writes of a “lack of strategic vision among policymakers, who had little understanding of the complexity of force development and, with an ideal vision, wished to design armed forces for the short term”.²⁷ The question remains: Why was there no attempt made within the military to retain at least a modicum of competence in a capability with such strategic potential in Africa? It is the contention in this thesis, that the answer lies in the understanding of the strategic role of an airborne force.

1.5. THE ARGUMENT: STRATEGY VERSUS TACTICS

There has long been a dichotomy of thinking on whether the airborne capability has a primary value as a strategic or as a tactical tool in any national arsenal. There have been post-Second World War examples (including several in Africa) of strategic airborne operations achieving a national political aim in a conflict situation. However, in most of the small wars of the second half of the 20th century, airborne operations have merely been a tactical adjunct to the larger military operations. In the case of South Africa, the question could be asked: Has this tactical emphasis paradoxically contributed to the loss of a viable airborne capability?

The case that is argued in this thesis is that the accentuation of the tactical level downgrades the value of the airborne concept in military thinking, resulting in the loss of strategic airborne capacity. The salient result is the absence of both an airborne deterrent to would-be aggressors and a rapidly deployable force to deal with unexpected crises under almost any circumstances. This is precisely what happened in the case of the South African airborne capability.

1.6. THE RELEVANCE OF AN AIRBORNE CAPABILITY

The SADF experience in operations during the second half of the twentieth century indicates that the very possession of an airborne capacity provides a military advantage. This in itself

27. Van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p. 285.

affords an airborne force a strategic influence. In the words of Tom Clancy in his examination of the United States airborne capability, “Airborne forces are a deterrence force with power, mass and an ability to make an opponent think about whether his ambitions are really worth the risk and trouble”.²⁸ Colonel Festus Aboagye, formerly of the Ghana Armed Forces and a one-time panel member for the development of the policy framework relating to the establishment of the African Standby Force (ASF), writes of the “coherent rapid deployment capabilities” envisaged for this force²⁹ to carry out Scenario 6 interventions of the conflict and mission scenarios identified by the African Union.³⁰ There can be little doubt that only an airborne force could provide such a capability.

The SADF developed both a tactical and a strategic airborne capability during its participation in the Thirty Year War in Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe from 1966 to the late 1980s. However, as the conflict developed and hostilities progressed through the classical phases of revolutionary war³¹ from a low-level insurgency to conventional operations in which South Africa gradually lost air supremacy to Angolan, Cuban and Soviet forces, this advantage of having an airborne deterrent was largely negated. Coupled to this air supremacy of her enemies, South Africa found itself faced with one of the most hostile air defence environments imaginable during the final phases of the war. This led to a restriction being placed on the large-scale employment of paratroopers.³² In the collective memories of those involved in the conflict, it was these limitations imposed on airborne actions by conventional operations in a high-threat environment that became enduring; and it was the small tactical success of airborne forces in the earlier stages of the conflict that shaped post-conflict thinking about their future employment.

This certainly affected the priority given to an airborne capability in South African military thinking during the early 1990s and was carried over to the SANDF after 1994. As a case

28. T. Clancy, *Airborne: A Guided Tour of an Airborne Task Force* (London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 2000), p.xix.

29. F. Aboagye, “A Stitch in Time would have Saved Nine: Operationalising the Africa Standby Force”, Institute of Security Studies UP (hereafter ISSUP), *Policy Brief*, No. 34 (September 2012).

30. African Union, *Policy Framework for the Establishing of the African Standby Force and the Military Staff Committee (MSC)* (Addis Ababa, African Union, May 2003).

31. R. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1972), pp. 28–44; Mao Tse-tung, *On the Protracted War* (Peking, People’s Publishing House, 1960), p. 104; and J.J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: The Strategy of Counter-Insurgency* (Harrisburg, Stackpole Books, 1966), pp. 40–44.

32. Maj Gen R. de Vries, e-mail correspondence from Dubai, 29 Oct. 2013. De Vries commanded a brigade during the final battles in South East Angola.

study, South Africa can be seen to mirror the worldwide tendency to relegate the airborne capability to a level where its continued viability is at stake. Yet the South African example also reflects the inherent value of an airborne force, casting a prophetic light on the future role of such forces in today's world.

Paratroopers, airborne forces and airborne operations continue to grip the imagination of many of those both seriously and casually interested in military affairs. There is an aura of mystique, adventure and bravado associated with soldiers who arrive on the battlefield without warning, approaching from an open flank provided by the sky. Like high-risk raiders and shock troops throughout history, the paratroopers evoke the same mixed images of courage and carnage, audacity and brutality, romanticism, and ruthlessness.³³ As with any elite military group, their reputation and their toughness, the fact that they stand out above the ordinary, captures the imagination and makes them of enduring interest. But do they still have a role to play in modern warfare? Or have they, similar to their predecessors who attacked from an open flank, like the Vikings and the horsed cavalry, become merely a curiosity of history?

By examining the employment of airborne forces in southern Africa during the second half of the 20th century, some answers to these questions emerge and a foundation is formed upon which to base the argument for preparing them for a strategic role. This study involves tracing the growth of the South African airborne capability, identifying just how high a level of capability was achieved, and assessing whether its use was intended primarily as a tactical instrument, complementing other military operations and integrating with them, or whether it was intended for a strategic role, able to sway political and major military events through independent action.

1.7. PERIODISATION AND CONTEXTUALISATION

The thesis focuses on the period 1960 to 2000, which covers the establishment and gradual growth of the capability under discussion, as well as its subsequent sudden and as yet unexplained decline. Some introductory attention is given to the 1950s and earlier in order to contextualise the research and provide background to the airborne concept. Some brief attention is also paid to the period after 2000 to gauge the impact of the airborne forces on the

33. See, for example S.A. Southworth (ed.), *Great Raids in History: From Drake to Desert One* (Edison NJ, Castle Books, 1997).

new SANDF and to consider the effect upon them of the momentous developments within South Africa during its first decade of democracy.

It is important to see this military phenomenon within its national and international context. From the outset, what was happening inside and around South Africa was inextricably intertwined with the destiny of the South African airborne forces. Significantly, the period embraces the era of Cold War politics and apartheid South Africa's efforts to align itself with the West, but it also coincides with the decolonisation of Africa and the efforts of the continent to achieve stability. The decision to establish South Africa's first parachute unit, for instance, took place in the same year that the British prime minister, Harold Macmillan, delivered his "Wind of Change" speech in the South African parliament on 3 February 1960 during his landmark six-week tour of Africa. Regarded by some as "one of the defining statements of British foreign policy in the 20th century", Macmillan's speech was a portent of things to come and heralded the beginning of what was to be a watershed year in South Africa. His words:

The wind of change is blowing through this continent, and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it,³⁴

echoed through the next four decades of South Africa's turbulent history. This echo also reflected the *raison d'être* of the airborne capability in the South African military.

The decision to establish a parachute unit was taken in the wake of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, racial unrest in the Rhodesias and the beginning of the exodus from Africa by the colonial powers when a spirit of African nationalism began to sweep through the continent. It will be seen that its establishment was delayed by the 1960 uprising in Pondoland and the deployment of the first trained paratroopers into that area.³⁵ Some of its earliest recruits left to take their newly acquired military expertise to Colonel Mike Hoare's mercenaries in the chaotic first years of the Congo's independence.³⁶

Furthermore, the airborne capability thrived with the imposition of international sanctions and an arms boycott against apartheid South Africa in the wake of international opposition to its racial policies. Local industry rose to provide what was needed in the

34. Quoted in D. Hurd, "Great Speeches of the 20th Century: No Going Back", *theguardian.com*, 24 April 2007.

35. The military operation is discussed in this thesis.

36. See M. Hoare, *The Road to Kalamata: A Congo Mercenary's Personal Memoir* (Lexington, Lexington Books, 1989); M. Hoare, *Congo Mercenary* (London, Robert Hale, 1967); H. Germani, *White Soldiers in Black Africa* (Cape Town, Nasionale Boekhandel, 1967); and A. Mockler, *Mercenaries* (London, Macdonald, 1969).

technological field.³⁷ At the same time, the issue of South Africa's mandate in South West Africa/Namibia and the contestation of its legality in the International Court of Justice, as well as outspoken opposition in both the Security Council and the General Assembly of the United Nations, provided impetus to the growth and development of South Africa's paratroopers.³⁸

The liberation wars in the neighbouring Portuguese colonies and Rhodesia provided opportunities for a baptism of fire for South Africa's fledgling paratroopers; the Angolan Civil War of 1975–1976 and the intervention by South Africa and Cuba on opposing sides had a profound influence on the parachute forces and their organisation. So too did the subsequent growth of insurgency in South West Africa/Namibia, the continuing conflict in Angola after 1976, and the policy of destabilisation of the sub-continent by the South African government. All these developments had a direct affect on the growth of the airborne forces. The Rhodesian experience, with the central role played in that conflict by airborne forces and the direct exposure of the South African paratroops to that conflict, had a significant effect on South African thinking regarding vertical envelopment. The quick succession of the two largest airborne raids of the Thirty Year War by Rhodesia and South Africa within six months of each other, rather than being a mere coincidence, signified a general acceptance of vertical envelopment as a tool in the broader conflict.

Ultimately, the arrival of the United Nations Transitional Assistance Group (UNTAG) in Namibia and the SWAPO decision to violently contravene agreements made in terms of UN Security Council Resolution 435, incongruously saw the paratroopers working closely with and on behalf of the UN. And even before the withdrawal of the SADF from the territory in 1989, the paratroopers found themselves thrust into the townships of South Africa and the rural midlands of Natal when resistance to the apartheid government had reached an all-time high

37. South Africa's self-sufficiency in armament-related production post-1960, despite the arms embargoes (and by effective sanctions-busting), is partly addressed by C.M. Rogerson, "Defending Apartheid: Armscor and the Geography of Military Production in South Africa", *GeoJournal*, 22, 3 (Nov. 1990), pp. 241–250. An example of how this related to the airborne forces is the founding of Parachute Industries of Southern Africa (PISA), in 1965 (*Aviation Week World Aerospace Database Listing Profile*, in McGraw-Hill Aviation Week Website, 2008). The SADF was eventually equipped entirely with PISA parachutes produced in South Africa.

38. The impetus arose because the South African government perceived this as a threat. See A.E. Naón and L.D. Merizalde, *SWA/Namibia: Dawn or Dusk?* (Windhoek, self published, 1989); the chronology of events in C. Breytenbach, *Namibia: Birth of a Nation* (Montagu, Luga Publishers, 1989), pp. 6–9; and J. Shearer, *Against the World: South Africa and Human Rights at the United Nations, 1945–1961* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2011).

and clashes between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) were at the level of a virtual civil war within the liberation war.³⁹

In addition, the influence of the airborne forces on the psyche of an element of the white South African community cannot be discounted. The paratroopers, an elite group of volunteers drawn from the ranks of conscripts, were touted as the chosen few among whites, who regarded themselves as an elite in racial terms. They played a role in the propagation of masculinity, in the racialised construction of military professionalism and in the heroic portrayal of military actions directed against the armed wings of the liberation movements of southern Africa.⁴⁰

It is therefore clear how important it is that any research into the airborne forces and their capability should include a contextualisation of the events, developments and prevailing attitudes that shaped and defined their activities.

1.8. HISTORIOGRAPHY AND LITERATURE

The literature dealing with South Africa's part in the Thirty Year War (referred to most frequently in the literature as either the Border War or the Bush War) can be broadly divided into four categories. Firstly, there are the scholarly, academic studies that are well researched and provide extensive references and traceable sources. Secondly, there are popular histories, often extensively illustrated and with generally accurate information, but lacking source references. Thirdly, there are memoirs, which rarely provide references or substantiation. And lastly, there are collections of "war stories", sometimes well written and credible, but more often than not these publications are characterised by swaggering hyperbole about personal battles. While all these works have value in assessing the situation at the time of the war, much of what is included in the last of the four groups seem marginal to a serious military history, as the tales tend to be ahistorical. The memoirs have to be used with circumspection, because they are often compiled with a specific agenda in mind, usually to enhance or salvage the reputation of the writer. However, some autobiographies are of significant value. The popular histories require some verification, while the academic studies provide the greatest credibility.

39. W. Gutteridge and J.E. Spence, *Violence in Southern Africa* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013), pp. 78–123.

40. See J. Cock and L. Nathan, *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1989); and G. Baines, *South Africa's "Border War": Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014).

With the exception of the serious works that fall under the first category, most of the writers pay scant attention to the approaches of social and cultural historians covering the Thirty Year War. Political developments are considered in an attempt to contextualise, but the masculinity of the apartheid years appears to prevail in most of these works. Of course, there is an overlap and not every book or article fits neatly into one of these broad categories, but for ease of assessment, a selection of the most important works is discussed below under these headings in an effort to highlight the historiographical trends for the period under review.

Scholarly Works

Unfortunately, the dearth of scholarly investigation into military actions and activities during the Thirty Year War has resulted in few published sources from either side of the conflict that are of direct relevance to the subject of this thesis. The two military histories referred to earlier bear mentioning. Ian van der Waag's *A Military History of Modern South Africa* (2015) is excellent. It is the product of exhaustive research, including wide reference to both military and civilian archival sources, and fills an important gap in South African military historiography. This is despite the inexplicable failure to include reference to the fundamental effect of the Mpondo Revolt on military thinking of both the liberation movements and the SADF. However, as it spans a century that includes the South African War and the First and Second World Wars, its detail of the Thirty Year War is necessarily superficial. It is also unfortunate that Van der Waag's coverage of the Thirty Year War is based on secondary sources. *The SADF in the Border War, 1966–1989* by Leopold Scholtz (2013) is more specifically topical in terms of its timeframe. It is well researched, copiously referenced, has excellent illustrations and photographs. It also provides a lengthy list of sources from a wide spectrum of opinions and backgrounds. However, Scholtz has made almost no use of official archival sources, and its usefulness in analysing airborne operations is minimal. Both these publications paint too broad a picture of the conflict to include technical and tactical details of airborne actions. Nevertheless, both are extremely useful in contextualising airborne actions within the greater framework of belligerency. My thesis attempts in part to address their failure to use archival sources as the backbone of their research into the Thirty Year War; it also addresses the significance of the Mpondo Revolt.

Those histories written by liberation historians have the same limitations, with the added restriction of being war, rather than military histories. Mainly concerned with the

political, social and even ideological issues, they have not analysed the military aspects of the Liberation Struggle other than to consider how these impacted on broader political goals and intentions. A good example is Peter Katjavivi's *A History of Resistance in Namibia* (1988). This same tendency is also apparent in works such as J.T. Tsokodayi's *Namibia's Independence Struggle* (2011) and Tom Lodge's, *Insurrection in South Africa: The Pan Africanist Congress and the Poqo Movement, 1959–1965* (1984). The same limitation applies in the anthologies edited by Ian Liebenberg, Fiona Lortan, Bobby Nel and Gert van der Westhuizen, *The Long March: The Story of the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa* (1994), and in Henning Melber's, *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia* (2003). Two academic dissertations focusing specifically on the social impact of the military conflict in Namibia are those by Vilho Amukwaya Shigwedha, "Enduring Suffering: The Cassinga Massacre of Namibian Exiles in 1978 and the Conflicts between Survivors' Memories and Testimonies" (2011), and Christian A. Williams, "Exile History: An Ethnography of the SWAPO Camps and the Namibian Nation" (2009).

Even a credible, academically acclaimed multi-volume work with many collaborators, such as the South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET) histories, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa* (2006), which covers the years that correspond to the Thirty Year War, does not address the technical and tactical aspects of the military dimension of the struggle, far less the employment of an airborne capability by the security forces. Nevertheless, it provides both valuable and useful information that throws an often vastly different perspective on events from those discussed in apartheid-era histories or the writings of SADF veterans. The histories focus on the Liberation Struggle in South Africa rather than in Namibia, so include almost nothing of relevance to the airborne actions undertaken by the SADF against SWAPO.

More useful for my research has been the authoritative compendium, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle: The Two-Edged Sword* (1995) edited by Colin Leys and John S. Saul, particularly the impressive chapter written by the British journalist, Susan Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means: SWAPO's Liberation War", which gives an accurate, succinct and chronological account of the conflict of more than two decades, seen from a more "neutral" perspective than those produced by South Africans. Its brevity, however, does not allow for more than passing reference to the effect of airborne operations by the South Africans and it does not include any tactical detail. It curiously fails to mention the final incursion by SWAPO in contravention of the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435 on 1 April 1989. This is a serious

omission, since the last clash between SWAPO and the South Africans saw a particularly relevant airborne operation being carried out by the SADF. The operation is addressed in this thesis.

An exceptional example of war history, as opposed to military history, is *South Africa's "Border War": Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories* (2014) by Gary Baines. Carefully researched, balanced and painstakingly constructed, it examines the effects of conscription on and participation in the Thirty Year War by white South Africans, both at the time and in the post-1994 era. The perceptions of participants, including those of senior professional officers, form a major theme in the book. Although it is of immense interest and importance, it contributes little of significance to the military dimension of the conflict, least of all to the conduct and intricacies of airborne operations. Where Baines does venture into the controversial arena of the parachute assault on Cassinga, he focuses on the different perspectives of the protagonists, and makes no attempt to address the military dimension (see also G. Baines, "The Battle for Cassinga: Conflicting Narratives and Contested Meanings"⁴¹). Other than parts of my analysis of the Cassinga operation,⁴² there appears to be no academic study of the general concept and operational application of airborne operations during this period in southern Africa. This lack will hopefully be met, in part at least, by this thesis.

Popular Histories

Particularly useful in this category are biographies of leading personalities in the airborne field. Sadly, these are not numerous. However, Dennis Cruywagen's *Brothers in War and Peace* (2014) provides significant insight into the background of General Constand Viljoen, a paratrooper and artilleryman who became Chief of the South African Army and of the SADF and played a crucial part in the development and employment of the paratroopers. He was possibly the man who grasped the concept of vertical envelopment more fully than anyone else in the SADF. Hilton Hamman's *Days of the Generals* (2001) also gives some idea of the thinking of several top general officers in the SADF during the Thirty Year War.

Also in this category are a number of military histories with a direct bearing on airborne operations analysed in this thesis. A booklet called *Battle for Cassinga* (2011), by a former conscript and paratrooper, Mike McWilliams, is one of a specially commissioned series called

41. Available at www.researchgate.net/profile/Gary_Baines.

42. E.G.M. Alexander, "The Cassinga Raid" (MA dissertation, Unisa, 2003).

Africa@War. It is in the format of a glossy magazine, was produced very much for popular consumption and relies heavily on personal accounts by participants. It gives a fairly succinct account of one airborne operation from the perspective of a paratrooper who participated, but apart from a single notebook found in the area that was attacked, and referring to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), like almost all other literature in this category, it has no source references and does not make use of official archival documents. McWilliams' work, which tends to come across as a memoir, also contains many technical and factual errors, which detract from its credibility.

Another booklet on the same airborne operation, *The Cassinga Event* (1994) by Annemarie Heywood and published by the Namibian Archives, relies solely on secondary sources for the description of military aspects of the operation, and sets out to condemn the attack and vilify the SADF. Naturally, the absence of primary documentation for any study of an insurgent army is understandable, but not for the study of an action by a statutory force. These publications by McWilliams and Heywood both have specific and opposing agendas and neither achieves a balanced account. British Colonel Robert Kershaw in *Skymen* (2010) has devoted a credible section to the SADF airborne operation on Cassinga, but it is based purely on the work of others, so offers nothing new.

Even works that have attempted some form of analysis, such as *Ongulumbashe* (2007) by Paul J. Els, have for the most part been written as an attempt at justification and are based almost entirely on secondary sources such as newspaper reports, and recollections recounted long after the events took place. Importantly, there is no reference to official documentary evidence and little effort is made to present a balanced view. Detailing the first helicopter assault by the SADF at Ongulumbashe in the then South West Africa in 1966 (considered the start of the armed conflict in that territory), the book is a rambling, disjointed account, littered with technical, terminological, grammatical, spelling and historical errors, with no systematic military analysis or assessment of the operation. It is difficult to follow, unsubstantiated in its claims and of very little value to a study of airborne operations. What might have been a contribution to the military history of the conflict, turned out to be, like so many other books in this field, an inaccurate, triumphalist and one-sided account. *We Conquer from Above* (2010), also by Els, purports to be a history of 1 Parachute Battalion, but suffers from the same maladies as *Ongulumbashe*, compounded by exaggerated war stories.

Among the few more reliable and better-researched secondary sources are the works by Willem Steenkamp. Though written in a popular style, they reflect an accurate account of facts that in most cases can be corroborated by documentary evidence. As a Citizen Force officer in the SADF and an accredited defence correspondent, his writing shows a “feel” for the war that he describes and his technical knowledge of his subject is generally sound. However, he also reports on events from the point of view of the SADF. Though he has written broadly about the war, his books include substantial sections on certain airborne operations and the employment of airborne forces. *Borderstrike! South Africa into Angola 1975–1980* (1983), particularly the revised and updated third edition (2006), goes some way towards analysing airborne operations, based mainly on the parachute assault on Cassinga in 1978. He mentions certain shortcomings in airborne planning that are usually ignored or played down in other accounts (for example, inadequate considerations prior to the attack on Cassinga and the failure to provide fuel for the helicopters at a crucial point during Operation SCEPTIC in 1980).

The Rhodesian airborne attacks on Chimoio and Tembué in Mozambique (which had a direct impact on South African airborne thinking) have been extensively covered in publications such as *Dingo Firestorm: The Greatest Battle of the Rhodesian Bush War*, by I. Pringle (2012) and *Operation DINGO: Rhodesian Raid on Chimoio and Tembué*, by J.R.T. Wood (2011). The operation also receives considerable attention in *Africa’s Commandos*, edited by Mark Adams and Chris Cocks (2013); *The Elite*, by Barbara Cole (1984); and *The Saints* by A. Binda (2007). All these works are military histories, focusing in detail on the military action and have therefore been extremely useful in this thesis, particularly in the absence of access to Rhodesian archival records. However, they are written from the perspective of the Rhodesian Forces that participated in the operation, so a particular bias is apparent. As far as can be established, my thesis is the first attempt to identify the influence of Rhodesian airborne operations on those of the SADF.

Much has been written about the Rhodesian fire force technique in books such as those by J.R.T. Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky* (2009); C. Cocks, *Fireforce* (2006); and K. Cocks, *Rhodesian Fire Force 1966–1980* (2015). Equally, the pioneering work done by 32 Battalion in the aggressive use of helicopters in counter-insurgency is well documented in some of the many publications that have appeared about that unit. Examples are Jan Breytenbach’s *They Live by the Sword* (1990); Piet Nortje’s *32 Battalion* (2003); and *The Terrible Ones* (2012). These

have all provided finer detail at a technical and tactical level and have helped to broaden the study of SADF airborne operations beyond the actions of the paratroopers.

Turning to liberation historians and writers in this category, the attempts to sketch the background of the decision to resort to armed struggle by the ANC and the history of MK dwell more on the political and ideological motivations than the tactical implementation of the Liberation Struggle, or are too superficial to provide sufficient detail for analysis. Prominent in this regard are Ben Turok's *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle* (2010); and Howard Barrell's *MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle* (1990). While they give excellent background to one side's view of the war, they offer little on the airborne dimension. James Ngculu, in his article "The Role of Umkhonto we Sizwe in the Creation of a Democratic Civil-Military Relations Tradition", in *Ourselves to Know* (2003), edited by Rocky Williams, Gavin Cawthra and Diane Abrahams, gives a summary of MK's political history, but from the viewpoint of this thesis, that is exactly its shortcoming – it dwells only on political training, capabilities and importance of the organisation, but says nothing about MK's military tactics, which were, after all, the main reason why MK was formed.

Even articles such as "The Sabotage Campaign" by Joe Slovo, in the *Dawn* Souvenir Issue (c. 1986) while conveying something of the tactics of MK, are of less use in evaluating the security force tactics and have no bearing on airborne operations. There has, in fact, been little attempt to scrutinise the tactical application of military theory from the perspective of freedom fighters waging an insurgency war in southern Africa, nor of their view of the successes or failures at the tactical level of the counter-insurgency doctrines of the government security forces they came up against during the war.

Publications of a more general nature, such as Helmoed-Römer Heitman's *Modern African Wars (3): South-West Africa* (1991), lack sufficient detail to contribute much to this thesis. But Willem Steenkamp's *South Africa's Border War, 1966-1989* (1989), though by no means definitive and admittedly marred by some errors and omissions, remains the best publication to give an overall, reasonably accurate, chronological summary of the military side of the war from the SADF point of view. It is invaluable in determining when certain actions took place and also includes insights into the role of airborne operations in the conflict.

Memoirs

Memoirs, particularly those of famous commanders, have always been a valuable source of insight into military history. Those of Montgomery and Eisenhower during the Second World War and Westmoreland in the Vietnam War are well-known examples. But even those of ordinary soldiers have become classics, such as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1963) about the First World War. South Africa's part in the Thirty Year War has produced a sizeable crop of such memoirs. Some of these are by paratroopers and special forces operators and describe certain airborne operations, but their subjective nature has rarely produced a critical appraisal of the actions. Their value as contributions to the literature of the South African campaign in the Thirty Year War as personal experiences cannot be questioned, but their contribution to the bigger picture and historical analysis is less certain.

Prominent examples of memoirs that have particular relevance to this thesis are *Eagle Strike!* (2008), a voluminous account of the parachute assault on Cassinga by Colonel Jan Breytenbach, who commanded the attacking force of paratroopers; *Journey without Boundaries* (2007), by Colonel André Diedericks, one of the most highly decorated special forces soldiers of the time; and *A Greater Share of Honour* (2001) by Major Jack Greeff. The authors all have impeccable military credentials, but with the exception of Diedericks, whose book is refreshingly free of vindictiveness, the others have axes to grind and this detracts from a nuanced and balanced assessment of airborne actions. Written as a military history, but in fact little more than a lengthy memoir with no references or bibliography, Breytenbach's book is a prime example of an autobiography aimed at preserving the writer's reputation as a military commander. It contains some questionably selective criticism. This is unfortunate, because more than any other memoir, it could have provided insightful information for this thesis. A source must have credibility and if it is characterised by personal vendettas its validity is compromised.

Ordinary conscripts who became paratroopers, anxious to record their experiences of combat in an elite airborne unit, have also written several books. Two of these are John Delaney's, *Staying Alive: The Paratrooper's Story* (2004) and Granger Korff's *19 With a Bullet: A South African Paratrooper in Angola* (2009). Both of these, seen through the eyes of a soldier who was not privy to the planning and background, give a very different perspective to airborne operations from those recorded by officers. Neither makes any pretence at being anything

other than a personal memoir, and Korff's book throbs with the bravado that is common among tough, elite combat soldiers, such as paratroopers. Although not a paratrooper, Louis Bothma was a conscript officer in 32 Battalion, which became adept at helicopter operations. His memoir, *Die Buffel Struikel* (2006), is a serious piece of writing and deeply thought provoking. But while of great interest, the value of these accounts to the understanding of airborne operations in their wider context is rather limited. Undeniably the desire of conscripted soldiers to share or record a brief period of their lives that had a profound effect on them, though not central to the thesis, certainly impacts upon it. The appearance of these writings is hardly surprising, given the fact that during the 1970s and 1980s all young white males in the country were subject to conscription.

The book *Ons Vergeet Nie* (2010), a memoir by Peet Coetzee, an interpreter of aerial photography who served as a non-commissioned officer (NCO) with military intelligence, includes some interesting aspects of airborne operations. Although the book itself is poorly edited and contains some errors, it provides evidence of photographic intelligence gathering and processing which was so vital to airborne operations.

There have been memoirs from generals too, such as *Dié wat Wen* (1993) by General Jannie Geldenhuys, a former Chief of the South African Army and Chief of the SADF for a significant part of the Thirty Year War. Like Breytenbach's publication, it attempts to preserve the author's military reputation in the face of changed perspectives within society about the war in which they played a pivotal part. The book by Geldenhuys was published before South Africa's democratisation but at a time when the changes in the South African political dispensation were inexorably taking place. An English translation appeared as *A General's Story* (1994), with a revised edition being published as *At the Front: A General's Account of South Africa's Border War* (2009). Though historiographically useful because of the author's standing, it reveals little about his own thinking concerning the airborne capability, thus limiting its utility in developing this thesis.

Similarly, the publication by Magnus Malan, *My Life with the SA Defence Force* (2006) is, in the words of one reviewer, aimed at "salvaging his own reputation and defending the

integrity of the SADF”,⁴³ and barely touches on the tactics and techniques employed by the SADF. Although it provides some background, it throws little light on the airborne concept.

An exception to this characteristic among the memoirs of generals is *Eye of the Firestorm* (2013) by Major General Roland de Vries, perhaps because he, unlike Geldenhuys and Malan, exercised field command in combat. Although it is autobiographical, he offers a practical examination of tactics and expounds his own and the SADF’s approach to mobile warfare, based on a thorough reading of history, as well as his own extensive experience. He does not, however, explicitly analyse airborne operations.

On the other hand, the autobiographical books of the leaders of liberation movements, such as *Where Others Wavered* (2001) by Sam Nujoma of SWAPO, and *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) by Nelson Mandela of the ANC, while offering background information, the socio-political context and perspective to the military side of the Liberation Struggle, add little to a study of military tactics and techniques on the ground.

Publications by former combat veterans of the liberation movements, like those of their adversaries, tend to be autobiographical and are often written with a passion in support of their own political convictions or in an attempt to discredit individuals within their own movements, rather than with a view to expounding tactical issues. Unfortunately, there are very few of these and in the case of some personal accounts they are jointly written with professional authors whose interventions modify the content and favour advocacy above analysis. Examples are *Mbokodo* (1994) by Mwezi Twala and Ed Benard; and *Waiting in the Wing* (1994) by Joseph Kobo, with Gerry Finley-Day. Although these books provide interesting glimpses of those who participated “on the other side”, their contribution to military history is only slight. Certainly, there has not been any examination of the military aspects of the airborne actions carried out by the security forces from the insurgents’ point of view. Kobo describes his experience of the parachute assault on Cassinga as an MK operative attached to SWAPO, but gives no military analysis of the action. The tendency of these memoirs is to concentrate on the in-fighting and internal politics of the various liberation movements rather than on military operations, perhaps because MK seldom entered into direct combat with the SADF.

43. G. Baines, “The Life of a Uniformed Technocrat Turned Securocrat”, Book Review of Magnus Malan, *My Life with the SA Defence Force* (Pretoria, Protea, 2006), in *Historia*, 54, 1 (May 2009), pp. 314–327.

War Stories

Recent years have seen a proliferation of books, articles and newspaper reports about the days of conscription and the so-called Bush War, with former servicemen (both conscripts and regular soldiers) sharing their stories. These have for the most part been anecdotal rather than analytical. Many have reflected the stories of paratroopers, but they have not dealt with airborne operations from a conceptual tactical base. They have included triumphalist narratives and collections of reminiscences of various individual paratroopers and special forces soldiers. While some are of interest, many do not stand up to scrutiny and verification when tested against official documents, interviews with other paratroopers and other publications, articles and studies. Among those in this category are *Parabat* (2001) by Mathew Paul; *Rooiplaas!* (2015) by Renier Du Toit and Ronnie Claassen; and *We Fear Naught but God* (2000) by Paul Els. These books are poorly written and of questionable quality. A more poignant collection of paratrooper stories was written by a kindly Bloemfontein teacher known affectionately as “Tannie Mossie”, who took the tough airborne soldiers to heart and become a mother figure to lonely young men who were far from home. Her *Voetestamp* (1987) gives insight into the more human side of a paratrooper’s life as he prepared for his daunting task in war. Others in this genre do not reflect only the tales of the paratroopers, but include those of many other soldiers and are vastly less gung-ho in their content. They are in fact sometimes compiled to show the perceived evils of conscription, the traumatic effect of the war on conscripts, and are even intended to discredit, or at least ridicule, the SADF. J.H. Thompson’s *An Unpopular War* (2006) and the more balanced *On the Border* (2008) by David Williams are typical examples. Thompson’s anecdotes appear to be carefully selected to justify her title.

In contrast to this, Geldenhuys compiled his own collection of reminiscences by veterans of the war. Drawing overwhelmingly on recollections and perspectives submitted by senior SADF officers, but with a sprinkling of contributions from the lower ranks and even some extracts from the diary of a Soviet lieutenant colonel, the title clearly states the purpose of the book: *We were There: Winning the War for Southern Africa* (2011). While the stories are engaging and shed light on the conflict, it is painfully obvious that they were selected to portray the impression of a faultlessly planned and executed campaign of more than two decades, culminating in a brilliant victory during the final battles around Cuito-Cuanavale in south-eastern Angola. In fact, a good two-thirds of this book is devoted to the last year or two of the

23-year campaign, when Geldenhuys was head of the SADF. This biased approach to a conflict in which there was the usual ebb and flow of war but was never, at any stage, a military capitulation by either side, makes it difficult to embrace the book as a reliable source.

Comment

Military historians of the Thirty Year War tend to write from the perspective of the government security forces. This often places them at odds with social, cultural and political historians of the same period, because they tend to write from the perspective of the oppressed majority, and are mainly critical of things military. Nevertheless, this tension does encourage further investigation, from both sides. This goes to the heart of the distinction between war history and military history. It is clear from the above that many authors and researchers have written on the history of the Thirty Year War and much of the detail of the political, social, economic and even ideological aspects has been dealt with at length by scholars of international relations and historians. However, on the social side, with regard to the interaction between the airborne forces and society in general, as well as the impact of the paratrooper mystique on both conscripts and their families, there is very little that has been published. There is much of a general nature available, both in the form of books and articles in academic journals, some dealing specifically with the militarisation of white South African society. Frankel's book *Pretoria's Praetorians* (1984) is a good example. Where applicable, these issues have been extrapolated to the airborne situation. However, while issues such as gender, race, identity and the structure of the military as a microcosm of the apartheid state are an important field that is open to further research, such lenses are not central to the scope of this thesis, and are touched on very superficially. Such important concerns fall within the scope of war history, rather than the tactical and strategic fields of military history.

Other than a plethora of anecdotal and autobiographical literature of a popular nature and some good, but fairly general works, little of historical substance has emerged about the military issues. The absence of any current scholarly writing, either in military science or history, of the Thirty Year War which examines airborne operations conceptually has provided me with an opportunity to fill the gap. Nevertheless, it is of course true to say that the literature pertaining to the South African/Namibian Border War, the Bush War and the

Liberation Struggle cannot simply be dismissed in a study such as this on the basis that it does not deal directly with the specific topic.

Most of the literature on the military aspects of the southern African liberation wars on both sides remains more anecdotal than analytical. It is characterised by considerable emotion, has shown a marked lack of documentary evidence, and frequently displays a clear bias one way or the other. Sometimes this is politically motivated, but often it is justifying or promoting the role of individuals. This is to be expected when dealing with events that are still within living memory, regardless of how fickle a source mere memory might be.

Nevertheless, it remains vital that participants from all sides should speak of the part they played in a conflict that helped shape South Africa as we know it today; their first-hand exposure to the conflict should not be allowed to disappear without at least some of it being recorded. This applies very specifically to airborne operations, which played no small part in the SADF's counter-insurgency tactics and strategy, as well as a role in the successes of the broader liberation movement in developing their own tactics to meet this particular threat to their insurgency campaigns. For them to have meaningful historical value, such records should be reliably corroborated where possible. Even then, without some effort at "against the grain" analysis they will remain of limited use for posterity, other than in propagating a particular viewpoint. The passage of time and the loss of the collective memory of modern military experience in the country emphasises the need to undertake studies that will encompass this experience before it is lost. This thesis aims to contribute towards fulfilling that need and attempts to draw on much that can be derived from existing publications as well as surviving individuals.

Importantly, this presents an opportunity for military history to assert its value by the conduct of credible, scholarly research into the military aspects of the Thirty Year War, many of which have thus far been neglected or distorted. My thesis attempts to contribute to addressing this shortcoming by defining vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre, describing how it came about; explaining how it developed in South Africa; and ultimately analysing how it was applied. At the same time, the important connecting thread linking the airborne tactics and techniques of the armed forces of Portugal, Rhodesia and South Africa is identified and traced. This link has never before been highlighted.

1.9. METHODOLOGY EMPLOYED TO COMPILE THE THESIS

Initially, a great deal of reading was undertaken on the concept of airborne operations, its historical development and a study of numerous specific airborne operations since the beginning of the Second World War. There is a wealth of published material available on the airborne concept and the development of airborne forces worldwide. Very little that is authoritative and well researched is available on South African airborne forces, and this is therefore part of the contribution of this thesis and why it has been constructed mainly from primary military sources. However, in order to provide a basis from which to work, the generally accepted premises on which airborne operations rest have been gleaned from reputable published works. In this regard, Maurice Tugwell is an authoritative author, having impeccable British Army credentials in the airborne field. His definitive work on the subject is *Airborne to Battle* (1971). Tugwell articulates a school of airborne thought that evolved in the Allied command echelons during the Second World War and is largely followed throughout the military world today. John R. Galvin also espouses this approach in his classic work, *Air Assault* (1969), which provides an American perspective.

A different approach to airborne operations, embraced by the Germans during the Second World War, is looked upon with scepticism by the military in most countries but was used by the South Africans and Rhodesians on occasion. Volkmar Kuhn expounds it in his publication, *German Paratroopers* (1978). Both approaches are dealt with in this thesis. This background reading provided a solid foundation for my subsequent research and was then related to my own experience and exposure as an airborne commander who also taught officers on numerous airborne battle-handling courses and at staff college level over many years. How these airborne operations fitted into the broader context of military operations was then considered by a careful assessment of the basic tenets of military manoeuvre and how they relate to the airborne concept. This was obtained largely from published works as well as military manuals, particularly those of the SADF, based on my experience as a member of the Directing Staff (DS) of the South African Army College in 1985 and again as the Chief Instructor of Senior Staff Training at the College during 1993 and 1994. Use was also made of a research paper which I wrote while attending the Joint Staff Course at the Defence College in Pretoria in

1995.⁴⁴ In addition to this, I read extensively from the literature that has proliferated on the Thirty Year War. Most of this was in the form of popular publications, written from the perspective of former conscripts or professional soldiers in the security forces, while the far smaller reservoir of publications from the perspective of opposition to the apartheid security forces was often penned by liberation historians or political activists. The historiography is discussed under the appropriate section above.

From this foundation, the research progressed to an emphasis on archival sources in order to catalogue the events that comprised the development of the South African airborne capability. The archival sources form the bulk of the reference material used in the thesis. The information gleaned from the documents held in the South African military archives, as well as other original documents, was then balanced against personal interviews and correspondence conducted with participants over a period of more than 25 years, as well as information found in military diaries where these were available. The selected information was then placed in context by aligning it to broader societal and political developments before arranging it thematically to illustrate the arguments of the thesis. This produced the outline that appears below.

1.10. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Because the subject of this thesis is a military one and the aim is to determine the military employment of an airborne capability, my approach in analysing the research material that was gathered is based on the military problem-solving technique known as an Operational Appreciation. This entails the examination of all available factors; the making of assumptions only in cases where no information is available; formulating relevant deductions at the end of each chapter and ultimately coming to certain conclusions. While such conclusions will always evidence a degree of subjectivity, this technique does attempt to minimise this. However, in the final analysis, all conclusions are my own. They have been interpreted in the light of my own military experience over almost five decades and my exposure to events such as those described in this thesis.

44. M. Alexander, Course JSC 34/95, *“Research Staff Paper on the Employment of a SANDF Parachute Brigade for Interventionist Peace Support Operations in Africa”*, SA Defence College, Pretoria, 25 October 1995..

1.11. OUTLINE OF THESIS

Initially, a conceptual approach is necessary to clarify and define certain terminology and military concepts, an understanding of which is essential in order to grasp and follow the essence of the thesis. Thereafter, although the intention is not to set out a chronological history of the airborne forces in South Africa, a degree of adherence to the sequence of developments within the organisation is unavoidable. This is particularly so for the early growth of the organisation, which was characterised by an uncertainty of the role it was to play. This chronological approach has also facilitated the linking of the airborne forces' development and role within the socio-political developments of white apartheid society in South Africa.

The thesis then follows a thematic approach in respect of the dichotomy between the tactical and strategic applications of the airborne capability. This tension is best illustrated by a sequential analysis of those events and military operations that clearly reflected it. This has brought about a degree of chronology, precisely because the changing fortunes of the paratroops were determined by the progressively changing role assigned to them and the issues that arose as a result. Nevertheless, the events that are chronicled do not all appear in a strictly sequential order, because of the need to select those that best illustrate the theme under discussion.

Throughout, the focus is on airborne operations. The many other operations in which the paratroopers participated have thus not been included in this study, as they are not germane to the argument. Equally, not all airborne operations are discussed. The thesis as a whole can therefore not be considered a history of the South African paratroops. Furthermore, some airborne operations are included that were carried out by units such as 32 Battalion, special forces and the Rhodesian forces in order to best illustrate the overall concept of vertical envelopment in the southern African context. The thesis has therefore been developed around the following framework:

Chapter 1. Introduction and Research Background

This chapter commences by explaining the approach used in developing the thesis in the light of existing historiographical trends in military and war history. The positionality I have adopted is set out early in the chapter, indicating my perspective. The southern African Thirty Year War is also defined, with an examination of the historiographical trends in this conflict. The decline in

the South African airborne capability within the context of the war is then highlighted. At this point, the central argument regarding strategic versus tactical airborne application is introduced, the relevance of airborne operations is discussed, the periodisation is explained and existing historiography and literature on the subject is considered. The methodology employed in the research is discussed and the analytical framework of the thesis is set out. An outline of the thesis is then provided, followed by an evaluation of the sources used before acknowledging the support and assistance given during the research.

Chapter 2. Vertical Envelopment as a Form of Manoeuvre in Tactics and Strategy

The second chapter is of a technical nature and provides a conceptual orientation intended to explain what is meant by vertical envelopment and other military terminology associated with this form of manoeuvre. This enables a reader with little or no military background to better understand the military technical, tactical, operational and strategic issues which are dealt with in the thesis. In order to establish a common understanding in the body of the thesis, it is also considered necessary to define the strategic versus the tactical approach for the employment of vertical envelopment. Second World War examples of both are provided.

Chapter 3. The Airborne Concept in History and Early South African Experience

The third chapter touches on the origins of the airborne concept and the early military application of parachuting. Using original, previously classified archival material, the Union Defence Force's unsuccessful attempt to establish an airborne capability during the Second World War is considered. The subsequent international adaptation of the concept and its application during the small wars and insurgencies of the Cold War are then briefly recounted.

Chapter 4. Crucial Decisions: The Acquisition of Helicopters and the Training of South Africa's First Paratroopers

The chapter commences with an outline of the politico-military climate in southern Africa, and especially South Africa during the 1950s. It goes on to describe the shift in military thinking from conventional war to counter-insurgency and how a need was identified for light, mobile forces in the recently renamed South African Defence Force (SADF). This ultimately led to the acquisition of modern helicopters and establishment of a parachute unit, but without the formulation of a doctrinal basis for their employment. The influence on the SADF of Portuguese and Rhodesian airborne developments is examined and the selection and preparation of the

first fifteen SADF paratroopers, followed by their training in the United Kingdom, receives attention.

Chapter 5. The Mpondo Revolt and the Establishment of 1 Parachute Battalion: The Problem of *raison d'être*

This chapter deals with the establishment of South Africa's first real airborne unit, 1 Parachute Battalion, in 1961. The occurrence of a little known insurrection, generally called the Pondo Revolt (more correctly, Mpondo), is discussed. There are three reasons for this: first, it delayed the establishment of the new battalion; secondly, most of the freshly trained paratroopers participated in the military operation to suppress the revolt; and thirdly, the operation that was conducted held fundamental lessons for South Africa in the airborne concept, because it saw the first use by the SADF of helicopters in a counter-insurgency role. Previously classified archival material provided the primary source for the assessment of this operation. The chapter goes on to examine the conditions under which the building of the first battalion of paratroopers took place, including the acquisition of parachutes and other equipment and the recruitment and training of paratroopers. It concludes with an appraisal of the strategic effect on the paratroopers of the acquisition by the SAAF of seven Lockheed Hercules C-130B aircraft from the United States in 1964.

Chapter 6. The Insurgent War Begins: Tactical Airborne Application with Strategic Potential

The sixth chapter examines the growth and development of South Africa's airborne capability and the early role ascribed to the parachute battalion, before considering the 1966 World Court decision on South West Africa/Namibia. This leads to the launch of the insurgent war in Namibia by SWAPO and its first armed clash with the South African government Security forces. This was an airborne operation involving helicopters, in which the paratroopers played an important role. The growing international isolation of South Africa also led to a secret tripartite alliance with Portugal and Rhodesia as well as training exchanges for the paratroopers. Some background is provided on the growing conflicts in the Portuguese territories and Rhodesia, the employment of airborne forces there, and how they related to the South African situation. The participation of South African paratroopers in the Nigerian Civil War is highlighted as instrumental in the creation of a special forces capability in the SADF.

Chapter 7. The Airborne Conundrum: Strategy or Tactics?

The escalation of the war in Namibia is dealt with in this chapter, as is the extension of conscription, the establishment of part-time Citizen Force parachute battalions, and the first operational parachute jump in 1974. The strategic potential that this operation revealed is discussed. The failed attempts to address the need for more paratroopers are then examined before gauging the effect of the Angolan Civil War of 1975–1976 on the paratroopers and their resultant introduction of the airborne technique of fire force as the insurgency war intensified. Finally, the deployment of South African paratroopers on fire force duties inside Rhodesia is evaluated, showing how it reinforced a tactical as opposed to strategic approach to the application of vertical envelopment. Consequently, the SADF faced a conundrum: Were its paratroops to be prepared for a strategic or a tactical role?

Chapter 8. Strategic Application of the Concept: Cross-Border Airborne Strikes

The eighth chapter examines a strategic airborne application, showing how a strategic decision was taken in 1977 to adopt a military strategy of cross-border operations. The effect on SADF thinking of a Rhodesian airborne operation with strategic intent is analysed, showing its influence on the subsequent strike on Cassinga in Angola in 1978. The objective was regarded as of strategic importance to the SADF and the success of the operation gave fresh impetus to the evolving South African airborne doctrine. A comparison of certain aspects of the Rhodesian and South African operations is made and the aborting of another, similar airborne operation by the SADF in Rhodesia, is considered as one reason why more airborne operations with strategic intent were not undertaken.

Chapter 9. A Strategic Tool: The Establishment of a Parachute Brigade

This chapter outlines how the decision to establish a parachute brigade revealed a realisation of the strategic potential of the airborne capability. It identifies the key role in this of General Constand Viljoen, but points out how the initial efforts were curtailed by personality clashes and a failure to provide firm leadership at high levels in the South African Army. The eventual formalisation of the brigade is then evaluated.

Chapter 10. Tactical Application: Airborne Support to Ground Forces

This chapter shows that for the most part, the paratroopers, even in an airborne role, were used in support of ground forces, often for secondary tasks with a purely tactical intent. This is

analysed by elaborating on the application of the fire force or reaction force technique in reinforcing the growing persuasion that airborne forces were merely a tactical capability. Several small-scale parachute operations by the SADF in Angola and Zambia in the mid-1970s appeared to confirm this. As a result, training, equipping and organising of airborne forces tended to reflect this mindset. With the exception of the attack on Cassinga, parachute and helicopter operations by the paratroopers that took place during the late 1970s and early 1980s were purely tactical and usually in support of ground forces. Two larger, battalion-sized airborne operations with more tactical than strategic value are examined.

Chapter 11. Crest of the Wave: An Airborne Capability at its Peak

This chapter outlines the high capability level ultimately achieved by the airborne forces. While in their employment the paratroopers were mainly restricted to a tactical role, they were nevertheless being prepared for strategic intervention. The airborne forces reached their zenith in the late 1980s. Initially, the new brigade was plagued by problems of command and control and these issues were never satisfactorily resolved. The brigade nevertheless successfully embarked on a series of ambitious exercises of battalion group size. These confirmed its capability and developed the ability to drop heavy loads and light armoured vehicles. At the same time, 1 Parachute Battalion, which remained outside the structure of the brigade, was intensively involved in the training of paratroopers for a number of southern African countries and resistance movements, while continuing to provide a fire force in Namibia. Weighing up these different focus areas shows that a strategic mindset developed at the parachute brigade, while tactical thinking prevailed at 1 Parachute Battalion.

Chapter 12. A Climate of Change, Uncertainty and Instability: Unfulfilled Airborne Potential

The war in Angola and Namibia was finally drawing to a close in 1988, but tension remained high during negotiations. In this chapter, a proposal by the parachute brigade to help counter the estimated threat by the Cuban 50th Division in Southern Angola in 1998 is evaluated. The planning and rehearsal of this complex combined airborne and amphibious attack of strategic importance on the port of Namibe is considered for its contribution to the establishment of a full-time parachute battalion group. This is shown as evidence that the airborne capability was now seen primarily as a strategic tool. Two more strategic airborne operations were planned and both are investigated. Although none of these operations took place, the reasons for the

sudden surge of strategic airborne planning at the end of the conflict are considered in this chapter, and the role of a permanent airborne headquarters at the correct level is highlighted. Although the military authorities were fully prepared to employ the capability in this role, a review of the political developments shows that this was impossible and unnecessary. The brigade's continuing efforts to build its capability are shown to have been out of touch with the changes taking place in South Africa.

Chapter 13. Internal Operational Employment and Lesotho Incursion: Nadir of the Strategic Airborne Concept

The thirteenth chapter deals with the deathblow of a strategic role for the South African airborne forces after 1990 and the end of the Thirty Year War. It addresses the controversial parachute drops in black townships, the recruiting and training of the first company of black African paratroopers and the ending of conscription with its dramatic decrease in the number of available paratroopers. The incorporation of the brigade into a so-called Rapid Deployment Force dominated by armour and mechanised infantry is shown to have severely curtailed its ability to operate independently. Finally, the far-reaching effects of democratisation in 1994 on the airborne forces are assessed; firstly, in light of the integration of the SADF paratroopers with those from Transkei, Ciskei and Bophuthatswana; secondly, due to the resistance to change shown by those former SADF elements that continued celebrating what they termed Cassinga Day; and thirdly, because of a massive arms theft by right-wing elements at the brigade. In a sense, the brigade had sounded its own death-knell as a strategic asset by stirring the animosity of the new ANC government. Although the paratroopers performed exceptionally well during the intervention in Lesotho in 1998 there was no longer an airborne headquarters to plan and control operations. The parachute brigade was reduced to an under-strength regiment. Re-organisation was based on economic and political rather than operational demands and airborne expertise at the highest levels disappeared. Transport aircraft were retired from service and the Citizen Force, which had accommodated the bulk of the paratroopers, effectively disappeared. The chapter thus shows that the strategic capability of the South African airborne forces had reached its nadir.

Chapter 14. Conclusion

Chapter fourteen confirms the central argument of the thesis.

Appendices

A separate volume of appendices provides photographs, lists and maps, which can be viewed alongside the main volume during reading.

1.12. EVALUATION OF SOURCES

In conducting research for this thesis, there was a plethora of primary and secondary sources available for consultation. The thesis itself draws substantially on primary sources in the SADF military archives, particularly official documents. However, much use has also been made of interviews, diaries, memoirs and other writings, to elaborate, substantiate and illustrate information gleaned from official documentation. Because some of these sources need to be treated with circumspection due to their subjective nature, they have been verified where possible from the official documents.

Original Documents

The primary sources that provide the critical mass of information for this thesis are official declassified contemporary military documents, most of which were consulted at the South African Department of Defence's Documentation Centre in Pretoria. This establishment houses the archival material relating to the Union Defence Force (UDF), the South African Defence Force (SADF) and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). My knowledge of the military reference and filing system has been extremely useful in accessing these archives. I was also able to request that a large number of classified documents be declassified for my research, making such information public for the first time. This vast archival collection contained most of what was needed to trace the historical growth, organisational changes, appointments of key personalities, training exercises and operational deployments of the airborne forces. This archival repository also has an extensive photographic collection.

I have spent long hours in this centre, visiting it many times over more than two decades of research on the South African airborne forces. I found the staff most helpful and obliging. Declassifying of selected documents sometimes took time, but I experienced none of the frustration Baines describes in accessing classified material.⁴⁵ At no time did I experience any

45. G. Baines, "Accessing Information in South Africa's Department of Defence Archives", in C. Saunders (ed.), *Workshop Report: Documenting Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa*, Select Papers from the Nordic Africa Workshop, Pretoria, Nov. 2009 (Pretoria and Uppsala, Nordic Africa Institute, 2010), pp. 86–94.

form of obstructionism, bureaucratic “bloody-mindedness” or the stern application of the letter of the law to which he alludes. It should, however, be acknowledged that as a retired general officer who was still serving when I began my research, I may have been treated preferentially.

I was also fortunate to have access to a large number of official documents that are not housed in an archival repository. Some are in the private possession of individuals, others in files or scrapbooks in museums, are part of the collections held by regimental associations or other organisations. A significant number are in my personal collection of papers; I rescued others when 44 Parachute Brigade/Regiment consigned them to the scrapheap after 1994, a period in which the records of the old SADF were considered of little or no value under the new dispensation. Of particular significance were the Company War Diaries maintained by various parachute companies during periods of operational duty. The collection of these diaries is far from complete – many have simply disappeared.

A few diaries maintained by individuals who played a part in the airborne narrative have been made available to me; these have been used where relevant. I also made considerable use of my own diaries, maintained during some of the events dealt with in the thesis.

The non-military archives yielded material to enable the contextualisation of the thesis. The collections of the ANC in the Robben Island Mayibuye Museum, held by the University of the Western Cape, as well as private collections in the libraries of other South African universities, have thrown light upon events, seeing them from other perspectives. The Institute for Contemporary History at the University of the Free State also gave me access to relevant documents, although most are secondary sources. In addition I was able to access a few transcripts of interviews with freedom fighters and refugees, some of whom encountered the South African paratroopers in combat situations, from the University of Namibia.

Oral Sources and Correspondence

Many of the individuals who played a role in the development and subsequent dismantling of the airborne capability are still alive, or were alive during the period of research, and their input has been utilised. Others, such as former conscripts, were also consulted. Some of these individuals were traced through the Generals’ and Admirals’ Club or other ex-servicemen’s organisations, as well as via personal contacts, paratrooper veterans’ associations and the Internet. Unfortunately, some paratroopers, including former colleagues, were reluctant to participate in this research, and a few have been quite antagonistic.

I have also traced individuals who are members of Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) and the African People's Liberation Army (APLA) Veterans' Organisations. They were willing to share some of their experiences and provide insight into their views on the SADF's airborne forces. Interviews from all backgrounds have been treated with caution, but in cases where archival or other documentation was not available or could not be traced, an attempt has been made to verify one oral source with another.

Secondary Sources

I have consulted a vast array of secondary sources in the course of my research. Those to which I have attached the greatest value are the academic theses and dissertations and the military staff papers. Also of great value from a military technical point of view have been the official SADF manuals, handbooks and course programmes on airborne operations in the period under review. Of the South African manuals, the most important has been *GWU 110 Deel 1: Lugstormoperasies*; and *JWP 110 Part 2: Standing Operating Procedures for Parachuting*. In addition, US, British and French airborne manuals are in my possession, and the South African airborne fraternity consulted these extensively. I was also able to access a number of précis and *aides memoire*, training curricula and lecture notes, all of which were useful.

My use of published books and academic journals has been discussed under the heading "Historiography" above. As indicated, some must be treated with circumspection due to their subjective nature; these have been validated in relation to official documents where possible.

Newspapers and news magazines have proved especially useful in gauging opinions and attitudes of South African white society between 1960 and 2000, and are available from the archives of the newspapers concerned, from the microfiche and microfilm archives of the South African Library and from the University of the Free State's Institute of Contemporary History, which has carefully categorised newspaper cuttings for the period in question. Of particular relevance have been those newspaper reports and editorials about specific operations and exercises conducted by the paratroopers, as well as press reports on the training of paratroopers and the machismo image portrayed of an elitist military unit in (at the time) an elitist and increasingly militarised white civilian society in a racially segregated country.

The electronic media has played a part in the research undertaken for this thesis. The availability of the Internet has opened up many avenues for research, often at a considerable

saving of time. However, in many cases it is difficult to gauge the reliability of the source. As a general rule, information from the internet was treated as opinion rather than fact. While it is necessary to consult this source, each reference must be evaluated critically.

1.13. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

As a committed Christian, I acknowledge foremost and with gratitude my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who I turned to for encouragement and for the intellectual stamina and perseverance that enabled me to continue when I felt discouraged, tired and under siege from those of the airborne fraternity who are antagonistic to academic research.

To my wife, Anne, my grateful thanks. She has patiently borne the stresses and strains associated with my long years of research, my frequent absences from home, my frustrations when I have encountered enmity from others, and my being a husband who was, for all intents and purposes, “buried in his study”.

To my supervisor, Professor Greg Cuthbertson of Unisa, my sincere thanks for the patience, guidance, encouragement, subtle correction and sound advice that always came my way during circumstances that were often difficult and despite the geographical separation of more than 1,000 kilometres between us. His questions, suggestions and pointers drove me to interrogate parts of my work that I might otherwise have considered complete.

There are many others who have contributed to this project, particularly those who gave of their time to allow me to interview them or who took the trouble to correspond with me and provide me with answers to my questions. To all of them, I extend my grateful thanks. I want to single out the following for particular thanks:

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- Mary-Lynn Suttie, personal librarian for History, Church History, Political Science and Religious Studies, and later the College of Graduate Studies, at the University of South Africa, for regularly forwarding articles she felt might be of use to me and for assisting with research queries when I raised them.

- Lou Hempstead (Boscaino), an old school friend now living in Piacenza, Italy, for tracing and researching ancient and recent Italian sources on the history of parachuting, translating relevant sections and forwarding the information to me in South Africa.
- Emily Krige, the senior archivist, Campbell Collections, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for tracing articles on the first parachute jump in South Africa in *The Natal Witness* from 1891.
- The Port Elizabeth Public Library, for tracing and copying information for me.
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- My old friend and comrade-in-arms, Lieutenant Colonel Rob Jennings and his charming wife Anthea, for making their comfortable cabin in the isolated mountains of the Langkloof available to me to work in uninterrupted peace and quiet during the final revision and editing of the manuscript. The blissful but invigorating environment gave me inspiration and impetus during the final stretch.

To all of these and others who have not been mentioned but who gave support and assistance in one way or another, I extend my utmost gratitude. Without their help I could not have undertaken nor completed this task.

CHAPTER 2

VERTICAL ENVELOPMENT AS A FORM OF MANOEUVRE IN TACTICS AND STRATEGY

2.1. CONCEPTUAL AND TECHNICAL EXPLANATIONS

This chapter provides a general orientation of the theory and historical application of airborne warfare. This is essential as background for the thesis in order for the discussion to be seen in the correct perspective.

This section therefore provides the information required to understand the four military levels of technical, tactical, operational and strategic issues that will be dealt with in the thesis and explains the concept of vertical envelopment as a form of military manoeuvre. The technicalities of the airborne delivery of a military force are also discussed. In addition, it is important to define the strategic versus the tactical approach for the employment of airborne forces as this forms the nub of the hypothesis under discussion.

Finally, some examples of strategic as opposed to tactical airborne operations are used as illustrations of what is meant by these two approaches. A list of military terminology and abbreviations (both military and other) is provided after the Preface to this thesis.

2.2. DEFINING MILITARY MANOEUVRE AND VERTICAL ENVELOPMENT

To fully appreciate the argument of this thesis, it is essential that the potential of vertical envelopment in both the strategic and tactical spheres is understood. This is only possible if there is a clear grasp of what is meant by “manoeuvre”, the fundamental role it plays within the two recognised poles, or theories, of warfare, as well as what is meant by “envelopment” as a basic tactical form of manoeuvre.

Methods of war have generally been seen by modern proponents of military science as a continuum or spectrum, with manoeuvre warfare at one end and attrition warfare at the other. Manoeuvre warfare is based on aggressive offence and mobility of both thought and means, while attrition warfare espouses a predominantly defensive posture with a more static or positional approach of both thought and means. The school that favours manoeuvre warfare sees the destruction of the enemy’s will and ability to fight as more important than the physical destruction of enemy forces and the occupation of enemy territory. Those who favour an

attritionist approach tend to emphasise physical destruction of forces and occupation of territory as indicative of victory. Military doctrine stressing the manoeuvrist approach relies on a decentralised command structure and a flexible force composition rather than the highly centralised command and rigid organisation required for prosecuting the attrition theory.¹

By implication, therefore, manoeuvre warfare doctrine is well-suited to smaller military organisations, although certainly not exclusively so. It also lends itself easily to guerrilla-type armed forces and to insurgency wars. Mao Zedong, one of the greatest proponents of insurgency in the 20th century, stressed the offensive character of what he called “mobile warfare”.² Practically implemented, all warfare embodies some elements of both manoeuvre and attrition. This is stressed by Mao. However, the stalemate of trench warfare on the Western Front during the First World War can be seen as an extreme example of an over-emphasis on attrition, while the German *blitzkrieg* of the opening months of the Second World War is an example of a predominantly manoeuvrist approach. Clearly, manoeuvre requires greater innovation, initiative and forward thinking than does attrition, with all the risks that this entails. Inevitably, this precludes many commanders of a more staid disposition from becoming manoeuvre practitioners. Nevertheless, it would be simplistic and mistaken to see the two theories as mutually exclusive. Simpkin, in his futuristic but scholarly study on the direction of warfare in the 21st century, is adamant that once fighting begins, the two theories are complementary.³

Furthermore, the general acceptance of such a continuum in methods of warfare has recently been challenged by the emergence of the so-called asymmetric warfare approach adopted by various terror groups in the decades around the close of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. However, this quandary had not yet been identified during the period under consideration in this thesis, when the continuum theory was generally accepted. Many proponents, in any case, see asymmetric warfare as no more than another means of applying a manoeuvrist approach.

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1. R. de Vries, *Mobiele Oorlogvoering: 'n Perspektief vir Suider-Afrika* (Pretoria, F.J.N. Harman Publishers, 1987), pp. 133–138 De Vries uses the terms mobile warfare and positional warfare (the latter resulting in linear warfare), but they are different terms for the same concepts as manoeuvre and attrition warfare.
 2. Mao Tse-tung, *On the Protracted War* (Peking, People's Publishing House, 1960), p. 102. However, Mao did not see warfare as a continuum – this is a relatively new theory. Instead he described it as comprising three forms, namely mobile, positional and guerrilla warfare. See *On the Protracted War*, pp. 101–108.
 3. R.E. Simpkin, *Race to the Swift: Thoughts on Twenty-First Century Warfare* (London, Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1985), p. 23.

The concept of manoeuvre in warfare has long been practised by many of the great generals of history⁴ and in fact, in one of the greatest and earliest known treatises on war, believed to have been written more than 2,300 years ago, the legendary Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu, is said to have described the tactics of manoeuvre as lying in the variation of concentration and division of forces.⁵ But it is only in modern times, specifically the 19th and 20th centuries, that manoeuvre has been reduced to clear doctrinal theory and identified as such by professional soldiers as students and exponents of war. This defining of the theory has coincided with the advent of more revolutionary modern technological innovations in warfare that have contributed to speed, mobility, armour protection and firepower on the battlefield. These have included the rifle, machine-gun, motorised vehicle (particularly armoured vehicles and more specifically the tank), long-range artillery (including rockets and missiles) and especially the aeroplane (including helicopters).

Manoeuvre is essentially tactical movement in order to win a battle. It is concerned with mobility and speed and its aim is to make the enemy's position untenable. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, referring to manoeuvre, wrote: "My own military doctrine was based on unbalancing the enemy by manoeuvre while keeping well balanced myself."⁶ A vital element of manoeuvre, namely surprise, is bound up in this statement.

Because this thesis is concerned with a particular form of manoeuvre and how it was practised in southern Africa, principally by the South Africans, it is appropriate to consider the South African view of this military expression.

In the South African Army manual, *Conventional Landbattle*, published in July 1977, manoeuvre is defined as:

The skilful use of forces, terrain, movement and tactics to directly or indirectly force the enemy to act and move according to own forces' design for battle, thereby allowing own forces to maintain the initiative and placing the enemy at a disadvantage.⁷

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4. C. von Clausewitz, in his classic, *Vom Kriege (On War)*, first published in 1832, well before the mechanisation of armies, referred extensively to manoeuvre warfare without using the modern term. An example is his description of Frederick the Great's campaign of 1760, in translated and abridged version (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978), p. 244.
 5. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, edited by Lo Shun-te (Taipei, Mu-Tuo Publishing, 1991), p. 153.
 6. Montgomery of Alamein, *A History of Warfare* (London, Collins, 1968), p. 22.
 7. South African Army Manual, *Conventional Landbattle* (Pretoria, SADF, 1977), pp. 1–12.

Manoeuvre is one of the 13 principles of war propagated by the old South African Defence Force (SADF) and it is still embraced by the new South African National Defence Force (SANDF). Though the exact number of these principles varies from country to country according to the military tradition of different armed forces, there are certain of them that appear in most lists, and manoeuvre, in one form or another, is one of these.⁸ Essential to the principle of manoeuvre, according to De Vries, is the availability of space within which to apply the necessary mobility.⁹

Manoeuvre, however, should not be seen as merely the movement of combat troops or the directing of artillery fire and air strikes on the battlefield; it is far more than that. To illustrate this, the following points referring to manoeuvre are listed in the updated version of the South African *Conventional Landbattle Manual*:

- Manoeuvre implies that military resources must be positioned to favour the accomplishment of the mission.
- The object of manoeuvre is to dispose of a force in such a manner as to place the enemy at a relative disadvantage and thus achieve results that would otherwise be more costly in men and materiel.
- Manoeuvre is the movement of combat power to provide the necessary concentration at the proper time and place for attainment of the aim.
- Manoeuvre enhances combat power because only through manoeuvre can the military resources be so positioned that they can apply their full power or concentration at the decisive point and time.
- Manoeuvre is not limited to the movement of troops alone; there is manoeuvre of fire, manoeuvre of logistics, manoeuvre of means for controlling areas and populations and manoeuvre of political force.
- To apply manoeuvre in order to establish concentration of force required at the decisive point and time, mobility is essential. Mobility may be achieved by improvement of ground transportation means, but will be limited in flexibility unless it exploits air mobility.¹⁰

8. De Vries lists the principles of warfare of South Africa, the United States Army and the old USSR as including the concept of manoeuvre. See De Vries, *Mobiele Oorlogvoering*, p. 192.

9. De Vries, *Mobiele Oorlogvoering*, p. 9.

10. SA Army Manual, Updated version of *Conventional Landbattle (Draft)* (Pretoria, SADF, 1986), pp. 1-51 to 1-52.

All this is in complete accordance with universally accepted interpretations of manoeuvre. For instance, the Internet Wikipedia defines this form of warfare as:

the term used by military theorists for a concept of warfare that advocates attempting to defeat an adversary by incapacitating their decision-making through shock and disruption brought about by movement. Its concepts are reflected in a number of military strategies throughout history.¹¹

Although the internet is open to question regarding its reliability, this definition generally conforms to the more succinct one of the US Army, which defines Manoeuvre Warfare as “a war fighting philosophy that seeks to shatter the enemy’s cohesion through a series of rapid, violent, and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which he cannot cope.”¹²

Yet it would be wrong also, to see manoeuvre as limited to physical movement. The Spanish Army, in discussing manoeuvre as advocated by that acknowledged strategic theorist, Liddell Hart, emphasises its disruptive effect on the enemy. Translated from the Spanish, it reads: “In almost all decisive campaigns, the disruption of the psychological and physical equilibrium of the enemy was the prior condition intended to accomplish his conquest.”¹³

Manoeuvre, thus, is an approach to warfare that is aimed at both the physical and the psychological dimensions of the enemy, with the emphasis and priority on the latter.

Envelopment, on the other hand is not an approach to warfare. It is merely a tactical movement within the concept of manoeuvre; and is thus a form of manoeuvre. Envelopment is defined in the South African *Conventional Landbattle* as: “An operation during which the main attack passes around or over [in the case of airborne forces] the enemy’s principal defensive positions and subjects him to destruction in a position from the flank or rear.”¹⁴

A basic tactical movement, envelopment is also known as outflanking. Envelopment entails movement around an enemy force, avoiding direct encounter with his main force. It is thus a form of offensive manoeuvre. The types of offensive manoeuvre can be simply categorised as follows:

1. Frontal attack
2. Left envelopment

11. Wikipedia, “Maneuver Warfare”.

12. “Evolution of Warfare”, Microsoft Powerpoint presentation by Capt Bartis, US Army ROTC Program, 2008.

13. Spanish Military Manual, *Lecciones de Historia Militar*, (Madrid, Escuela Superior del Ejercito, 1980), p. 76.

14. *Conventional Landbattle Manual (Draft)*, p. 1-16.

3. Right envelopment
4. Double envelopment or multiple envelopment
5. Vertical envelopment

Clearly, the last-named type of envelopment is a recent innovation, only made possible by the advent of air transport. Galvin and others refer to vertical envelopment as a “third dimension” in manoeuvre warfare.¹⁵ In the first three types of envelopment the aim is always to either strike the enemy’s rear, or to encircle and cut off his forces. Multiple envelopment is any simultaneous employment of more than one envelopment. Yool explains envelopment in the following terms:

In an early age it was discovered that armies, like the individuals composing them, dread an attack from the flank or rear. An assault from one side or another is not enough, since an adversary can face in the new direction, whereupon the effort becomes a mere frontal attack. In order to deliver a true flank attack, part of the offensive force must fix the enemy’s front, perhaps even defensively, while the assault force swings around to strike simultaneously from the side. If this force can make a wide enough swing to threaten an opponent’s rear, the attack becomes a single envelopment. And in instances where the rear is assailed from both sides with concentric thrusts, a double envelopment is the result.¹⁶

Yool goes on to couple this to the importance of bringing about a conviction of defeat in the minds of the enemy, which returns the argument to the psychological dimension. In the above description, however, what is of particular relevance to this thesis is an understanding that the “fixing” of the enemy’s front (in other words, the tying down of the enemy) would not be necessary if the envelopment could be carried out with complete surprise – something which becomes a distinct possibility with an airborne force. Herein lies the essential strength of an airborne force.

Nevertheless, in the case of vertical envelopment it needs to be borne in mind that tactical encirclement in the narrowest sense of the concept is generally only possible if the operation is part of a multiple envelopment with ground forces. An airborne force on its own cannot hold ground indefinitely, so it could not encircle and cut off a substantial enemy force successfully without being backed up by a strong ground force. An airborne force is too lightly equipped and constituted to act on its own in such circumstances. Employed as a raid on the

15. J.R Galvin, *Air Assault: The Development of Airmobile Warfare* (New York, Hawthorn Books, 1969), p. 314.

16. W.M. Yool is a retired air vice marshal of the RAF, a military writer and assistant editor of *Brassey’s Annual*. See his “Warfare, Conduct of - Tactics”, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Vol. 19, p. 573.

other hand, where an objective in the enemy's rear is struck but not held, an airborne operation could arguably not be considered "envelopment" because the enemy force has not been encircled or closed off. This though, is only true of physical encirclement in a purely tactical sense. A raid that is strategically executed can create a mentality of encirclement and siege in the enemy's thinking, thereby bringing into play the psychological dislocation which is the very essence of manoeuvre warfare. This would certainly justify even an airborne raid independent of other ground operations as being seen as an envelopment of the enemy.

It has been said that the raid as a military operation is the second most primitive tactic in the history of warfare, after the ambush; but that it has become, in the modern era, the most sophisticated type of operation requiring the most brilliant commanders and the most elite soldiers.¹⁷ The raid has thus become, over the past century, a spectacular, potentially decisive and conceivably strategic action. This is of particular significance in the modern context of warfare, now a complex activity under constant scrutiny from the masses because of technological surveillance and satellite communication capabilities. This modern increase in the prominence of the raid has coincided with the advent and development of airborne forces as a tool of manoeuvre warfare. That this is so is no accident: it is a direct result of the inherent attributes of an airborne force. Yet it also highlights the shortcomings of such a force.

Manoeuvre warfare, as has already been intimated, is largely reliant on speed. Where the tactic of envelopment is applied within this form of warfare, speed becomes especially crucial, but speed implies a light and mobile force, unencumbered by a heavy logistic tail. The lighter the force, however, the more vulnerable it becomes to both siege and attack by strong enemy forces. This was succinctly summed up by Sun Tzu as follows:

An army advancing together with all equipment and supplies cannot move very fast. While an army without equipment and supplies can move faster, they risk losing the provisions which they left behind. Although the troops are lighter, speedier and they can cover greater distances, they move without rest. They will soon become disorganised... An army that has lost its means of transportation will perish. An army that has lost its food, provisions, equipment and supplies cannot hope to survive.¹⁸

Herein lies the inherent weakness of an airborne force and the classic examples of this weakness being exploited by an enemy can be seen in the defeat of the British 1st Airborne

17. S.A. Southworth (ed.), *Great Raids in History: From Drake to Desert One* (Edison NJ, Castle Books, 1997), p. 1.

18. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, edited by Tsai Chi-chung, pp. 72–73.

Division at Arnhem in September 1944,¹⁹ and the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.²⁰

It is here that the concept of the *schwerpunkt*²¹ or concentration of combat power on a focal point comes in. During the planning of operations a centre of gravity must be identified which, once taken, will be decisive to the outcome of the operation. Clausewitz explained that in a conflict “a certain centre of gravity, a centre of power and movement, will form itself, on which everything depends; and against this centre of gravity of the enemy, the concentrated blow of all the forces must be directed”.²²

De Vries describes the *schwerpunkt* as the weak place in the enemy’s position, going on to consider it the priority target identified by a commander as the key to a given military problem situation.²³ However, Liddell Hart, analysing Napoleon’s application of this thinking, mentions that “what he really meant was not point, but joint”,²⁴ a joint being both vital and vulnerable.

Furness traces the evolution of the *schwerpunkt* concept from the embryonic ideas expressed by Fredrick the Great in his *Instructions for his Generals* in 1748, through the growth of Prussia and the treatise *On War* by Clausewitz, to the culmination in the *blitzkrieg* operations of the German *Wehrmacht* during the opening stages of the Second World War. Today it continues to have a profound influence on modern military thinking and doctrine on manoeuvre warfare. In a cogently stated argument, Furness shows how Napoleon embraced certain tenets which were the embodiment of the *schwerpunkt* concept, and how the Germans, in a careful analysis of Napoleon’s tactics, formulated the concept as a reaction to their defeats

19. A recent and professionally analytical account of the Battle of Arnhem (as opposed to the many emotional and propagandistic works that have appeared over the past 60 years) is W.F. Buckingham, *Arnhem 1944; A Reappraisal* (Stroud, Tempus Publishing, 2002).

20. This is apparent in the classic, albeit most subjective account by J. Roy, *The Battle of Dienbienphu* (New York, Harper & Row, 1965). A more scholarly analysis which indicates this weakness in an airborne force is by B.B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1967).

21. The German concept *schwerpunkt* is seen by some to encompass four terms: centre of gravity, critical vulnerability, focus of effort, and the main effort. See, for example D.J. Furness, *Schwerpunkt: Fall Gleb and the German Example* (MMil dissertation, Marine Corps University, Quantico, Virginia, 2002), p. 11.

22. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 389. See also M.N. Vego, “Clausewitz’s Schwerpunkt: Mistranslated from German, Misunderstood in English”, *Military Review* (Jan/Feb 2007), argues that *schwerpunkt* should be translated as “weight (or focus) of effort” rather than “centre of gravity”. This, Vego feels, gives it a different meaning. In effect, the meaning will still depend on the interpretation by the commander on the ground and the principle of identifying a focus point remains valid.

23. De Vries, *Mobiele Oorlogvoering*, pp. 41 and 61.

24. B. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London, Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 99.

at the hands of the French emperor.²⁵ Napoleon's lasting influence on the battlefield to this day cannot be underestimated if the reasoning of Furness is to be accepted, and there is little reason to question it.

However, Clausewitz's definition of the centre of gravity on both sides of a conflict as being where the greatest concentration of enemy troops is – and their consequent need to clash, contained the seeds of attrition so evident during the First World War. His French contemporary, Jomini, in his *The Art of War* (1862, trans. 1971), showed a greater appreciation of a more indirect approach and provides a less dogmatic description of what he termed the decisive point.²⁶ After the static horror of the First World War the Germans distilled the thinking of both, based on their recent experience, combining them with the mobility afforded by mechanisation and air transport, to produce the *blitzkrieg* approach to war, which incorporated the *schwerpunkt* concept. The German understanding of the concept at the time of the outbreak of the Second World War and throughout that war was that their own *schwerpunkt* was directed at the enemy's centre of gravity through a critical vulnerability referred to as the decisive point.²⁷

This *schwerpunkt*, once identified, therefore becomes the focus of main effort. This concentration principle enables the attacker to win numerical superiority at the point of main effort, giving him tactical and operational superiority even though he may be numerically and strategically inferior in the overall contest of forces.²⁸ The most effective way of overcoming the weakness of an airborne force and at the same time exploiting its capabilities to optimum effect, is to apply it to the identified enemy *schwerpunkt*. This enables the decisive action to be taken before the weakness of the airborne force can be exploited. Not only is this an application of the element of surprise, but it is also the employment of an economy of force.

2.3. THE LEVELS OF WAR

We now move on to a clarification of the often confusing references to the tactical as opposed to the strategic application of the airborne concept. It is useful at this early stage of the thesis

25. Furness, *Schwerpunkt*, especially pp. 10–27.

26. A-H. Jomini, *The Art of War* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1971), p. 78. See also US Military Academy, *Jomini, Clausewitz and Schlieffen* (West Point, Department of Military Art and Engineering, 1954), p. 20.

27. Furness, *Schwerpunkt*, p. 20.

28. K-H. Frieser, *Blitzkrieg-Legende: Der Westfeldzug 1940, Operationen des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (München, R. Oldenbourg, 1995), pp. 89–90.

to examine the generally accepted military “levels of war”. These levels are the strategic, operational, tactical and technical levels. It is important to understand exactly which level is being referred to, particularly because two of these levels, the tactical and the strategic, are crucial to the hypothesis, while all of the levels are encountered, if not always referred to, throughout the thesis.

The South African Defence Force and the later South African National Defence Force, drawing on both British and US Army doctrine as well as the writings of proponents such as Simpkin, refer to the levels of war as a “classification of military action”.²⁹ Each level is defined by the outcome intended, rather than the level of command or the size of the unit involved. There is though, in some countries, such as Australia, a preference for describing these rather as “levels of command in war” because they are seen as an attempt to define command responsibilities during armed conflict.³⁰ However, in this thesis, because airborne operations by the South Africans are being addressed, the South African definitions will be adhered to. These levels are also embraced by the African Union in the creation of an African Standby Force.³¹

2.3.1. The Strategic Level

The highest level of war is the strategic level. This comprises two types of strategy and some countries go so far as to regard them as separate levels of war.

2.3.1.1. Political Strategy

The first, political or policy strategy (also called national strategy, what Liddell Hart referred to as grand strategy³²), is where the politicians who govern the country concerned make decisions regarding whether to embark on a war or to end one; how alliances will be structured; and what the objectives will be for the subsequent peace.³³ These politicians set political objectives to be attained through military action to achieve their aims. It is the responsibility of the government of a country to lay down policy objectives for the military activities to be carried out, to stipulate the limitations imposed on those activities (including the circumstances in

29. *Staff Officer's Operational Manual (SOOM)*, Part VII, Operational Concepts (Pretoria, SANDF, 1996) p. 7/2-1.

30. “Levels of Command in War”, Royal Australian Air Force Website, www.airforce.gov.au

31. Moving Africa Forward: African Peace & Security Architecture (APSA), 2010 Assessment Study, p. 44, para 125.

32. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, pp. 335–336.

33. “Levels of Command in War”, Royal Australian Air Force Website, www.airforce.gov.au

which military activity should cease) and to make available the requisite resources for the attainment of the objectives.³⁴

Political strategy therefore concerns far more than simply the military dimensions. It takes all elements of national power into consideration, such as diplomatic, political, economic, social, intelligence and military issues. Simply put, “Strategy is the application of national resources to achieve policy objectives.”³⁵ It is therefore strategic policy that provides the framework for conducting military operations.

Political strategy gives direction to the military high command. Involvement in political strategy by the generals and admirals in the high command should ideally to be limited to providing advice on whether the military has the capability to carry out what the politicians want them to do and making known what resources will be needed. However, it is not uncommon for the generals to exercise wider influence at this level to persuade the politicians to approve their intentions. This certainly happened on occasion in southern Africa, as will be seen in this study.

2.3.1.2. Military Strategy

The second type of strategy at this level is military strategy (referred to by the Americans as theatre strategy), which gets its cue from the political strategy. South African military manuals define military strategy as “the application of military resources to achieve the military aspects of strategic objectives”.³⁶ Military strategy is the province of a country’s military high command. At the level of military strategy decisions are made on the manner in which the conflict will be directed. This means decisions on how armed forces will be used to achieve the aims of national policy by the application or threat of force.

Here the generals and admirals must translate the intentions of their political masters into broad military plans. These are issued in the form of directives to the various military components. They include taking decisions on what military campaign or campaigns need to be undertaken to achieve the strategic policy goals; identifying military strategic goals and defining campaign objectives; taking into consideration political, legal and financial limitations on the use of force (including international law, rules of engagement and humanitarian guidelines);

34. *SOOM, Part VII, Operational Concepts*, p. 7/2-1.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, p. 7/2-2.

allocating forces and appointment of commanders at the operational level; agreeing on operational objectives with commanders at the operational level and adjusting resources where necessary; and establishing the outline command arrangements.³⁷ Politicians in government, having issued the necessary guidelines, should ideally not interfere in the nitty-gritty of military strategy, even when reverses have been experienced. Hitler was a prime example of failing to do this during the Second World War.

In the event of a strategic airborne operation being decided upon (strategic because it may involve crossing sensitive borders, attacking sensitive objectives or achieving a strategic goal – all of which could require specific political decisions), its actual conduct is normally delegated to the operational level, even if the force levels are relatively small and no formal “campaign” has been undertaken, or any “theatre of operations” established.

2.3.2. The Operational Level

Here the emphasis is on the planning and conducting of joint (multi-service) and combined (multinational) military campaigns and major operations, within a theatre of operations, to accomplish the strategic objective.³⁸ It is the domain of general officers commanding field forces and of staff officers. Napoleon referred to this level of war as “grand tactics”.

The Americans define the operational level of war as:

...the level of war at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theaters or other operational areas. Activities at this level link tactics and strategy by establishing operational objectives needed to accomplish the strategic objectives, sequencing events to achieve the operational objectives, initiating actions, and applying resources to bring about and sustain these events. These activities imply a broader dimension of time or space than do tactics; they ensure the logistic and administrative support of tactical forces, and they provide the means by which tactical successes are exploited to achieve strategic objectives.³⁹

The South African Army College taught that “the operational level of war is more than being bigger than tactics or smaller than strategy. It is different, governed by different characteristics, principles and personalities”.⁴⁰ The College went on to specify it as follows:

37. *SOOM, Part VII, Operational Concepts*, p. 7/2-2.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *US Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, US Army Command, 2001, as amended, 20 March 2006).

40. SA Army College flyer, “The Operational Level of War”, unreferenced.

The operational level is the gearing between tactics and strategy; it translates military strategic goals into achievable objectives, groups and manoeuvres tactical forces, orchestrates and sustains the effort. No fighting takes place on this level. It is the level that contests intellectual wills, executes operations and campaigns, links the components of the state's power base to the theatre goals and orchestrates strategic objectives.⁴¹

This makes it clear that the operational level exists primarily to translate strategic intentions into tactical objectives. The operational art is concerned with co-ordinating the activities of all units within a single theatre of operations.⁴² Operational instructions are normally issued to these units, telling them (in the case of manoeuvre warfare) broadly what objectives to reach within certain timeframes – but not specifically how to reach them.

General Glen K. Otis, Commander-in-Chief of the US Army in Europe from 1983 to 1988,⁴³ gives an earthy and understandable explanation: “On the operational level, your goal is not to kill the enemy, but to provide opportunities for the commanders on the tactical level to kill the enemy. Your operational objective is to put the enemy in harm's way.”⁴⁴

When a decision is made at the strategic level to carry out an airborne operation of strategic significance, it will normally be planned and co-ordinated at the operational level. As such, it is vitally important to understand this level of war when examining airborne operations.

2.3.3. The Tactical Level

Sometimes divided into minor tactics and major tactics, this is the level at which field officers normally work, where the emphasis is on the execution of an operation and where contact is made with the enemy. It entails the movement and positioning of soldiers and materiel for employment against the enemy, and implies a skilled use of terrain and equipment in order to do so. Tactical expertise is largely reliant on a good knowledge of the technical capabilities of both one's own soldiers and equipment as well as those of the enemy. But it also entails a grasp of psychological factors such as morale on the battlefield and is immeasurably enhanced by a “feel” for the physical environment. It is the level at which the commander moves from the technical “Science of War” to the more discerning and imaginative “Art of War”.

41. Ibid.

42. “Levels of Command in War”, Royal Australian Air Force Website, www.airforce.gov.au

43. West Point Association of Graduates, 2004 Distinguished Graduate Award, at <http://www.westpointaog.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=753>

44. SA Army College flyer, “The Operational Level of War”, unreferenced.

The Americans describe the tactical level of war as involving the employment of units in combat, where battles and engagements are planned and executed by tactical units. “Activities at this level focus on the ordered arrangement and maneuver of combat elements in relation to each other and to the enemy to achieve combat objectives.”⁴⁵ The Australians say simply that “at the tactical level forces are deployed to confront the enemy in battle. The tactical art is all about organising and manoeuvring forces to engage the enemy in combat.”⁴⁶ It is at the tactical level that troops are deployed directly for combat.⁴⁷

A sound grasp of what is entailed in the phases of war, both offensive (advance, attack) and defensive (defence, retrograde operations) is vital at this level. Rapid planning plays a crucial part in the tactical level of war, as does the ability to issue clear and unambiguous orders so that there is no misunderstanding of what the intention is.

Where manoeuvre warfare is applied, a great deal of initiative is encouraged at the tactical level. This is generally known in military circles as “mission command”, implying that if the mission to be accomplished is clear and unambiguous, commanders at every level of the organisation will use their own initiative to accomplish the mission. The term is derived from the German *Auftragstaktik*, sometimes translated as “mission-type tactics”, which have characterised German military thinking since the 19th century. The modern *Bundeswehr* prefers the term *Führen mit Auftrag* (leading by mission), because it possibly portrays the idea of the commander’s intent more accurately. This must be absolutely clear at every subordinate level so that every last soldier knows the overall goal and what must be achieved. This means that ideally, in manoeuvre warfare, officers at the lowest level of command (that of platoon or troop, commanded by a 2nd lieutenant) will not hesitate to act during an operation, even in the absence of specific orders at a critical time. In a counter-insurgency war, where forces as small as a ten-man section (a “squad”, in US terminology) are deployed independently, this concept of mission command can be devolved to a corporal, at the very lowest military organisational level, who would otherwise operate only on the technical level of war. In airborne operations, where the possibility of individuals becoming separated from their fellow soldiers is high (particularly during parachute operations), the concept of mission command is particularly

45. US Military Command, *US Army Field Manual FM3-90: Tactics* (Washington DC, US Army, 2001), pp. 1–2.

46. “Levels of Command in War”, Royal Australian Air Force Website.

47. *SOOM, Part VII, Operational Concepts*, p. 7/2-4.

relevant to the lowliest soldier in the hierarchy. In the application of mission command at the operational level of war, mission-type orders are issued, freeing that level of leadership from tactical details, which are left to the tactical level commanders.

In the attrition approach, on the other hand, there is very little initiative possible at the tactical level. Cumbersome organisations, large force-levels, heavy and complex equipment and highly detailed orders that place the emphasis on procedures rather than on the mission to be accomplished, tend to stifle initiative and reduce tactics to the technical level. Even in a tactical organisation the size of a battalion (anything between 500 and 1,000 men, depending on the type of battalion and the country employing it), the attrition approach allows little room for initiative and actions are preordained, reactionary and mechanical rather than innovative.

At the tactical level, operational orders are issued that can be extremely detailed and specific about how a mission is to be carried out. However, the greater the degree of “mission command” philosophy that is applied, the less detail such an order will contain. Accordingly, in the manoeuvrist school, such orders are frequently verbal rather than written, particularly where time is of the essence.

What is important to bear in mind at the tactical level is that the context and focus of tactical actions should stem from what is decided at the operational, and in turn the strategic levels. In terms of this thesis, it will be seen that the decision to carry out many (in fact most) airborne operations tends to be made at the tactical level. This is because the airborne force forms only a small part of a far larger force, and is simply one of many means at the disposal of the overall commander for accomplishing missions that are part of other operations.

2.3.4. The Technical Level

This is the lowest level of expertise in war and entails the actual operation of equipment and of armament, the non-tactical movement and the maintenance of soldiers and materiel. It is highly procedural in nature. It is characterised by laid-down drills for every procedure and leaves little room for initiative.

It is the level of the ordinary soldier and is normally supervised by the non-commissioned officer, or NCO, who should be a master of technical application. Techniques are usually designed for simplicity and ease of understanding and execution. A high level of

technical skill is essential to ensure the smooth functioning of the higher levels of war. In most military doctrines, the technical level is included as a sub-section of the tactical.

Marching, shooting, parachuting, driving, climbing, digging, swimming, hand-to-hand combat, stripping, assembling and operating weapons are all examples of technical skills. Many such techniques are encapsulated in Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), taking the place of orders and requiring little or no initiative beyond minor adjustments. Where orders are given at this level they rarely require explanation or clarification as reaction to each order has usually been practised to the extent that it is immediate and almost automatic.

2.3.5. Summary of the Levels of War

A phenomenon as complex as war, however, can never be neatly compartmentalised into four comfortable levels in this academic manner. This is merely a theoretical approach designed to provide a structure so that the different levels at which decisions are made can be better understood. The size of the armed forces of any country, the political system of that country and the relationship between the military and the political government authorities all influence these matters. In addition, there is a great deal of overlap between these levels and particularly at the strategic level, in many instances there is a blurring of the line between national strategy and military strategy. This is particularly so if the country concerned is a military dictatorship or where the military high command exercises excessive influence in government.

Strategy is determined at the highest level of government and of command and involves setting of aims and the taking of decisions at this level. Operational level planning entails the translation of those aims and decisions into militarily achievable actions, while the tactical level is concerned with their implementation in the face of combat. The technical level is merely the carrying out of drills and procedures where planning and decisions play a minimal role.

Very broadly then, it can be said that at the strategic level operations are directed, or provided with direction; at the operational level they are conducted; and at the tactical level they are executed.

2.4. THE TECHNICALITIES OF AIRBORNE DELIVERY

There are three means of delivering troops and their equipment to battle from the air. These are by parachute, by landing them in a fixed wing transport aircraft, and by landing them in a

rotary wing aircraft, or helicopter. All are classified as “airborne” because with all three the troops are borne to battle by air.⁴⁸ For each of the three means, there are advantages and disadvantages. Common to all these means of delivery, however, is the immense advantage of being able to cross both natural and man-made obstacles at speed during the approach to the landing area, and being able to make that approach from any direction in a significantly short space of time.

Despite this advantage, it is vital to understand the limitations of manoeuvre faced by an airborne force. Essentially, an airborne soldier’s ability to manoeuvre is dependent on the aircraft that is transporting him. Once on the ground, he only has his feet to convey him. It therefore goes without saying that this aerial manoeuvrability must be exploited to the full by commanders planning an airborne operation. Ideally therefore, as was pointed out above, every effort should be made to land the airborne force as close as possible to the *schwerpunkt* in order to carry out a decisive action in the shortest possible time with a minimum of movement on the ground. Each of the three means of airborne delivery has different implications in attempting to achieve this, and these are now considered.

2.4.1. Parachuting

A military parachutist must undergo time-consuming training in the specialised techniques needed for this type of delivery. Experience has also shown that not every soldier is capable of mastering these techniques or is even prepared to attempt them. A paratrooper must also necessarily be physically fitter than the average soldier because of the punishment his body is expected to absorb when landing in adverse conditions, and the fact that he is expected to carry all he needs with him when he jumps. In addition, it takes a particular type of person to accept that when he goes into combat it will almost always be in isolated conditions when he will be pretty much without support and medical back-up. There are therefore both psychological and physical requirements that must be met by such soldiers. This implies the need for volunteers and a degree of selection of those volunteers.

Furthermore, military parachutists must be trained in aircraft drills that are to be executed while they are being transported within the aircraft and while they are preparing for the jump. There have to be dispatchers (called jumpmasters by the Americans) to initiate and

48. M. Alexander, “South African Airborne Operations”, *Scientia Militaria*, 31, 1 (2003), p. 49.

control these drills and to give the commands that will bring each paratrooper to the point of jumping. Then there are three techniques that have to be mastered by every paratrooper: the exit technique, which entails his safe departure from the aircraft; the flight technique, which involves his drop into space, the deployment of his parachute, the carrying out of any emergency drills should this be necessary, (including the activation of his emergency reserve parachute), the avoidance of collisions with other paratroopers in an often crowded sky, and the control of his opened parachute); and finally, there is the landing technique, which is concerned with enabling the paratrooper to arrive safely on the ground, even when faced with strong winds, rough terrain and natural or man-made obstacles.

Paratroopers must be able to execute all three techniques just as well at night as they can by day, and must be capable of doing so when heavily encumbered with personal weapons, ammunition, rations and equipment, sometimes weighing more than half their own mass. Once on the ground they do not have recourse to significant vehicle transport, guaranteed lines of communication, regular logistic support or medical evacuation. What they have jumped with, they have to carry. This means that there are reasons other than the jump itself why a paratrooper needs to be fitter and tougher than most soldiers and why he has to overcome psychological as well as material odds that are not always encountered by the average soldier.

Dropping a force by parachute exposes the aircraft that are transporting that force to enemy ground fire for a relatively brief period of time. The aircraft do not land in enemy territory, so are not placed in such an extremely vulnerable position. Because modern transport aircraft have very long ranges and refuelling can be done at intermediate airfields or in some cases even in flight, it is possible to deliver a force by parachute across almost any distance and to do so relatively rapidly. However, the aircraft are vulnerable while dropping the force, because they have to fly slowly and at a low altitude. Due to dispersal on landing, the force itself is initially scattered and requires time to assemble before it can go into action. It also takes time to de-rig heavier equipment and weapons that have been parachuted before they can be brought into action.

Yet a parachute delivery has the advantage that it can take place where there are no airfields or where airfields have been rendered unserviceable. But obstacles on the dropping zone (DZ), such as large bodies of water, buildings, power lines, broken ground, rocks and fences can all cause casualties even before combat takes place. Adverse weather conditions

such as high winds can also result in casualties or even in the cancellation of an operation. Of major importance is the problem that is always posed of how to extract the paratroopers once they have been dropped, if the intention is for them not to remain in the area. Should there be a friendly force with which to link up, this is easily resolved. But if not, and if there is no serviceable airfield on which aircraft can land to carry out the extraction, or if distances exclude the use of helicopters for this purpose, the paratroopers are literally left stranded.

Nevertheless, a parachute delivery is the one means by which a sizeable, balanced force can be employed over long distances for vertical envelopment almost anywhere, provided sufficient numbers of suitable transport aircraft are available, weather conditions permit it and there is fire support available from ground attack aircraft.⁴⁹ A balanced force is one that is composed so as to provide the commander with the ability to deal with all likely contingencies for the operation in question. This implies that the force used would not necessarily consist solely of infantry, but could possibly include artillery, engineers, anti-aircraft or anti-tank elements as well as the necessary logistic back-up.⁵⁰ It need not necessarily comprise all these elements for every operation, but would instead be tailored to include those considered essential for the success of the specific operation being undertaken.

A suitable transport aircraft for parachute operations is one that can carry between 50 and 100 paratroopers or a number of cargo platforms over a distance of several thousand kilometres and then return to a safe airfield after dropping them. For several of these aircraft to drop their loads simultaneously or within a short space of time in approximately the same area, the pilots have to be experienced in flying in suitable formations to avoid collisions in the air both with other aircraft and with paratroopers descending with their heavy equipment. The pilots must also be trained to fly tactically so as to minimise their vulnerability.

Parachuting as an option for airborne operations is therefore highly complex and demanding, both in terms of specialist training and specialised equipment. Yet it enables a sizeable force to be delivered, and in all the largest airborne operations ever carried out primary use was made of paratroopers jumping with parachutes.

49. See M. Alexander, "An African Rapid-Deployment Force", *Military Review*, 77, 3 (May/June 1997), pp. 26–32.

50. M. Alexander, "Airborne Forces as a Strategic Imperative: A South African Perspective", *African Armed Forces*, October 2001, p. 7.

2.4.2. Tactical Air Landing

Landing a force by means of fixed wing aircraft has historically taken two forms: by glider, and by powered aircraft. Gliders are no longer used in airborne operations because of their vulnerability, but were comparatively inexpensive to manufacture and as expendable items could be landed in almost any open field. The troops they carried were also not as widely dispersed on landing as are paratroops. The greatest drawbacks of gliders, besides their vulnerability to enemy fire, were that they needed highly trained pilots and were prone to horrific accidents during landings. They also required tug aircraft, which could usually be better used for other tasks. Furthermore, their pilots were often redundant “spare parts” after landing, becoming a nuisance or even a burden to the other troops because they did not form part of their organisation. Like paratroops, glider troops were also faced with the problem of extraction once their task had been completed.

Today, tactical air-landed operations, or TALO, (sometimes called tactical assault landed operations) are carried out by powered fixed wing aircraft using airfields. Their greatest advantage is that the force being landed is already concentrated on arrival and can immediately go into action. In addition, the aircraft can approach at a very low level, thereby making it less visible and vulnerable. The technique can also be effectively utilised for the extraction of a force in the case of a raid. The large size and carrying capacity of modern aircraft makes them capable of transporting more troops and bigger vehicles than gliders ever could, and they can travel vast distances. This was illustrated by the Israelis during the hostage-release operation they carried out by means of a TALO at Entebbe in Uganda in 1976.⁵¹

The greatest disadvantages of landing powered aircraft as a means of delivery or extraction are that there are not always airfields located where the force is required; that airfields can quickly and easily be rendered unserviceable; and that the aircraft are exceptionally vulnerable while on the ground unloading their cargo – even to small arms fire. In addition, this means of delivery can generally only be used to insert a relatively small force, because most airfields cannot accommodate many aircraft simultaneously. However, any

51. W. Stevenson, *90 Minutes at Entebbe: The First Full inside Story of Operation Thunderbolt, the Spectacular Israeli Strike against Terrorism* (New York, Bantam Books, 1976); C. Chant, “The Raids on Entebbe and Mogadishu”, in P. de Ste Croix (ed.), *Airborne Operations: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Great Battles of Airborne Forces* (London, Salamander Books, 1978), pp. 212–215.

soldier can, with some specialised training, be utilised in this role, and it is not necessary to rely on volunteers who have to meet stringent standards and undergo complex training as is the case with paratroopers.

There have been examples of successful large-scale TALOs. The Soviets carried out some impressive air-landed operations, such as their intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968.⁵² Dissent by the government of that country was not tolerated by the Soviets, so an invasion force was spearheaded by a division of airborne troops who carried out a rapid and effective air landing to capture Prague Airport, and from there they spread out and occupied key points and government offices in the capital. Resistance was isolated and sporadic, with the larger ground forces linking up within two days. It was a classic example of how a large-scale invasion could be spearheaded by a vertical envelopment manoeuvre, using a big airport in a capital city.

2.4.3. Helicopters

As a means of positioning troops by air, helicopters provide great flexibility. They can fly much closer to the ground than fixed wing aircraft, even making use of “nap-of-the-earth” flying to mask their approach behind ground features like hills, forests and buildings. They have no need of an airfield to land and can in fact utilise a very small open space. Because of their ability to hover, they can actually insert troops where there is no open space, utilising techniques such as rappelling or fast roping. Furthermore, they are able to withdraw after delivering their cargo and return again when they are needed to extract a force. By hovering and utilising a hoist cable they can extract soldiers from an area where it is impossible to land, lowering a rope or using a “snatch” procedure. They are easily adaptable to quick changes in plan and to unexpected or variable circumstances.

An added advantage is that troops do not need to be volunteers to be used in heliborne operations and provided they undergo the specialised training necessary to carry out the various techniques, any good soldiers can be used. Perhaps the greatest advantage provided by helicopters for airborne operations is their ability to provide further mobility to the troops after they have landed. This battlefield mobility means that helicopter-borne troops are the only

52. A. Kadish, “The Rape of Czechoslovakia”, in De Ste Croix (ed.), *Airborne Operations*, pp. 204–209; J. Weeks, *Assault from the Sky: A History of Airborne Warfare* (Newton Abbot, Westbridge Books, 1978), pp. 168–169.

airborne troops with any real and significant manoeuvre capability once they have reached their objective area.

The Israelis carried out the first ever helicopter deployment at night of a battalion in one lift during the Middle East War of 1967. The innovative thinking of General Ariel Sharon resulted in the overrunning of the Egyptian positions at the key location of Abu Ageila and ultimately the routing of the Egyptian Army. In the words of George W. Gawrych: “Abu Ageila fell as a result of a small mobile group penetrating into the Egyptian rear at Ruafa Dam, a paratroop battalion breaking into the center of the defensive perimeter and destroying much of the Egyptian artillery.”⁵³ This action showed how vertical envelopment by helicopters taking advantage of darkness can prove pivotal in mechanised manoeuvre by ground forces.

But helicopters have a limited range and payload, restricting the distance over which they can operate without being refuelled, and limiting the size of the force they can deliver. Large numbers of helicopters are thus needed to insert or extract a force of significant size. They are also vulnerable, even to small arms fire and require aerial fire support, preferably from helicopter gunships.

The American “air cavalry” idea that evolved from experiments with helicopters during the 1950s became a feature of the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. This was destined to influence all thinking on the tactical employment of helicopters in combat and turned the third dimension of manoeuvre into a permanent theme of the modern battlefield. Unlike parachute and air landed operations, where air mobility enabled vast distances to be covered, but left troops with almost no mobility on the actual battlefield, helicopter operations were severely limited in terms of long distances, but provided unparalleled mobility on the battlefield.⁵⁴ In Afghanistan the Russians also developed effective and sophisticated helicopter tactics; but these require a complex and expensive array of helicopters, putting such operations beyond the reach of most smaller countries.

53. G.W. Gawrych, *Key to Sinai: The Battles for Abu Ageila in the 1956 and 1967 Arab-Israeli Wars*, Research Survey No. 7, Combat Studies Institute (Fort Leavenworth, US Army Command, 1990), p. 127.

54. See W.C. Beaver, “Airborne and Airmobile in Vietnam”, in De Ste Croix (ed.), *Airborne Operations*, pp. 186–197; R. Bonds (ed.), *The Vietnam War* (London, Salamander Books, 1979); J. Pimlott (ed.), *Vietnam: The History and the Tactics* (London, Orbis, 1984); Galvin, *Air Assault*, pp. 254–318; Hickey, *Out of the Sky: A History of Airborne Warfare* (London, Mills & Boon, 1979), pp. 206–259; Weeks, *Assault from the Sky*, pp. 150–166; M. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle: A History of Airborne Warfare, 1918–1971* (London, William Kimber, 1971), pp. 316–322.

2.5. THE STRATEGIC VERSUS THE TACTICAL APPROACH FOR THE EMPLOYMENT OF AIRBORNE FORCES

With the military background provided in this chapter, it now becomes necessary to elaborate on the two approaches to the employment of airborne forces outlined in the hypothesis: the strategic and the tactical. However, there is not universal agreement on this in airborne circles. Tugwell warns against using this distinction, preferring the terms “independent” and “close-support” airborne operations. In his definitive work, *Airborne to Battle* (1971) he differentiates as follows:

There were, from the outset, two methods of employing airborne forces: in direct support of ground forces or on missions which, though probably inter-related with other manoeuvres, would not form an integral part of the ground force operations and would not directly depend on them. An essential feature of the latter – the independent or semi-independent action – would be the reinforcement of the airborne troops, by air, at a rate that would out-pace any build-up of enemy forces engaging them. It would be a “self-sustaining” airborne operation. This distinction between airborne operations, the success of which depends on early relief by ground forces, and those that reinforce themselves by air, is important. Confusion can occur if operations close to friendly troops and those launched deep into enemy territory are described as “tactical” or “strategic”, respectively, when the only real difference is measured in miles.⁵⁵

Tugwell makes an important point. Neither distance nor independent sustainment are the key factors in the tactical/strategic differentiation. More accurately, the essential factor is found in the level at which the results will yield success. The purely tactical issue of whether the force is self-sustaining or whether it is reliant on ground support is not what will determine whether the operation is of tactical or strategic significance. Rather, it will be the results that the operation will achieve in terms of the overall political or military intentions.

Galvin, in his classic exposition *Air Assault* (1969), claims in his introduction that throughout the Second World War in Europe the argument continued “over whether airborne troops should be used in short-range tactical operations or in deep slashes behind enemy lines”.⁵⁶ But when it comes to strategic or tactical operations, he is missing the nub of the debate. Certainly, from the point of view of the airborne commander (and both Tugwell and Galvin commanded airborne forces), there is a clear differentiation between the close

55. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, p. 36.

56. Galvin, *Air Assault*, p. xv.

operation which enjoys support from friendly ground forces and the distant operation that has to be planned and carried out independently. The risks and challenges are always greater for the latter. It is therefore understandable that an airborne commander will be focused on this important logistic and fire-support distinction.

More recent commentators continue to make the error of seeing distance as the key differential between tactical and strategic operations. David Miller describes “strategic flights” as:

normally relatively straightforward, with aircraft flying into either an international-standard civil airport or a large military airfield, both of which should afford good approaches together with runways and taxiways capable of bearing the wheel loadings of even the largest transport aircraft. They will also offer adequate ground facilities and a reasonable degree of security in the air and on the ground.⁵⁷

However, he is referring to a logistic air lift operation, the execution of which is generally termed “strategic air lift”. While the actual movement of a force to such an airfield might be considered strategic, if it does not involve the insertion of the force into an area where the landing is likely to be opposed, the action cannot be regarded as an “airborne operation” in terms of this thesis. An airborne operation, for the purposes of this study, is one where troops are transported by air in order to be committed directly to battle, or at the very least, into a hostile, unsecured, operational environment.

The above views on the differentiation of the deep or shallow airborne operation fail to consider the raid as part of their postulations. A raid is defined in the *Military Dictionary of the SADF* as an “operation, usually small-scale, involving a swift penetration of hostile territory to secure information, confuse the enemy, or destroy his installations, ending in a planned withdrawal upon completion of the assigned mission”.⁵⁸ This is the same definition used in the SA Army’s *Conventional Landbattle* handbook. In essence, this accords with international definitions. For example, the USA Department of Defense gives a raid as being “an operation to temporarily seize an area in order to secure information, confuse an adversary, capture personnel or equipment, or to destroy a capability. It ends with a planned withdrawal upon completion of the assigned mission.”⁵⁹

57. D. Miller, “Anywhere, Anytime: Rapid-deployment Forces and their Future”, *International Defense Review*, Special Report 10/1994, Jane’s Information Group, Coulsdon, 1994, p. 16.

58. SADF, Personnel Division, *Military Dictionary (MD)* (Pretoria, Director Language Service SADF, c. 1990), p. 292.

59. US Dept. Defense, JP 1-02, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, p. 452.

From this it is clear that an airborne force is eminently suited to carrying out a raid, and that a raid can be tactical in the sense of furthering the aims of a large ground force, but may also be strategic because of its results influencing the course of a campaign or even a war. Often a strategic raid is an independent action, but not necessarily always; similarly, it might take place across a considerable distance, but this is not always the case.

It is the import of the results of an operation that will make it strategic or tactical, not the distances involved or the degree of ground support available or even whether it is conducted independently of other operations.

It for this reason that this differentiation has been chosen for the subject of this thesis, because politicians, who ultimately decide the fate of military units, are rarely aware of tactical results, but are acutely sensitive to the strategic ones. A concomitant consequence is therefore that strategic success by an airborne force would be more likely to ensure its development and even its continued existence. Strategic failure, on the other hand, could signal its demise, as happened when the Canadian Airborne Regiment was disbanded because a few of its members were found guilty of human rights abuses during peace support operations in Somalia in 1993.⁶⁰ Though the operation in which they were involved was not strategic, the actions of the guilty soldiers had a strategic import on the image of Canada, a country that jealously guards its reputation as a nation sympathetic to the plight of those in the Third World.

2.5.1. Strategic

In order for an airborne operation to be considered strategic, it needs to produce a result that has a clear influence on the progress of the war or campaign being waged and/or the undertaking embarked upon. It must contribute directly and significantly towards the successful conclusion of the conflict; prevent an imminent conflict from taking place; play a vital role in making a territorial gain of political importance; sway the whole course of the conflict; improve the bargaining power of the government internationally; or resolve a specific crisis of political import. It could also be considered a strategic operation if it takes the form of a raid on a vital target such as a headquarters, a logistic installation, a railhead or a harbour, the destruction or

60 . "The Canadian Airborne Regiment's Somali Affair, 20 years later", *Edmonton Sun*, 15 March 2013. The malaise was far more widespread in the Canadian Armed Forces than just the Airborne Regiment. See D. J. Bercuson, "Up from the Ashes: The Re-professionalization of the Canadian Forces after the Somalia Affair", *Canadian Military Journal* archive, at <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vo9/no3/06-bercuson-eng.asp>) It was the Airborne Regiment that was sacrificed in the subsequent fall-out, rather than being disciplined and cleaned up.

neutralisation of which prevents the opponent from prosecuting the war effectively. In this last respect, there is a distinct overlap with the role of special forces and it is frequently less risky and more effective to use special forces for this purpose rather than the usually much larger airborne force.

Generally, a strategic airborne operation involves a force operating independently of other ground forces to carry out a task stemming directly from a government decision at the political strategic level. However, the force does not necessarily have to be independent and may form part of a larger ground or naval force with a strategic task. Normally in this case though, the employment of such other forces is in support of the airborne force rather than the other way around. Although a strategic operation often entails long distances, this need not necessarily be so and distance alone does not make the operation strategic.

Nevertheless, in order for it to have the flexibility of composition necessary to participate in any strategic role, the airborne force needs to conform to certain requirements. Briefly, these are: i) the availability of long range transport aircraft capable of carrying substantial numbers of troops and of delivering heavy weapons and supplies by means of air dropping; ii) fighter and bomber aircraft able to provide protection to the transport aircraft, pre-bombardment of the objective and close air support to the troops fighting on the ground; iii) troops and aircrews trained in paratrooping and airlanding, with troops capable of surviving with minimal logistic support for days or even weeks; iv) an organic air-droppable ground force (i.e. a force permanently grouped and belonging to the same organisation/formation) comprising principally infantry, but also field and air defence artillery, combat engineers with specific expertise in the construction and repair of airfields, and also technical and logistic support, including appropriate medical backup; v) access to strategic intelligence and its own specialised tactical intelligence gathering and processing capability; and vi) a signals potential that will guarantee radio or other communication between the battlefield and the base or staging area as well as between the ground and air forces. Lastly, and most importantly, vii) for strategic employment it is vital that the airborne force have a specialised, jointly composed operational headquarters of air and ground elements (and in certain operations also a naval

element), well-versed as a headquarters in the planning and conduct of airborne operations and in command of participating ground, air and on occasion, naval forces.⁶¹

Airborne forces, most notably during operations in Africa, have carried out some highly successful hostage rescues that could be classified as strategic. These include the dropping of three companies of Belgian paratroopers onto the airport of what was then Stanleyville in the Congo and the subsequent landing of another three companies on the same airport to rescue 1,600 hostages from armed rebels in 1964.⁶² Other examples are the much-acclaimed Entebbe rescue by Israeli paratroopers using a sophisticated night air landing technique in 1976;⁶³ and the rescue of some 2,000 hostages at Kolwezi in Zaire's Shaba Province by French and Belgian paratroopers in May 1978, with the French dropping a battalion of 750 paratroopers and the Belgians air landing two complete parachute battalions.⁶⁴ This set the standard for airborne operations as a means of carrying out humanitarian actions in crisis situations. It is the level at which these actions had to be authorised and monitored, as well as their results in terms of resolving crises of international proportions, that makes them strategic.

2.5.2. Tactical

A tactical airborne operation, on the other hand, only influences the actual operation of which it is a part and has no broader impact. In this case, the airborne element almost always forms a part of a larger force, usually a ground force, and the task it is given is invariably to enhance or facilitate the movement or offensive action of the ground force. Its employment is integrated into the plan of the larger force and it is subservient to that force throughout. A tactical airborne operation such as this is normally used in support of the larger force.

The employment of airborne forces for tactical operations places far fewer demands on the force being used in terms of composition and support. This is in part due to the fact that distances involved will often be far less than is the case for a strategic operation. For instance,

61. Miller, "Anywhere, Anytime", especially p. 24; Alexander, "An African Rapid-Deployment Force", pp. 28–31.

62. T.P. Odom, *Dragon Operations: Hostage Rescues in the Congo 1964–1965*, Paper No. 14, Combat Studies Institute (Fort Leavenworth, US Army Command, 1988), pp. 95–114; D. Reed, *Save the Hostages!* (New York, Bantam Books, 1988), pp. 265–292; E. Genot, *Rode Mutsen, Groene Mutsen: 50,000 Para-Commando's* (Brussels, Emile Genot, 1987), pp. 233–242; S.D. Brown, "Destination Stanleyville", *Military Review* (March 1991).

63. Stevenson, *90 Minutes at Entebbe*; Chant: "The Raids on Entebbe and Mogadishu", pp. 210–217.

64. T.P. Odom, *Shaba II: The French and Belgian Intervention in Zaire in 1978*, Combat Studies Institute (Fort Leavenworth, US Army Command, 1993), pp. 57–89; J. Mabire, "Target Kolwezi", *The Elite*, 3, 28 (1985).

an airborne operation to secure a bridgehead across a river or a defile (such as a bridge or a mountain pass) to expedite the passage of a larger ground force, might be close enough to the ground force to be supported by its artillery fire, thereby making it unnecessary for the airborne element to have its own artillery. This would also make it less reliant on the Air Force to provide close air support.

Similarly, if there is a ground force linking up with the airborne force after it has achieved its objective, it may be unnecessary for the airborne force to have a combat engineer capability to repair an airfield for its withdrawal.

Tactical airborne operations are not usually crucial to the success of the overall plan – they merely speed up the accomplishment of that plan. They are also often useful as a deception so that the enemy are fooled into believing that they are part of a main thrust, only for a ground force to carry out that thrust elsewhere, after the enemy has moved forces away to deal with the deception. Airborne forces are also well-suited to provide reinforcements to ground forces that have become isolated.

Tactical airborne operations also generally require far less complex logistic and medical support because of the relatively short period of time that the airborne force will be operating on its own before a ground force links up with it. This also obviates the need for a higher airborne headquarters, because the ground forces headquarters is able to play this role. For many military commanders, all this influences their thinking and their propensity to consider airborne forces only in the tactical sphere.

2.5.3. The Choice: A Strategic or Tactical Capability?

What needs to be carefully considered by any country intending to maintain an airborne capability, is that a force structured to carry out strategic missions of almost any contingency will also be able to execute tactical missions; but a force structured only for tactical airborne operations will not have the flexibility or capability to undertake most strategic missions requiring airborne action. A country lacking a strategic airborne force would be compelled to look to others should the need arise for such a force. In a continent like Africa, this implies a potentially embarrassing reliance on non-African countries.

It is clear from this discussion that most countries would find it far easier (and cheaper) to maintain an airborne force that is only capable of carrying out a tactical operation in support

of and as a part of other forces. This provides the country concerned with the status of having an airborne capability in its order of battle, and it looks good on paper, but in fact it is of both limited and dubious value. Certainly, it does not contribute in any way to a country that might be aspiring to play a prominent role in a regional or wider international context.

2.6. EXAMPLES OF STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL AIRBORNE OPERATIONS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Having served as both the crucible for airborne forces as well as the stage on which airborne forces achieved their absolute zenith, the Second World War provides possibly the greatest examples of the strategic and tactical employment of airborne forces. Perhaps the most famous strategic airborne action was Operation MERCURY, the German invasion of Crete in May 1941.⁶⁵ In a division-sized airborne assault, the Germans seized the island without any ground or naval support in the first land battle ever won by airborne power alone. Taking off from airfields in newly-occupied Greece, just 350km distant, a force of some 8,000 paratroopers and glider troops and a further 14,000 air-landed troops wrested victory from 40,000 British, Australian, New Zealand and Greek troops, most of them exhausted and battle-weary after their withdrawal from Greece.

The battle, which lasted little more than a week, cost both sides dearly. The Germans lost some 4,000 men killed and suffered another 2,500 wounded; the Allies experienced similar losses in dead and wounded and over 22,000 were captured. The remainder were evacuated by sea.

It was a strategic operation by virtue of the fact that Germany “secured her southern flank in the forthcoming invasion of Russia” and, thereby, although she did not ever use it, “obtained a springboard for further conquest in the eastern Mediterranean. The loss of Crete deprived the British of a naval and air base close to occupied Europe, which might have proved invaluable in later years.”⁶⁶

65. The Battle of Crete is the subject of many publications. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, pp. 81–119 gives a succinct description of the operation. Other valuable works are Galvin, *Air Assault*, pp. 42–60; De Ste Croix (ed.), *Airborne Operations*, pp. 50–61; and V. Kühn, *German Paratroops in World War II* (London, Ian Allan, 1978), pp. 56–131. J. Hetherington’s *Airborne Invasion: The Story of the Battle of Crete* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1944) describes the battle from the point of view of the defenders, but lacks official sources.

66. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, p. 113.

The strategic worth of Crete and consequently of Operation MERCURY is apparent from the coinciding views that both Hitler and Churchill are said to have held that the island was “a base from which aircraft could dominate the southern Balkans, southern Italy, and the Aegean Sea, as well as operate against Egypt and Suez.”⁶⁷

An example on Allied side of an airborne action with strategic intent is Operation THURSDAY. This was the second long range penetration operation in Burma by the Chindits of Major General Orde Wingate in March 1944. The operation involved the insertion of a force of troops by glider, at night, into clearings in the jungle up to 260km behind enemy lines. Following the glider assault, the troops constructed airstrips in the short space of 24 hours and within five days the force had been increased to eight thousand troops, 1,300 mules, and 250 tons of supplies, all brought in by air. Another 4,000 troops were brought in by air within the following three weeks.⁶⁸

The intention was to cut off Japanese supply lines and force the enemy to evacuate northern Burma, thereby opening the overland route to beleaguered China and conceivably squeezing the occupying Japanese out of South-East Asia. This would have shortened the campaigns in the East considerably. In effect, Operation THURSDAY failed to attain its goals fully (due in part to the untimely death of its instigator and commander, the eccentric and imaginative Orde Wingate, in an air crash), although the force continued to operate against the Japanese for several months, supplied exclusively from the air. Its results therefore turned out to be tactical rather than strategic. Nevertheless, this innovative use of an airborne capability did contribute towards the advance of the Chinese-American forces under General “Vinegar Joe” Stillwell in Northern Burma and thus ultimately to the opening of the Burma Road between India and China.⁶⁹ In addition, the “operation proved in dramatic fashion that, given local air superiority, an air supply line is feasible in combat, even for a large unit operating at long distances from its depots”.⁷⁰

67. Galvin, *Air Assault*, p. 46.

68. A good summary of Operation Thursday is found in Galvin, *Air Assault*, pp. 132–136, while works with more detailed discussion include Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, pp. 181–201; J.E. Mrazek, *The Glider War: Prelude to Dunkerque* (New York, Luce, 1970), pp. 110–128; and De Ste Croix (ed.), *Airborne Operations*, pp. 150–155.

69. The contribution of the Chindits in the overall Allied strategy for Burma is discussed in Liddell Hart’s *History of the Second World War* (London, Pan Books, 1970) pp. 378–385 and pp. 537–544. Useful maps of the Burma campaign, illustrating their strategic value, together with descriptions of the Chindit operations, appear in P. Young (ed.), *Atlas of the Second World War* (New York, G.P. Putnam, 1974), pp. 176–177.

70. Galvin, *Air Assault*, p. 136.

Examples of tactical airborne operations abound, but a good illustration of such use of airborne forces is Operation OVERLORD, the Allied landings on the Normandy coast on 6 June 1944. This, the largest amphibious landing in history, was also the largest airborne operation in history. Two complete US airborne divisions and two-thirds of a British airborne division were dropped or landed at night in a single lift.⁷¹ This totalled over 15,000 men and about 1,000 aircraft, excluding gliders.⁷²

Essential to the amphibious landings was the securing of their flanks. This was done by dropping the two American airborne divisions on the right flank and the British division on the left. Tactical surprise was fully achieved and both airborne forces were able to consolidate a position in time for the landings to take place.⁷³ The airborne action (code-named Operation NEPTUNE) was a closely integrated part of the overall Operation OVERLORD and was essentially tactical in nature, despite the strategic character of the overall OVERLORD undertaking. The fact that the landings could probably have succeeded without the airborne contribution (though this would certainly have made them more difficult to accomplish) is what makes Operation NEPTUNE a tactical action. The airborne operation merely facilitated the accomplishment of the strategic aim, but was not necessarily crucial to it.

And then, compounding the complexity of making a clear and simple differentiation between strategic and tactical airborne operations, there are those that form part of a broader tactical plan, but on the success of which the strategy of a campaign depends. The German glider assault by Force GRANITE on the Belgian Fort Eben Emael on 10 May 1940 is the classic example.⁷⁴

The fort was built at the juncture of the Meuse River and the Albert Canal, within sight of the Dutch border where the Maastricht salient separated Belgium from Germany by about 30km. The fort was probably the strongest redoubt in the line of defences built by the Belgians and the Dutch to repulse any German attack and was generally regarded by the Allies as “impregnable”. It controlled three vital bridges across the deep, 100 metre-wide canal that had

71. Weeks, *Assault from the Sky*, pp. 87–88.

72. De Ste Croix (ed.), *Airborne Operations*, p. 93.

73. Young, *Atlas of the Second World War*, pp. 228–210.

74. Mrazek, *The Fall of Eben Emael*. This work gives a detailed account of what remained a top secret operation throughout the Second World War and is based on interviews with planners, participants, and German documentation not released during the war. Other accounts are available in Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, pp. 17–18 and 45–58; Mrazek, *The Glider War*, pp. 21–27; De Ste Croix (ed.), *Airborne Operations*, pp. 40–49; and Galvin, *Air Assault*, pp. 21–28. For a German perspective, see Kühn, *German Paratroops*, pp. 28–36.

to be seized intact if the German invaders were to bring their ground forces into Belgium at speed. The fort was therefore identified by the Germans as the key to their occupation of the Low Countries, crucial in their plan to lure French and British forces into those countries so that the main German thrust through the Ardennes Forest could sweep around behind them and cut them off.⁷⁵ This is what made the capture and neutralisation of Fort Eben Emael of strategic importance to the German *Wehrmacht*: without it the *blitzkrieg* into the Low Countries could be turned into a campaign of attrition, reminiscent of the First World War and totally out of alignment with the new German approach of manoeuvre warfare.

The fort, blasted from a solid granite hill, with 24 heavy artillery guns firing from reinforced steel cupolas, defended by a multitude of anti-aircraft guns and machine guns and manned by 780 Belgian soldiers, fell to a pre-dawn airborne assault by 10 gliders and 78 men. Two of the bridges across the canal were also captured intact by equally small detachments of glidermen and the German 6th Army was able to pass through to carry out its mission. Nobody, least of all the Belgians manning the fort, had expected an assault from the sky by the unheard-of military use of silent, troop-carrying gliders. The German paratroopers in the gliders landed right on top of the “impregnable” fortress and using an until-then unknown hollow-charge explosive, blasted their way into the massive reinforced concrete structure and within minutes had paralysed the Belgian defensive system. It was vertical envelopment *par excellence*; an airborne landing right on the *schwerpunkt*. In the words of Mrazek:

At Eben Emael, ten gliders and seventy-eight men started a new phase of Nazi conquest, at the cost of six killed and twenty wounded. The lives of an estimated 6,000 crack German ground troops were saved; the force the German High Command calculated it would have had to sacrifice to take Fort Eben Emael by conventional attack. The Germans had also estimated that it would take six months of hard fighting.⁷⁶

Herein lay the strategic value of this tactical operation: without it the invasion of the Low Countries, the success of which hinged on speed, could not have been carried out. Though the distances were very short, and although the airborne force was supported by ground forces within a short space of time, this was clearly a strategic operation with a high degree of independence.

75. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War*, pp. 70–80.

76. Mrazek, *The Glider War*, p.25.

Had the Allied Operation MARKET-GARDEN in September 1944 succeeded, it would have been another example of a strategic aim being accomplished through a tactical airborne operation in support of ground forces. This was the failed attempt to lay an “airborne carpet” across Holland to enable the British 2nd Army to cross the Rhine at Arnhem. Field Marshal Montgomery’s intention was to accomplish a thrust into the heart of Germany, thereby bringing the war in Europe to a speedy conclusion in one bold stroke. Securing a crossing over the Rhine was crucial to the success of the plan. The gamble failed, but had it worked, the part played by the airborne forces would certainly have been strategic.

Perhaps more has been written on this spectacular failure by the British 1st Airborne Division than all the successful airborne operations before or since.⁷⁷ Among this plethora of works about the Battle of Arnhem, many are over-emotional and singularly partisan, but two stand out for their balanced and analytical approach. The first is the concise study by Brigadier Maurice Tugwell (*Arnhem: A Case Study* 1975) and the second is a particularly penetrating account by William Buckingham (*Arnhem 1944: A Reappraisal*, 2002), which does not spare “holy cows” and reveals some of the flawed decisions by individuals previously lauded as outstanding generals.

2.7. CONCLUDING COMMENT

This chapter has discussed the concept of vertical envelopment, outlining the technicalities of airborne delivery and defining the strategic and tactical approaches to the employment of airborne forces, with examples of each. A framework has thus been provided for an understanding of the historical relevance of the airborne concept in South Africa over the second half of the twentieth century. It is the study of the development and employment of the South African airborne capability that forms the essence of what is addressed in this thesis in my efforts to advance the argument in favour of a strategic airborne capability.

77. A Dutch catalogue published in 1975 lists 631 known books and articles about the battle, a supplement issued in 1978 lists a further 165 and there are certainly many more that have seen the light of day since then. See P.G. Aalbers (compiler), *Slag om Arnhem: Bibliografie van Gedrukte Werken* (Arnhem, De Walburg Pers Zutphen, 1975) and Supplement (Arnhem, Bibliotheek Arnhem, 1978)

CHAPTER 3

THE AIRBORNE CONCEPT IN HISTORY AND EARLY SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

3.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter recounts the origins and development of parachuting from the dreams of ancient warriors to be able to mount an attack out of the sky, through the advent of balloons and later aircraft, to the eventual military application of vertical envelopment. Parachuting and its military application in South Africa are touched on, and South Africa's unsuccessful attempt to venture into airborne warfare during the Second World War is dealt with. This provides an early indication of the thinking in the South African military regarding vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre. Post-Second World War airborne operations globally are briefly covered to illustrate the ongoing relevance of the concept.

3.2. EARLY PARACHUTING

The concept of vertical envelopment has long been a dream of military men. This is reflected in the ancient mythologies of Greece and of the Hindus about the warriors Bellerophon mounted on the winged horse Pegasus, and of Shatrujeet and his exploits on his winged horse Kunalaya.¹ These warriors and their steeds were eventually adopted as symbols of the airborne forces of respectively Britain and India,² while the paratroopers of many other countries (including South Africa) adopted the eagle, symbolising attack from above, as their insignia. (See Appendix 1 for illustrations of examples.)

There are unverified accounts of the ancient Chinese lifting men aloft in kites and jumping from towers with canopies woven from bamboo; of Siamese entertainers jumping from towers with mushroom-like contraptions; and of Africans jumping from tall trees with the aid of large umbrellas.³ However, it was the Renaissance in Europe that produced tangible, documentary proof of the concept of a parachute (see Appendix 2). A manuscript in the British Library depicts a drawing by an unknown Italian of the Quattrocentos group of

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1. A.S. Murray, *Who's Who in Myth and Legend: Classic Guide to the Ancient World* (London, CRW Publishing, 2004), pp. 185–187; K.C. Praval, *India's Paratroopers* (London, Leo Cooper, 1975), p. 192.
 2. G.G. Norton, *The Red Devils: The Story of the British Airborne Forces* (London, Leo Cooper, 1971), Frontispiece; Praval, *India's Paratroopers*, p. 192.
 3. J. Needham, *The Shorter Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 4*, Abridged version (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 284–286 and 290–292; M. Dhzalalova, "Parachute Science: A Little History", Internet website, Margarita Dhzalalova..

Sieneese engineers, showing a conceptualised parachute. This predates the similar and more famous design by Leonardo da Vinci.⁴ These designers elaborated on the concept theoretically rather than empirically – they never tested their designs. A Dalmatian, Faust Vrančić (Fausto Veranzio in Italian), is said to have jumped from a tower in Venice in 1616, using a parachute that he called Homo Volans.⁵ This is also depicted in Appendix 2.

More generally accepted as being the first person to have carried out a parachute jump is the Frenchman, Louis-Sébastien Lenormand.⁶ He is credited with coining the term “parachute” from the French words *para* and *chute*, (literally, “protection against falling” or “counterfalling”) and jumped, it is claimed, from a balcony of the Montpellier Observatory in 1783.⁷ In that same year, the Montgolfier brothers, Joseph-Michel and Jacques-Etienne, built the first hot air balloons. When these carried out flights in France, man at last became truly airborne.⁸

There is considerable contention about who first descended from a balloon by parachute, but it was probably done in France towards the end of the 18th century as a means of escape from a crippled balloon.⁹ Contemporary, somewhat fanciful illustrations portraying early parachuting descents are reproduced in Appendix 3. During the next century parachute descents from balloons became popular fairground attractions, but they were not seen as having military potential. It was the balloon that was first considered a means of delivering soldiers by air. According to Weeks, by 1803, when Napoleon was waiting for the right winds to carry his invasion fleet to England, suggestions were put forward to utilise hydrogen-filled balloons rather than ships to transport the invasion army across the Channel. But the practicalities of producing the required number of balloons, training soldiers to fly them and the unpredictability of an operation where the soldiers were likely to be scattered over a vast area, all ensured that a general who was as astute a

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4. C. Pescio (ed.), *Leonardo on Flight* (Florence and Milan, Giunti Editore, 2004), pp. 26 and 58 gives the year in which the Sieneese drawing was made as ca. 1485; see also Praval, *Inndia's Paratroopers*, p. 9.
 5. Dalmatian Society of History, *Atti e Memorie della Societa Dalmata di Storia Patria, Volume 5* (Rome, DSH, 1966), pp. 225–226; N. Arena, *I Paracadutisti; Aeri, Armi, Uniformi, Volume 6* of booklets *Quid Novi?* (Modena, STEM Mucchi, 1972), p. 12; J. Bates, “The World of Parachutes, Parachuting, and Parachutists”; and J. Bates, “Parachutes”, both online at Aero.com,
 6. Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Micropaedia, Volume 7*, “Parachute”, p. 740.
 7. Dzhahalova, “A Little History”.
 8. M. Hickey, *Out of the Sky: A History of Airborne Warfare* (London, Mills & Boon, 1979), p. 9. See also www.todayinsci.com, “The Montgolfier Brothers: Pioneer Balloonists”.
 9. G.M. Devlin, *Paratrooper!* (London, Robson Books, 1979), p. 2; Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, pp. 13–14; The US Centennial of Flight Commission, at <http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Dictionary/blanchard/DI10.htm>; A.D. Collins, “The Story of the Parachute”, *Command* (October 1960); L. Kraft, “The Conquest of the Air: (2) Parachutes”, Transcript of school broadcast, 7 February 1940.

tactician as Napoleon, would have no truck with such an idea.¹⁰ An illustration depicting the concept can be seen in Appendix 4.

In the 1880s a fantasy illustration (See Appendix 5) appeared on postcards in Germany, clearly depicting the concept of an airborne assault on an otherwise impregnable fortress. It was chillingly prophetic of the capture of Fort Eben Emael by the Germans just six decades later.¹¹ Kühn relates how, on 16 April 1889, an American, Charles Leroux, gave a parachuting demonstration to the Imperial German General Staff in a field in front of their headquarters in Berlin at Schöneberg. Using a folded parachute, he is said to have jumped from a balloon at a height of 1,000 metres and landed in front of the high-level military spectators. One of them, General Graf von Schlieffen, was to become the next Chief of the General Staff. With remarkable foresight he later commented in a report: "... if one could only 'steer' these things, parachutes could provide a new means of exploiting surprise in war, as it would be feasible for a few men to wipe out an enemy headquarters...".¹² Clearly, the future author of the Schlieffen Plan recognised the potential of vertical envelopment.

But for the time being, parachuting remained no more than a civilian entertainment act. There was hardly a travelling carnival of any significance in both North America and Europe that did not have its own balloon and parachutist as a main attraction.¹³ In South Africa an American, "professor", James Price, carried out the first such parachute descent from a balloon in Pietermaritzburg on 11 November 1891 – after numerous unsuccessful attempts because of the poor performance of the balloons he was using.¹⁴ See Appendix 6 for illustrations.

Who carried out the first parachute jump from a powered aircraft remains, as with the identity of the first person who descended from a balloon, a subject open to debate. There are two claimants to this historical honour, both of them Americans. One is Grant Morton, who is credited with executing this feat in 1911 over Venice Beach on the coast of California. But the most generally accepted pioneer parachutist is US Army Captain Albert Berry, who jumped over Missouri in 1912.¹⁵ Photographs of Berry's jump are held at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC (see Appendix 7). A year later Adolphe Pégoud, a

10. J. Weeks, *The Airborne Soldier* (Poole, Blandford Press, 1982), pp. 11–12.

11. See J.E. Mrazek, *The Fall of Eben Emael: Prelude to Dunkerque* (New York, Luce, 1970).

12. V. Kühn, *German Paratroops in World War II* (London, Ian Allan, 1978), p.7. See also, Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, p. 16.

13. Devlin, *Paratrooper!* p. 10.

14. *Natal Witness*, 7–10, 15, 24, 26, 28–30 and 31 October; and 3–7, 9, 10, and 12 November 1891.

15. See www.who2.com/albertberry.html ; HickokSports.com on Sport Parachuting; and Devlin, *Paratrooper!* pp. 11–12.

French aerobatic pilot, carried out a parachute jump from the aircraft he was piloting, leaving the plane to crash.¹⁶

The bulky packed parachutes in use prior to the First World War were far too impractical and unwieldy to employ from the tiny aircraft of the day as a standard feature. A Russian, Gleb Yevgenyevich Kotelnikov, made a significant contribution to parachuting in that he is credited with patenting the first “knapsack parachute” in about 1913,¹⁷ and although the Americans had produced a similar design soon afterwards,¹⁸ by the time the First World War began in 1914, parachutes were not yet used by pilots as an emergency device. They were in fact not introduced until the final year of the war.¹⁹

3.3. EARLY MILITARY APPLICATION

At the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, airborne operations formed no part of the military thinking of any of the belligerents. Flight was still in its infancy and the aircraft were certainly not capable of carrying more than one, or at the most two people. For manned observation balloons however, there was a very real wartime need to be able to jump to safety and this could most certainly be practically met by the latest developments in parachuting. The use of such balloons in war gradually increased as the world moved into the 20th century and proved especially useful for the directing of artillery fire. “All along the Western Front at the end of 1915 the silent sinister shapes of tethered observation balloons could be seen directing artillery fire onto opposing trenches.”²⁰

But the introduction of armed aircraft made them highly vulnerable and the hydrogen-filled balloons on both sides were soon plummeting to earth as blazing infernos with alarming frequency.²¹ The German invention of a synchronised machine-gun capable of firing between the aircraft propeller blades heightened the accuracy with which pilots could

16. Kraft, “Conquest of the Air”; “Famous Air Crash Victims, Part 1, Aviators”, at www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A15850514; Introduction to Aerobatics, Chapter 1: “History of Aerobatics”, at www.flightsimbooks.com/jfs2/chapter1.php; W.J. Claxton, *The Mastery of the Air*, Part 1, at fullbooks.com; J.O.E.O. Mahncke, “Early Parachutes: An Evaluation of the Use of Parachutes, with Special Emphasis on the Royal Flying Corps and the German Luftstreitkräfte, until 1918”, *Military History Journal*, 11, 6 (December 2000), claims that this was a documented case of an unmanned aircraft landing successfully after its engine had stopped.

17. “The Parachute”, The Voice of Russia [20th Century Footprints in History] at http://www.vor.ru/English/Footprints/excl_next850_eng.html; D. Minaev, *De Rebus Antiquis et Novis*, “November 9 in Russian History”, <http://minaev.blogspot.com/2007/11/november-9-in-russian-history.html>; “Kotelnikov’s Parachute”, Historical Magazine at <http://history-gatchina.ru/town/krylia/kotelnikove.htm>.

18. HickokSports.com, “Sport Parachuting”; Devlin, *Paratrooper!*, pp. 13–14; R. Kershaw, *Sky Men: The Real Story of the Paras* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2010), p. 15.

19. Kraft, “Conquest of the Air”; B. Gregory and J. Batchelor, *Airborne Warfare, 1918–1941* (London, Phoebus, 1978), pp. 4–7.

20. Kershaw, *Sky Men*, p. 15.

21. Devlin, *Paratrooper!*, p. 15.

fire, and the downing of observation balloons became common practice.²² Parachutes became a requisite for all balloonists, both sides adopting the type known as the Guardian Angel. They were folded into a container that hung above or outside the balloon's wicker basket, in which the balloonist stood, and was attached to the balloonists by means of a harness and hook. The drill was for the balloonist to leap from the basket as soon as an attack from enemy aircraft seemed inevitable. To wait for the balloon to ignite before jumping invited disaster, besides subjecting the man to a hail of machine-gun bullets during the attack. Photographs of balloon observers employing their parachutes are reproduced in Appendix 8.

The South African Heavy Artillery deployed six batteries on the Western Front during the First World War.²³ The SANDF Documentation Centre, repository of the archives of the Department of Defence, houses the war diaries of the various South African Siege Batteries and these make mention of reports from "kite balloons" or "observation balloons" by artillery observers.²⁴ The South Africans therefore made use of balloon observers, although it appears from the war diaries that these balloons could have been part of a separate unit from the batteries.²⁵ As far as can be established, South Africa never had any such balloon units, which means that South African observers would have had to be seconded to British balloon units. It is possible that one such observer could have been the first South African soldier to parachute in action. Two photographs were discovered in the archives of artillery observers suspended high in shell-shattered trees after jumping, and these might have been South Africans. The photographs are reproduced on page 2 of Appendix 8. No documentary evidence could be found of any South African pilot making use of a parachute to escape from his doomed aircraft during the final months of the war.

Despite the limitations of aircraft at the time, Kershaw reports that the Germans carried out what was perhaps the first ever real airborne operation in 1916. It was not a parachute operation, but it was a clandestine airborne insertion. An officer and senior NCO were flown across Russian lines near Rowno, the aircraft landed (presumably in an open field) 80km behind enemy lines and took off again without them. The soldiers successfully

22. Kershaw, *Sky Men*, p. 15.

23. P.K.A. Digby, *Pyramids and Poppies: The 1st South African Infantry Brigade in Libya, France and Flanders, 1915–1919* (Rivonia, Ashanti Publishing, 1993), pp. 423–426.

24. Department of Defence Archives (hereafter DOD), World War I: Diverse Group, Box 20, War Diary of 75th Siege Battery, RGA, entries 22 and 27 July 1916; 11 September 1916; and History of 125 Siege Battery, SAHA, p. 25.

25. DOD, World War I: Diverse Group, Box 20, War Diary of 75th Siege Battery, RGA, entry 5 August 1916.

blew up a railway line, were again picked up by the returning aircraft and flown safely back to their own lines.²⁶

The first occasions in history that soldiers were dropped from the air behind enemy lines appears to have occurred in the closing months of the First World War. These operations were miniscule in terms of number and involved the clandestine insertion of agents into enemy territory by parachute. Though they were never on a scale that seriously influenced the course of hostilities,²⁷ their significance lies in the fact that they were carried out at all! According to Kershaw, in 1918 three Italian agents were dropped at night on three separate flights by British airmen to carry out missions behind Austrian lines on the Piave River front. The agents received no prior parachute training and two of them parachuted with a consignment of homing pigeons to carry messages back to their own lines. Their missions are not specified in the official sources, but were all apparently successful.²⁸ Shortly afterwards a French officer was dropped with two others as a sabotage team in the German-occupied Ardennes Forest in 1918.²⁹ Landing with explosives and radio equipment, they returned to their own lines within a week after blowing up a road.

Re-supply by air was also carried out for the first time during the First World War. In the Middle Eastern campaign the British dropped supplies by air to garrisons beleaguered by the Turks at Kut-el-Amara in Mesopotamia as early as 1916. By 1917 air supply was becoming increasingly common in Europe and in October 1918 the Italians dropped large quantities of ammunition to their advancing troops during the great offensive towards the Vittorio Veneto.³⁰

None of this, however, was true vertical envelopment. The technique had not yet evolved into a tactical manoeuvre. But fertile minds in the military were becoming aware of its potential; the First World War did see the first proposal of the concept of vertical envelopment with the strategic intent of ending the stalemate along the Western Front. By this time there were some tremendous strides in the development of aircraft. In October 1918 the head of US air operations on the Western Front, Colonel Billy Mitchell, envisaged dropping 12,000 men of the US 1st Division by parachute behind German lines using aircraft

26. Kershaw, *Sky Men*, p. 18.

27. M. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle: A History of Airborne Warfare, 1918–1971* (London, William Kimber, 1971), p.19.

28. Kershaw, *Sky Men*, pp. 17–18; J.R. Galvin, *Air Assault: The Development of Airmobile Warfare* (New York, Hawthorn Books, 1969), p. 3; Gregory and Batchelor, *Airborne Warfare*, p.7.

29. Galvin, *Air Assault*, p. 3. Kershaw, *Sky Men*, p.18, dates the Italian drops as “mid-1918” and the French as the “same summer”.

30. Gregory and Batchelor, *Airborne Warfare*, p. 7.

of 60 squadrons equipped with the British Handley Page bombers. Each bomber could carry ten men (see Appendix 9). His idea was to break the deadlock of trench warfare by landing the division behind the German lines in the Menin-Roselare region to take the strategically important town of Metz.³¹ This would have been true vertical envelopment.

The plan was presented to the Commanding General of the US 1st Army, General John “Black Jack” Pershing. But it was only presented to him on 17 October 1918, and the war ended less than a month later, so it was never implemented.³² The plan was quite revolutionary in its vision, and tactically it could have ended the stalemate in the bloody Battle of the Argonne; strategically, it could have regained the initiative for the Allies along the whole Western Front after the great German offensives of 1918. Mitchell’s thinking was a classic case of a manoeuvrist approach as opposed to the prevailing attritionist mindset on the Western Front at the time. In terms of his visionary concept, Mitchell should be regarded as the true father of airborne forces.

However, although the idea was daring and innovative, it was premature. Airborne capabilities had not yet developed to the point that such an ambitious undertaking could be fully supported. Lewis Brereton, a young officer charged with working out the details of the plan, apparently identified major shortcomings which made the scheme impractical. For example there was a shortage of suitable aircraft and parachutes (and the Handley Page bomber was by no means ideal for parachuting); an absence of suitable communications equipment; no specialised headquarters capability; no air supply system; and no expertise or facilities for training the numbers of paratroopers required.³³

After the First World War developments in aviation continued apace. Improvements in aircraft carrying capacity and ranges contributed to boosting the evolution of both parachuting and the idea of transporting troops by air. In actions against dissident tribes in Iraq in 1923, the British carried out what can now be recognised as the first airborne operations involving formed bodies of uniformed troops.³⁴ Rather than sending the troops off into the desert in motor transport or on foot, with little chance of achieving surprise and

31. W. Mitchell, *Memoirs of World War I* (New York, Random House, 1960), p. 268; Hickey, *Out of the Sky*, pp. 13-14; Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, pp. 18-19; Weeks, *The Airborne Soldier*, pp. 12-17; Kühn, *German Paratroops*, pp. 7-8; Gregory and Batchelor, *Airborne Warfare*, pp. 7-8; Devlin, *Paratrooper!* p. 22; Kershaw, *Sky Men*, pp. 18-19.

32. H.P. Jeffers, *Billy Mitchell: The Life, Times, and Battles of America’s Prophet of Air Power* (St Paul, Minnesota, Zenith Press, 2005), p. 151; and Kershaw, *Sky Men*, p. 19.

33. Hickey, *Out of the Sky*, pp. 13-14. Brereton played a key role in the employment of airborne forces in the Second World War as the Commander of the 1st Allied Airborne Army. See Galvin, *Air Assault*, p. 168.

34. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, p. 21.

every possibility of being ambushed, they achieved tactical success through delivering companies by air, landing the twin-engined Vickers Vernon transport aircraft in any suitable open spot near their objective. After the operation had been completed, the troops were withdrawn by the same method. These were not parachute operations, but they were certainly airborne, because the troops were inserted into and extracted from the operational objective area by air. This was the first practical example of a vertical envelopment manoeuvre.

The US Marine Corps also used air transport for minor expeditionary missions in Central and South America during the 1920s, while modest trials were conducted by the US Army during which small groups of infantrymen were dropped with their weapons by parachute.³⁵ With the improvements made to parachutes, there were other small experiments by the Americans.³⁶ But it was the Italians who took the lead in pioneering the concept of airborne operations. This was largely due to the influence of General Giulio Douhet, one of the major proponents of air power and a significant strategic theoretician between the two world wars.³⁷ A parachute training school was established by the Italians at Tarquinia in 1925 and they developed an excellent, reliable static line parachute, known as the Salvatore. This parachute could be operated manually by a rip cord, or automatically by a static line.³⁸ By 1928 the Italians had trained a complete company of paratroopers³⁹ and by the 1930s they increased this to several battalions and built up considerable expertise in the air transportation of troops.⁴⁰ After the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 the Italian airborne forces grew to more than two divisions, although they were never used in any significant airborne operations.⁴¹ However, the strategic impact posed by simply possessing an airborne capability is well-illustrated by the effect that it had on South Africa's Union Defence Force (UDF) at the time of the East African campaign early in the war. Great

35. Gregory and Batchelor, *Airborne Warfare*, p. 12; Hickey, *Out of the Sky*, p. 14; Galvin, *Air Assault*, p. 3.

36. E.G. Chapman, "American Divisions Take to the Air", *Command and General Staff School Military Review*, 23 (April 1943), p. 11; Galvin, *Air Assault*, p. 4; Hickey, *Out of the Sky*, p. 15.

37. Galvin, *Air Assault*, p. 3.

38. Arena, *I Paracadutisti*, p. 6.

39. Weeks, *The Airborne Soldier*, p. 18.

40. Gregory and Batchelor, *Airborne Warfare*, p. 50; J. Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922–1940* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 416–421.

41. C. Chant, "Introduction", in P. de Ste Croix (ed.), *Airborne Operations: An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of the Great Battles of Airborne Forces* (London, Salamander Books, 1978), p. 28.

concern was caused by intelligence reports (subsequently proved wrong) of Italian paratroopers deployed in what was then known as Abyssinia.⁴²

South Africa had, after the First World War, maintained a miniscule military organisation. The earliest military employment of parachutes that could be traced in available records during research for this thesis, took place in 1926. It was in that year that the head of the South African Air Force (SAAF), Colonel Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, KBE, DSO, MC, Director of Air Services in the then Union Defence Force⁴³ carried out the first recorded parachute jump by a South African serviceman.

A report in the *Pretoria News* notes that Sir Pierre had been on a visit to England towards the end of 1926. While he was there the English were apparently trying to impress upon him the value of parachutes to aviators in the hope that the SAAF would purchase a consignment of the devices. Van Ryneveld was himself a veteran fighter pilot from the First World War and was said to have been sceptical. A Royal Air Force (RAF) officer who was present described how the South African insisted on personally testing a parachute by donning one, going aloft in an aeroplane as a passenger, jumping out and pulling the ripcord.⁴⁴ In his flight logbook, the 35 year-old Sir Pierre entered the details of the jump as taking place on 11 November 1926 at Henlow in Bedford from a Fairey Fawn aircraft.⁴⁵ A photograph of Sir Pierre as a colonel is reproduced in Appendix 10. This jump apparently convinced him of the value of parachutes and 25 were purchased by the SAAF from the RAF.

From photographs discovered in an unmarked album in the SAAF Museum, it appears that when they arrived in South Africa the parachutes were first tested with dummy weights attached below an Airco DH-9 biplane. However, it seems that Van Ryneveld was anxious for his pilots to have complete confidence in the new items, so he demonstrated the capability to them. His logbook entry for 19 April 1927 records that on that day there was a “live parachute drop with Sir Pierre van Ryneveld as passenger”.⁴⁶ The jump took place from a height of 2,300 feet (713 metres) and he delayed the pull of the ripcord for a

42. DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 92, Secret File 169/2, “Military Intelligence Appreciations: General”, Encl. 1, “Appreciation of a New Method of Warfare: Parachute Troops” by Deputy Director of Military Intelligence, 21 May 1940; and Confidential, “Data on Italian Forces in IEA”, M(I) 2/2.18 12 June 1940; Secret File 169/1 “Military Intelligence Appreciations: Italian Army”, Secret précis from Weekly I No. 39, 24 July 1940.

43. The Director of Air Services was the equivalent of what eventually became the Chief of the Air Force.

44. “The Way of the World: Sir Pierre Parachutes”, *Pretoria News*, 20 February 1927, p. 10.

45. South African Air Force Museum, Swartkops, Pretoria, Pilot’s Flying Log Book of Gen Sir Pierre van Ryneveld for the 1920s.

46. *Ibid.*

drop of 500 feet (155 metres). It took place at Zwartkop Air Station outside Pretoria. Copies of photographs taken of the event appear in Appendix 11.

In an interview conducted with the last surviving pilot from those years, the late Brigadier H.J. Bronkhorst,⁴⁷ he recounted how Sir Pierre had asked for six volunteers to test the parachutes, but that he, Sir Pierre, had been the first to jump. Bronkhorst and the others then jumped one at a time, on successive flights immediately afterwards. Thereafter, the wearing of parachutes by SAAF pilots apparently became mandatory.⁴⁸ Parachutes were subsequently tested with dummies from time to time and occasionally live drops were done.⁴⁹ This was the sum total of South Africa's experience in carrying out deliberate, intentional parachute drops prior to the Second World War. It was military – but it had nothing to do with delivering troops by air.

In the meantime, in the rest of the world it was the Russians who had become the pioneers of developing the vertical envelopment manoeuvre. The Soviets set up their first military parachute school in the 1920s⁵⁰ and were almost certainly the first to drop airborne troops in combat when they did so while carrying out operations against insurgent Basmachi tribesmen in Central Asia in 1927 (some sources give the year as 1931).⁵¹ Then, in an exercise in 1930, a small group of nine parachutists commanded by a lieutenant captured a corps commander when they were dropped a few kilometres south of Moscow to attack an enemy headquarters.⁵² This was exactly how the German General Schlieffen envisaged paratroopers being used when he had attended Leroux's demonstration back in 1889.

The Soviet military had a champion of the airborne concept in Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevski, the Chief of Staff of the Red Army from 1925 until he was purged by Stalin in 1936. Considered by some the best brain in the Soviet armed forces between the two world wars,⁵³ Tukhachevski was an outstanding military theoretician and the innovator of a free-wheeling offensive manoeuvre in open space, achieved by breakthrough and outflanking.⁵⁴ He intended his armoured force to punch through a foe's lines like a fast-moving fist while

47. Personal interview, Brig H.J. Bronkhorst, SAAF (retired), Cape Town, 8 September 1992.

48. "Military Manoeuvres", *Pretoria News*, 23 April 1927.

49. "Nie die Eerste Keer nie", *Commando*, (October 1961), p. 25; "Veteran Honoured", *Commando*, (October 1961), p. 25; Collins, "The Story of the Parachute".

50. Galvin, *Air Assault*, p. 4.

51. I. Dontsov and P. Livotov, "Soviet Airborne Tactics", *Military Review* (October 1964), pp. 29–33. See also Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, p. 24; and Gregory and Batchelor, *Airborne Warfare*, p. 22.

52. D. Eshel, *Daring to Win: Special Forces at War* (London, Cassell Military Classics, 1998), p. 61.

53. S.L. Mayer (ed.), *The Russian War Machine, 1917–1945* (London, Arms & Armour Press, 1977), p. 28.

54. A. Parry, "Tukhachevski: Ahead of his Time", *Military Review* (March 1978), p. 68.

other troops outflanked and enveloped the enemy.⁵⁵ To this end he introduced a new dimension of combat – the airborne assault.⁵⁶ For Tukhachevski, the airborne capability had a purely tactical application, but it was one that played a vital role in the offensive war of manoeuvre that he envisaged. The 1930s therefore saw a dramatic growth of the Soviet airborne forces, out of all proportion to those of any other country. This went hand-in-hand with the development of a heavy bomber capability and the TB-1 and TB-3 Tupolev bombers were also used as airborne transport aircraft.⁵⁷ Most Soviet manoeuvres and exercises were kept secret from the West, but the exercises of 1935 and 1936 were widely publicised and foreign military representatives were invited to witness what the Soviet armed forces were capable of. During the latter exercise, over a thousand paratroopers were dropped by parachute and an even greater number were air landed to seize river crossings, while artillery and light tanks were transported in TB3 aircraft.⁵⁸

A South African Military Intelligence report, compiled in the wake of the German invasion of the Low Countries in 1940, stated somewhat wistfully with regard to the Russian exercises that “unfortunately no nation, with the exception of Germany, took this demonstration seriously”.⁵⁹ However, without the visionary, influential and dynamic Tukhachevski, there seemed to be no one to apply his theories with the great airborne force that he had built up. The world learnt of the dropping of Russian parachute troops in actual combat during the Russo-Finnish War of 1939,⁶⁰ the first ever employment of such troops in a conventional conflict; but the Soviets made no use of their airborne forces during the Second World War in the way Tukhachevski had envisaged their employment.⁶¹

55. Parry, “Tukhachevski”, p. 71.

56. Mayer, *The Russian War Machine*, p. 161.

57. Eshel, *Daring to Win*, pp. 61–62.

58. DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 92, File 169/2, “Military Intelligence Appreciations: General”, Secret document, “Appreciation of a New Method of Warfare: Parachute Troops”, MI 2/2 (13), 21 May 1940; J.A. Huston, *Out of the Blue: US Army Airborne Operations in World War II* (Nashville, Battery Press, 1972), p. 47; Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, p. 25; B. Fitzsimonds, (ed.), *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of 20th Century Weapons and Warfare, Volume 23* (New York, Phoebus Publishing, 1971), p. 2479; W.C. Lee, “Introduction” to J.M. Gavin, *Airborne Warfare* (Washington DC, Infantry Journal Press, 1947), p. vii; Galvin, *Air Assault*, p. 5; M. De Vore, “The Airborne Illusion: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces”, Security Studies Program, MIT, Working Paper (June 2004), p. 10.

59. DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 92, Secret File 169/2, “Military Intelligence Appreciations: General”, Secret document, “Appreciation of a New Method of Warfare: Parachute Troops”, MI 2/2 (13), 21 May 1940.

60. Lee, “Introduction”, in Gavin, *Airborne Warfare*, p. vii.

61. See D.M. Glantz, *The History of Soviet Airborne Forces* (Portland, Frank Cass, 1994); C.R. Sasso, *Soviet Night Operations in World War II*, Paper No. 6, Combat Studies Institute (Fort Leavenworth, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1982); G.H. Turbiville, “Paradrop at the Bukrin Bridgehead: An Account of the Soviet Dnieper Airborne Operation”, *Military Review* (December 1976); L. Thompson, “Jumping under Fire”, *The Elite*, 5, 60 (undated); Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, pp. 285–286; Eshel, *Daring to Win*, p. 66.

3.4. THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND SOUTH AFRICA'S AIRBORNE EXPERIENCE

It was indeed the Germans who proved to be the first to employ the concept of vertical envelopment as a form of military manoeuvre, doing so with spectacular success. In this, it was General Kurt Student who played the crucial role. In the words of Edwards:

Only in Germany did the airborne idea as developed before the war take root; thanks to the vision and dedication of a group of forward looking army and air force officers. The airborne armadas with which the Luftwaffe captured Crete in 1941 and with which Allied forces later spearheaded the Normandy invasion and the crossing of the Rhine owed a great deal to the pioneering endeavours of General Student and his colleagues.⁶²

The German build-up of airborne forces prior to the Second World War as part of their general rearmament in eventual open defiance of the Treaty of Versailles, and the airborne operations undertaken in their invasions of Denmark, Norway, Belgium and Holland during 1940 as an integral part of the *blitzkrieg* tactics have been well documented. So too, have their airborne assaults on Greece and the island of Crete in 1941 and the subsequent demise of the airborne concept in German thinking due to the dictates of Adolf Hitler.⁶³ Equally, the consequent rise of a massive airborne capability in the British and American forces and their contributions to the invasions of Sicily, the south of France and Normandy, as well as the huge airborne operations in Holland and during the crossing of the Rhine, have all been extensively documented and intensively studied in a plethora of publications.⁶⁴ It is therefore of little value to discuss them in any detail for this thesis, though some have been dealt with as examples of strategic and tactical airborne operations

62. R. Edwards, *German Airborne Troops* (London, Macdonald & Janes, 1974), pp. 65–66.

63. Examples of this extensive historiography include: B.L. Davis, *German Parachute Forces 1935-45* (London, Arms & Armour Press, 1974); B. Quarrie, *German Airborne Troops, 1939–45* (London, Osprey Publishing, 1983); Galvin, *Air Assault*; F. Lannon, *The Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 2002); V. Kühn, *German Paratroops*; A. Merglen, *La Guerre de l'Inattendu*, Translated as *Surprise Warfare* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1968); B. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (London, Pan Books, 1970), pp. 57–66; D. Dildy, *Denmark and Norway, 1940: Hitler's Boldest Operation* (Oxford, Osprey, 2007); C. Chant, "Denmark and Norway", and "Eben-Emael and Holland", both in De Ste Croix (ed.), *Airborne Operations*; F. Kersaudy, *Norway 1940* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*; Hickey, *Out of the Sky*; and Huston, *Out of the Blue*.

64. Examples are Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*; Norton, *The Red Devils*; C. Macdonald, *By Air to Battle: The Official Account of the British First and Sixth Airborne Divisions* (London, Macdonald, 1970); G. Millar, *The Bruneval Raid: Flashpoint of the Radar War* (London, Pan Books, 1974); J. Frost, *A Drop too Many* (London, Cassell, 1980); Huston, *Out of the Blue*; Devlin, *Paratrooper!*; B. Gregory, *British Airborne Troops, 1940–45* (London, Macdonald & Janes, 1974); J. Weeks, *Assault from the Sky: A History of Airborne Warfare* (Newton Abbot, Westbridge Books, 1978); S. Bidwell, "The Airborne Assault on Sicily" in De Ste Croix, (ed.), *Airborne Operations*, pp. 84–91; "The Airborne Landing at Nadzab" at The Australian Army Website, <http://www.army.gov.au>; De Ste Croix, P. (ed.), *Airborne Operations*, p. 146; N. Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy* (London, Ian Allen, 1976); J. Mrazek, *The Glider War* (London, Robert Hale, 1975); Willes, *Out of the Clouds: The History of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion* (Port Perry, Port Perry Printing, 1995).

in Chapter 2. The Japanese employment of paratroops to complement their island-hopping expansionism in the Pacific is less well researched but falls outside the scope of this thesis in terms of providing relevant background.

Suffice to say that the Second World War saw the apogee of the airborne concept and the largest airborne operations that ever took place, with up to three divisions of airborne troops landed for some operations. The many hundreds of airborne actions that took place during the Second World War confirmed the role of airborne forces in modern warfare and refined the application of vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre.

Perhaps what emerged most starkly from the employment of airborne troops during this war were the very different approaches of the Germans and the Allies. The Germans saw the true potential of an airborne capability as surprise attacks on distant objectives in the heart of enemy territory. They fully exploited this understanding in their operations in Denmark, Norway, Holland and Crete. The Allies, on the other hand, showed a marked propensity to commit their airborne troops in tactical support of their main effort on the ground, just a short distance ahead of the ground or amphibious forces. This approach often led to exposing the airborne troops to great risk in areas of high intensity conflict where they were vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire, armoured counter-attack and importantly, where the airborne commander's initiative was limited by the ground plan. This observation was made, somewhat superficially, by Merglen in his study of surprise warfare,⁶⁵ but it does emerge, often indirectly, from many other works on Second World War airborne operations. Huston, working from official US documents, provides a more in-depth analysis of this tendency.⁶⁶

3.4.1. Early South African Airborne Thinking and Exercises

South Africa did not field an airborne force during the Second World War. However, this was not for lack of an understanding of the concept, but rather a shortage of manpower and other resources. The UDF Chief of the General Staff during the war, General Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, showed a very clear grasp of vertical envelopment and made a concerted effort to embrace it within the limited means at his disposal. Given his experience of parachuting during the 1920s and the fact that as an officer he had served in combat as an infantryman as well as a pilot, this is probably understandable.⁶⁷ In fact, South Africa displayed

65. Merglen, *Surprise Warfare*, pp. 84–85.

66. Huston, *Out of the Blue*, pp. 232–234.

67. I. Uys, *South African Military Who's Who, 1452–1992* (Germiston, Fortress Publishers, 1992), p. 254.

remarkable foresight regarding vertical envelopment long before any of the other Allies had accepted it as a form of manoeuvre. Although nothing came of this, ultimately a number of South Africans participated in airborne operations during the war as part of the British airborne forces.

It seems that the first South African to be trained as a paratrooper was the Olympic boxer, former policeman and UDF soldier, Sidney Robey Leibbrandt. Paradoxically, he was trained by the Germans. A Nazi supporter, he claimed to have served in a German parachute regiment after the outbreak of the Second World War.⁶⁸ Enquiries made to the German Bundesarchiv (Militärarchiv) to substantiate Leibbrandt's claims were unsuccessful, because most of the records covering that period were destroyed by the Germans at the end of the Second World War.⁶⁹ Nor was the Central Records Office of the German Federal Archives able to trace any record of Leibbrandt receiving training from the Germans.⁷⁰ What is indeed known is that he was landed clandestinely in South Africa on the Namaqualand coast by the German Abwehr, apparently from a rubber dinghy that had been brought from France on a German yacht.⁷¹ His subsequent subversive efforts against the Union government ended in his arrest, trial and a death sentence. This was later commuted to life imprisonment. He was released in June 1948 after the National Party came to power in South Africa.⁷² Photographs of Leibbrandt, taken at the time of his unsuccessful attempt to become an officer in the UDF and while he was in Germany during the 1930s, are reproduced in Appendix 12.

In South Africa, shortly after the Union declared war on Germany in 1939, a civilian academic turned military intelligence officer by the name of Louis Kraft, published an article in which he pointed out the potential of parachute units and expressed the opinion that a parachute battalion might be usefully employed by the Union Defence Force in bush warfare.⁷³ Considering that no Allied country had seriously considered the use of air transport as a tactical possibility at that stage, let alone the training and employing paratroops, this was very innovative thinking. Kraft subsequently prepared a memorandum in which reference was made to the Italian airborne threat in Abyssinia and suggested that consideration be given to the UDF possessing its own parachute unit, capable of taking

68. R. Leibbrandt, *Geen Genade* (Bloemfontein, self published, 1966); H. Strydom, *For Volk and Führer: Robey Leibbrandt and Operation Weissdorn* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1982); G.C. Visser, *OB: Traitors or Patriots?* (Johannesburg, Macmillan, 1976).

69. Letter from Frau Scholl of the *Bundesarchiv* (Militärarchiv), Freiburg, 26 May 1992.

70. Letter from Herr Meentz of the *Zentralnachweisstelle* of the *Bundesarchiv*, Aachen, 11 August 1993.

71. Paul Leverkuehn, *German Military Intelligence* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1954), pp. 124–127.

72. Visser, *OB: Traitors or Patriots?*, pp. 65 and 196.

73. L. Kraft, "Parachute Units for Bush Warfare", *Fly Paper*, November 1939.

offensive action against the enemy. Typical of the type of mission that such a unit would be called upon to carry out was “rapid construction of a landing runway in bush territory owned or occupied by the enemy, such a runway serving the purpose of concentrating behind or on the flank of an enemy force, infantry units landed from troop carrying aircraft”.⁷⁴ This was nothing less than vertical envelopment.

Whether Kraft’s memo had anything to do with it is not known, but a mere month later, on 25 June 1940, the eight Junkers Ju52 aircraft which had been taken over from the South African Airways and pressed into service with the SAAF were utilised to do an air-landing exercise. At the time, South Africa was the only Commonwealth country to have transport aircraft with the carrying capacity of the Junkers at its disposal. Significantly, this was barely a month after the Germans had astounded the world with their use of airborne troops in Belgium and the Netherlands, and a mere three days after Winston Churchill’s famous memo to his chiefs of staff in faraway England – unbeknown to the South Africans – which would set the ball rolling for the establishment of the British Airborne Forces.⁷⁵ The day before Churchill penned his memo, the UDF’s Military Intelligence Directorate had already predicted that airborne troops would become an integral part of the Allied armies, “not only in Europe but in other continents, where the existence of vast, thinly populated and relatively badly roaded areas, opens even greater possibilities for the efficient and economical use of parachute units than the European Lowlands”.⁷⁶

For the UDF exercise, the eight aircraft were used to transport A-Company, 1st Battalion of the Transvaal Scottish regiment, commanded by Captain A.W. Briscoe, from Swartkop⁷⁷ Air Station outside Pretoria to Pietersburg (now renamed Polokwane). There the company was marched through the town before spending some time rehearsing methods of emplaning and deplaning. The company commander then received a message to fly back to Swartkop to secure the airfield against a fictitious, imminent Fifth Column attack. A rather scathing report on the shortcomings of the exercise was written by the Director General of Operations, Lieutenant Colonel H.T. Newman. He made a clear and important distinction between what he called a tactical movement that would require the troops to immediately

74. DOD, Group CGS (War), Box 351, File: “Paratroop Training”, NOTES ON THE UTILITY OF PARACHUTE UNITS IN BUSH WARFARE, 23 May 1940.

75. Churchill’s memo is widely quoted in most works on the British airborne forces. See for example, Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, p. 64; Norton, *The Red Devils*, p. 1; Gregory, *British Airborne Troops*, p. 11; and E. Plaice, (ed.), *Red Berets ’44: Official Publication of the Airborne Forces* (London, Illustrated London News, 1994).

76. DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 92, File 169/2, “Military Intelligence Appreciations: General”, Secret document “Appreciation of a New Method of Warfare, Parachute Troops”, MI 2/2 (13), 21 May 1940.

77. By this time the Dutch spelling of Swartkop had been changed to Swartkop.

go over to action on landing, and a strategic air lift of troops into a secure environment. The former he saw as being planned by the operational staff and the latter by the logistic and administrative staff.⁷⁸ This distinction is maintained worldwide to this day.

The company commander also submitted a report.⁷⁹ Most of his men, it appears, had never flown in an aeroplane before. Seventeen soldiers with their equipment, plus four SAAF crewmen, were transported in each aircraft, but it is clear that this made the inside of the aircraft crowded and complicated the disembarking procedure. Nevertheless, many lessons were learnt and noted from the exercise, with good recommendations by both Newman and Briscoe regarding drills and procedures to be followed for such an air-landed operation.

That the UDF was taking airborne operations seriously is reflected in detailed reports on the German airborne troops that were being disseminated within the South African defence establishment by 26 June 1940, the day after their airborne exercise.⁸⁰ A few days later the Deputy Director of Military Intelligence was instructed by the Deputy Chief of the General Staff to forward a copy of the by then Captain Kraft's memorandum to Sir Pierre van Ryneveld.⁸¹ There can be little doubt that this request was influenced by the recent exercise. Sir Pierre had read the report by 4 July 1940⁸² and South Africa was already planning its first airborne operation. On the first day of that same month, Colonel F. W. Cooper, a police officer who commanded the newly-formed 6th South African Infantry Brigade (known as the Police Brigade because two of its three battalions consisted of volunteers from the South African Police) was summoned to attend a conference at Defence Headquarters.⁸³

Intelligence reports had indicated that the Germans might seize Delagoa Bay and it was imperative to make preparations to meet such an eventuality. Pretoria was particularly sensitive about possible German or Italian action through Lourenço Marques (now re-named Maputo) because of its proximity to the industrial heartland of the Union. Colonel Cooper was now instructed to train his two police battalions as "airborne troops" to carry

78. DOD, CGS Gp 2, File G2/1/11 "Air Movement Exercises", Secret document: "Movement of Troops by Air Exercise", 26 June 1940.

79. DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 539, File CGS 967/1, "Report on Exercise carried out by A Coy 1TS, 25 June 1940".

80. DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 92, Secret File 169/2, "Military Intelligence Appreciations, General", Document entitled "Transport of Troops by Air", M(I) 2/2 (20), 26 June 1940.

81. DOD, CGS (War), Box 351, File "Paratroop Training", Secret letter O. (I) 1/23 from DDMI to CGS, "TRAINING OF PARACHUTISTS", 2 July 1940,.

82. Pencilled and signed annotation to the above letter.

83. F.W. Cooper, *The Police Brigade: 6th SA infantry Brigade, 1939-45* (Cape Town, Constantia Publishers, 1972), pp. 16-17.

out an air-landed operation to take the airport at Lourenço Marques should the need arise. The idea was not to train the policemen as parachutists, but simply to get in and out of aircraft quickly, hampered as they would be by arms and equipment, and to take up, on deplaning, defensive or offensive positions, ready for immediate action. Provision was to be made for troops to be self-sufficient and able to operate independently for a period of 72 hours, after which they were to be provisioned by parachuting supplies to them.⁸⁴

Again, this ambitious and innovative training by the UDF was far in advance of anything that had ever been envisaged by any Allied country at that time and was nothing short of phenomenal, given that the first German employment of airborne troops was still not fully understood by the Allies and detailed reports or analyses of their actions had not yet reached the South Africans.⁸⁵ A series of far more ambitious exercises was now held between 9 and 15 July 1940 at Waterkloof and Wonderboom Air Stations after planning meetings had been held between the Army and the Air Force.⁸⁶ The exercises included mock dive-bombing and strafing attacks on the Wonderboom airfield by Hawker Hartbees aircraft, followed immediately by assault landings of Ju52 aircraft, approaching at 50 feet (15.5m) above ground level. The troops deplaned at speed after landing and “captured” aircraft hangars and other key buildings.⁸⁷ From 5 to 17 August 1940 further exercises were conducted⁸⁸ and eventually both SA Police Battalions were trained in air-landing operations, as was a platoon of the Special Service Battalion (SSB), although exactly what their role would be in the intended operation is not specified in the sources that could be traced.⁸⁹ Comprehensive loading tables were compiled, special medical packs were designed, drills were worked out in the finest detail and lists of recommendations were drawn up.⁹⁰

84. DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 539, File CGS 967/1, “Training of Troops for Transportation by Air”, 9 July 1940.

85. First official details of the German airborne capability and their airborne operations only reached the UDF in August 1940. See DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 92, Secret File 169/2, “Military Intelligence Appreciations, General”, Intelligence Pamphlet, “German Paratroops and Airlanding Troops”, MI 2/2 (26), 7 August 1940.

86. Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War: South African Forces World War II, Volume 7* (Cape Town, Purnell, 1979), p. 82.

87. DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 2, File No G2/1/11, “Air Movement Exercises”, “Secret Report, Capt A. F. Bartlett and Lt W.D. Wilson on exercises by 40 AC Squadron and sections of Police Brigade at Wonderboom Air Station”, 11 July 1940 and 15 July 1940”.

88. DOD, *Ibid.*, “Air Movement Exercises”, Memo G2/1/11 from DCGS to DGAS.

89. DOD, CGS Gp 2, File G2/1/11, Secret document, “Report on Emplaning and Loading Carried out by Police Brigade and SSB Pl” 9 July 1940”.

90. DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 2, Secret File G2/1/11, “Air Movement Exercises”, Most Secret and Personal minute MD 129/458, “Medical Aspect and Arrangements: Air Borne Troops”, 26 July 1941; “Employment of Aircraft with Police Battalion”, 12 July 1940; Secret document, “Report on Emplaning and Loading Carried out by Police Brigade and SSB Pl”, 9 July 1940”; Box 539, File CGS 961/1, “Training of Troops for Transportation by Air”, 9 July 1940. See also Cooper, *The Police Brigade*, p. 17.

Photographs of the commandeered Junkers Ju52 aircraft in SAAF livery, of a Hawker Hartbees and of troops emplaning can be consulted in Appendix 13.

Reports on the training were sent to the Chief of the General Staff,⁹¹ which was evidence of his personal interest in the rehearsals. "Z Plan", as the seizure of Lourenço Marques was known, apparently had a variation in which the ground forces of the 3rd SA Infantry Brigade would first occupy the city and the airborne troops would only then be flown in to reinforce them once the city had been secured.⁹² However, the intensity shown in the rehearsal of the first option made it clear that the airborne assault was the preferred course of action.

In the event, the airborne seizure of Lourenço Marques was unnecessary and other commitments altered the training of the 6th SA Infantry Brigade, so it never fully acquired the potential it was intended to reach. Nevertheless, it says much for the military authorities at the time that such imaginative contingency plans were made; that such detailed procedural rehearsals were carried out; that there was a willingness to embark on such revolutionary organisational adaptations; and that the UDF authorities were prepared to carry out such an untried form of operation. This is particularly so considering that training to embark on airborne operations had never taken place outside of the USSR, Germany and Italy at that stage of the war. Somebody in authority in the UDF had an obvious and thorough grasp of the concept and the potential of vertical envelopment. The indications are that it was the Chief of the General Staff, Sir Pierre van Ryneveld himself.

Later, in the wake of further German airborne successes, particularly their capture of Crete, Allied efforts to build their own airborne capability were redoubled. By then events had overtaken South Africa and the UDF was deeply committed to the war in Africa, having come through the East African campaign against the Italians. It was now embroiled in the desperate desert war against Rommel, and there had been no chance of developing an airborne capability with the limited resources at the UDF's disposal.

However, in October 1941 the British War Office sent a letter to the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, under whose operational command most of the UDF combat formations and units fell at the time. The British policy for Parachute and Airborne Troops was set out in the letter, asking for suggestions from the Middle East, where it was envisaged they were likely to be employed. The then Commander-in-Chief, General Wavell (who had attended

91. DOD, CGS Gp 2, File G2/1/11, "Air Movement Exercises", Secret letter O(I) 8/1/2 to CGS, DCGS and DGO, "Emplaning and Deplaning WATERKLOOF AIR STATION", 17 July 1940.

92. Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, pp. 61 and 82.

the Soviet airborne exercises in 1936 and been extremely dismissive of them!⁹³), now recommended that the War Office double the number of paratroopers that it was intending to authorise and suggested that Australia, New Zealand and South Africa be asked to consider raising their own airborne contingents.⁹⁴ When this correspondence was forwarded to South Africa by the General Officer Administering Union Defence Forces in the Middle East, the curt reply from Defence Headquarters in Pretoria was to bring to the notice of Middle East Command that both police battalions in the 2nd South African Division had already been trained as airborne troops.⁹⁵ This was somewhat presumptuous of the Union authorities, because Wavell's use of the term "airborne" was obviously addressing glider and parachute troops, not merely air landed infantry; but it does show the confused thinking around the term at the time.

Wavell's reply to the War Office in London resulted in a secret letter being sent to all commanders-in-chief incorporating some of Wavell's suggestions and informing them of the intended way forward for airborne forces. It was also sent to the military liaison officers of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, as well as later, South Africa.⁹⁶

The UDF's reference to the training carried out by the police battalions elicited a quick response at GHQ Middle East. By December 1941, the Union Defence Force's Middle East headquarters were frantically requesting Pretoria to forward the details on "training of airborne troops" carried out with the SA police battalions – for examination by the British.⁹⁷ A 21-page document setting out all the drills and technical information gained from the UDF exercises was forwarded;⁹⁸ however, there is no evidence to suggest that the British did, in fact, use this information on the South African experience. The fact that the South Africans had carried out their training on German Junkers transport aircraft would have had something to do with this, because the British had no such aeroplanes. But more relevant was that the British were by then thinking along the lines of airborne assaults on objectives

93. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, p. 25.

94. DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 2, Secret File G2/1/11, "Air Movement Exercises", Most Secret letter UDF/826/14 (G) "Parachute and Air-borne Tps" from GOA,UDF, ME to DCS, DHQ, Pretoria, 23 October 1941. A copy of Wavell's secret signal on the matter to the Indian Army, SD/08995, 30 Sept. 1941 is Enclosure 1c in the file UDF 826/18/3/1 (A) "Paratroop Company", Vol 1, DOD, UDF, Box 133.

95. DOD, CGS (2), Box 2, Secret File G2/1/11, "Air Movement Exercises", Cablegram No H/09086 from DECHIEF to UNIDEF CAIRO, 27 November 1941.

96. *Ibid.*, Secret War Office letter 0164/6437 (SD4), 29 October 1941.

97. *Ibid.*, Secret cable UDF/G/0479, 15 December 1941 to DECHIEF from UNIDEF MIDEAST; and reply "Training: Airborne Troops", 2 January 1942.

98. *Ibid.*, File G 2/1/11, "Air Movement Exercises", CGS (Gp 2), Secret report "Employment of Aircraft with Police Battalion", 12 July 1940; and Standard Operating Procedures, "Training of Troops for Transportation by Air".

that did not have an airfield conveniently nearby. They had been convinced by the German use of paratroops and gliders that this was the route to follow, rather than the air-landed option envisaged by the UDF. The drills and techniques developed in South Africa thus had little relevance to thinking in the Middle East at the time.

3.4.2. Plans for a South African Airborne Capability

With airborne developments in the British armed forces, the emphasis in South African thinking now shifted from air-landed operations towards parachutes and gliders. Responding to the suggestion that the dominions should consider raising their own airborne contingents, Sir Pierre van Ryneveld instructed the South African Military Liaison Officer at South Africa House in London to investigate the feasibility of establishing an airborne brigade.⁹⁹ The UDF was still heavily reliant on the British armed forces at the time.

The reply, sent in April 1942 after discussions had been held with the British Air Ministry, was not encouraging.¹⁰⁰ By September 1942 the heavy commitment of all available transport aircraft flying the routes between Pretoria and Cairo/Accra made it clear that parachute training could not be given priority. The training of glider pilots, however, had already commenced at Quagga-poort.¹⁰¹ The hope of building an airborne brigade was a forlorn one, given that South Africa was relying solely on volunteers for the war effort and was therefore always faced with a shortage of numbers to make up the forces being fielded. The decision not to conscript meant that the UDF was hard-pressed to produce two divisions for the campaign in North Africa, and one of these had now been decimated and most of its remnants taken captive at Tobruk (including both SA Police battalions). No doubt the appeal of raising an elite brigade of shock troops was seen as something that would be good for morale, particularly after the setback of Tobruk. But a parachute brigade would consist of some 2,500 men¹⁰² and this would be a sizeable chunk of manpower for the small volunteer armed forces of the UDF.

Nevertheless, Van Ryneveld was undeterred by the difficulties. He had already commissioned a feasibility study by the UDF into the implications of establishing an airborne force in South Africa. An officer of the SAAF, Captain David McCombe, was identified to

99. DOD, CGS (War), Box 351, "Paratroop Trg", Encl. 6, Cablegram G.15018 from DECHIEF to OPPOSITELY, 20 March 1942.

100. Ibid., Encl. 7, Cablegram L. 860 from OPPOSITELY to DECHIEF, 8 April 1942; and L. 860(A), 21 April 1942. Also in CGS Gp 2, Box No. 539, File CGS 967/1.

101. Ibid., Most Secret Memo from DGAF to DCS, DGAF 26/OPS "Airborne Forces", 26 September 1942.

102. DOD, CGS Gp 2, Box 2, Secret File G2/1/11, "Air Movement Exercises", Most Secret letter UDF/826/14 (G) "Parachute and Air-borne Tps" from GOA, UDF, ME to DCS, DHQ, Pretoria, 23 October 1941.

conduct the study and he was detached for special duties with the UK Forces in July 1942, only a month after the fall of Tobruk.¹⁰³ See Appendix 14 for a photograph of McCombe. He went to England and for the next six months conducted an exhaustive investigation into every conceivable aspect of airborne warfare and how an airborne capability could be introduced into the Union Defence Force. During this time he also underwent parachute and glider training, qualifying as a paratrooper.¹⁰⁴ He was able to secure a vast amount of documentation from the British authorities, which he forwarded to the relevant authorities in South Africa, via the office of the High Commissioner for the Union in London.¹⁰⁵

It soon became apparent that South Africa would not be able to build gliders, and that the British attached no priority to providing them to the Union from other sources.¹⁰⁶ But McCombe discovered that the jump-towers used by the British for their parachute training had been designed and constructed by Polish military engineers. He requested diagrams and drawings of these towers, which were readily supplied by the Poles.¹⁰⁷ By December 1942, he had completed his investigations. On 15 December 1942 he submitted an incredibly comprehensive secret report to his superiors.¹⁰⁸ It seems that this report served as something of a catalyst to sober the thinking of the South African military authorities on the viability of establishing an airborne brigade. Certainly, in February 1943 the Chief of the General Staff instructed his deputy to arrange for consultations between McCombe and the Director General of the Air Force to consider ways, means and equipment to establish an airborne unit consisting of one company of parachute troops and one company of glider-borne troops.¹⁰⁹ From a brigade, the concept had already shrunk to that of less than a battalion.

On 6 March 1943 the energetic McCombe, who was by then back in the Union, submitted a memorandum to the Director General of the Air Force in which he outlined the requirements for a proposed training unit to be responsible, as part of the SAAF, for the

103. DOD, Personnel Records, File of Captain David McCombe; Interview, McCombe's widow, Doris McCombe, Johannesburg, 18 January 1994.

104. DOD, AG Gp 3, Box 90, File 154/x/908, "UDF Para Coy", Enclosure 2, 3 July 1943.

105. Telephone interview, 1 February 1994, with Dr Brand Fourie, who served in the SA High Commission, London during WW2, confirmed McCombe's frequent liaison with the High Commission while in the UK.

106. DOD, CGS (2), Box 539, File CGS 967/1, Ministry of Aircraft Production, Millbank, to secretary, Office of High Commissioner for Union SA (for att Capt D. McCombe), 5 October 1942; CGS (War), Box 351, File "Paratroop Training", J. Dickson, Liaison Officer, SA War Supplies, Melbourne, to Secretary, Director General of War Supplies, Johannesburg, 14 December 1942.

107. DOD, CGS (2), Box 539, File CGS 967/1, Letter from Lt Col Geo. Iwanowski, 24 October 1942.

108. DOD, CGS (War), Box 351, Secret File "Paratroop Training", Signal A. 14/5 14 Dec. 1942; CGS (2), Box 539, File CGS 967/1, Secret Report A.F. 2/11/6, Capt D. McCombe, "Report on British Airborne Troops with Special Ref. to Training and Equipment of Parachute Troops and Air Landing Troops", 15 Dec. 1942.

109. DOD, CGS (War), Box 351, File "Paratroop Training", Encl. 22, Signal CC685 from CGS to DCS, 12 Feb. 1943.

training of the first volunteers for the envisaged operational airborne unit as well as those who would subsequently become reinforcements.¹¹⁰ It was found to be feasible to train South African parachute instructors at the Middle East Training School (METS) in Palestine; that the available Junkers Ju-52 aircraft could be modified for parachuting; and that most training apparatus and personal equipment needed for parachute training could be manufactured, constructed or acquired locally.¹¹¹

However, at this point all these plans were abruptly terminated. The constant difficulties involved in recruiting a sufficient number of volunteers to maintain the Union's war effort compelled Van Ryneveld to reconsider his enthusiasm for an airborne unit. At the General Staff Conference of 2 June 1943, Sir Pierre was minuted as saying that he could not see any reason for carrying on with the programme for the training of parachute troops in the Union unless volunteers were wanted for a British Airborne formation. "We had no programme for maintaining an airborne unit in the field and there was no necessity for parachute troops in the Union".¹¹² It seemed that the idea of establishing a South African airborne capability had come to nought.

3.4.3. The British Appeal for a South African Parachute Company

Barely two weeks later a formal request was indeed received from the British military authorities in the Middle East, asking the UDF to consider the formation of a parachute company comprising only UDF personnel, and to be maintained as such.¹¹³ The company would be subject to UDF terms of service and be self-administering although forming part of a battalion made up of British and other dominions' personnel. South Africa agreed to this. But due to the acute manpower shortage being experienced by the UDF at the time, in the efforts to build up the all-volunteer 6th SA Armoured Division for service in Italy, a decision was taken that recruiting for this parachute company would be restricted to the 9th Battalion of the 1st Reserve Brigade in Egypt. This battalion consisted of men who had taken the Africa Service oath to serve anywhere in Africa, but who were reluctant to take the

110. DOD, CGS (2), Box 539, Secret, File CGS/967/1, DGAF (O) 24/49/1, "Memorandum on Requirements for Proposed Parachute and Glider Training Unit Establishment", Capt D. McCombe, 6 March 1943 and Secret document, "Notes for Consideration on Formation of Airborne Troops in South Africa", attached to Secret DGAF 24/49/1 (undated).

111. DOD, CGS (2), Box 539, File CGS/967/1, Secret Memo, SAAF Senior Admin. Officer Air at HQ RAF Middle East to Deputy Director Air Force, Defence HQ, Pretoria, "Airborne Forces: Gliders and Training", Ref. SAOA/ME/14/2/39, 19 March 1943, and Most Secret Memo, DMT to DCS, "Airborne Troops", DMT. 1208/13, 20 May 1943.

112. DOD, CGS (War), Box 351, File "Paratroop Training", Encl. 27, Secret Minutes of General Staff Conference, 2 June 1943, Item "Parachute Troops".

113. Ibid., Encl. 28, Signal UDF/Z/0704 from Unidef, 18 June 1943.

General Service oath to serve further afield. These men were therefore not available for the 6th Division. There had been major morale problems in the battalion and it was hoped that giving the men the opportunity to volunteer for parachute training might persuade them to take the General Service oath and resolve these issues. Should efforts to recruit from this source fail, the only other option would be for the SAAF to provide the company.¹¹⁴

Major General Frank Theron, the General Officer Administration (GOA) of the UDF Administrative HQ in Cairo, sent a letter to Sir Pierre, explaining the reasons for the British request (essentially, a shortage of volunteers for the paratroops) and the terms under which the South African company would be administered and employed. Attached was the organisation of the parachute company required by the British (see Appendix 15).¹¹⁵ On 23 July 1943 Sir Pierre notified the Director General of the Air Force and the General Staff that the Minister of Defence (Smuts himself) had approved the formation of an Airborne Company as part of the SAAF Armoured Car Organisation and authorised the provision of the necessary training equipment.¹¹⁶ David McCombe was sent to the Middle East to gain first-hand knowledge of the situation and of airborne training arrangements in that theatre of operations.¹¹⁷

From subsequent reports by McCombe and others¹¹⁸ it emerged that the UDF parachute company was earmarked to become part of the 11th Battalion of the British 4th Parachute Brigade, for service in the Middle East/Mediterranean theatre of operations. It was decided that a parachute school would not be set up in South Africa, but volunteers would be trained at the existing British school at Ramat David in Palestine. When McCombe arrived back in South Africa on 3 September 1943, he brought with him an operational report on Operation HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily that had taken place during that July, less

114. Ibid., Encl. 29, Signal UDF/Z/0711, 21 June 1943; and Signal GG.43954, 22 June 1943; AG Gp 3, Box 90, File 154/x/908, "UDF Para Coy", Letter CGS 22/4, 2 July 1943. See also N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy: South African Forces in World War II, Volume 5* (Cape Town, Purnell, 1975), p. 16 on the role of the 9th Battalion.

115. DOD, AG(3), Box 90, File 154/x/908 "UDF Para Coy", Encl. 1, Letter GAO/23/1 from GOA, UDF Admin HQ, Middle East Forces, Theron to Van Ryneveld, Chief of General Staff, Defence HQ, Pretoria, 21 June 1943.

116. DOD, CGS (War), Box 351, File "Paratroop Training", Encl. 32, Letter from Chief of General Staff to DGAF, et al., 23 July 1943. There is also a copy in File 154/x/908 "UDF Para Coy", Encl. 3; DOD, AG(3), Box 90.

117. Ibid., Encl. 30, Secret letter DGAF(0)24/49/1 "Proposed UDF Paratroop Company", Director General Air Force to CGS, 2 July 1943; and Encl. 31, Secret signal CGS A 14/5, G.44723, 3 July 1943 from Dechief, Pretoria to Unidef Cairo. See also DOD, Personnel Records, File of Capt D. McCombe, SAAF Signals Officer.

118. DOD, CGS (War), Box 351, File "Paratroop Training", Encl. 39, "Report on Visit to 4 METS by Lt Col D.H. Ollemans", attached to letter GOA/23/1 from Maj Gen F.H. Theron, GOA UDF MEF to DCS, 5 August 1943 and Encl. 43, Secret signal CGS A/14/5, UDF/P/13575 from Unidef to Dechief, 18 August 1943.

than two months earlier, and which included the airborne assault, Operation LADBROOKE.¹¹⁹ This would enable UDF officers to study the very latest in airborne developments and the operational application of vertical envelopment.

3.4.4. The Paratroop Company of the SAAF Regiment

In the meantime a start had been made on the establishment of the parachute company and recruiting volunteers. By 26 July 1943 a total of 36 men from the 9th Reserve Battalion in Egypt had indicated their willingness to take the General Service oath and to join the company.¹²⁰ This was barely enough for a platoon, and it was clear that the balance of volunteers would have to come from the SAAF. The SAAF's No. 30 Armoured Car Commando was officially disbanded on 30 July 1943 and on the same day the SAAF Regiment (Armoured and Airborne) was established.¹²¹ The War Establishment Table (WET) organisation that was approved for the new SAAF Regiment was a Regimental Headquarters, a Headquarters Squadron, a Tank Squadron, two Armoured Car Squadrons and one Airborne Company.¹²²

Only 66 volunteers were recruited in South Africa (many of them aspirant pilots who had not made the flight training). These, together with some officers from the Army who had been allowed to volunteer, were sent to Kafferskraal at the Premier Mine near Cullinan, where the Battle School of the Armoured Corps Training Centre was located. Here they underwent a gruelling five-week so-called commando course at the hands of instructors who were veterans of the North African campaign, completing the course at the end of October.¹²³ The Battle School Course was designed to toughen the volunteers by means of strenuous physical exercise, but it also concentrated on small-group tactics and battle drills. There was a modicum of parade-ground work and kit inspections, but by far the greatest part of the course was spent out in the field undergoing hard soldiering (photos can be seen in Appendix 16).¹²⁴ Although none of the instructors at the Battle School were themselves

119. DOD, Personnel Records, File of Capt D. McCombe, SAAF Signals Officer; CGS (War), Box 351, File "Paratroop Training", Note acknowledging receipt of "Report on Airborne Operation HUSKY between nights 9/10 July 1943 and 16/17 July 1943", brought from ME by Capt McCombe.

120. DOD, CGS (War), Box 351, File "Paratroop Training", Encl. 33, Secret signal CGS A/14/5, UDF/Z/0828 from Unidef to Dechief, 26 July 1943.

121. *Ibid.*, Encl. 38, Secret authority DAP/24/14/617/X/130, 30 July 1943, "FORMATION: THE SAAF REGT (ARMD AND AIRBORNE)".

122. DOD, AGI, Box 132, File AG 736/4/19, "OFFICERS, SATC No. 30 Armoured Commando (V) SAAF Lyttelton", Encl. 35.

123. "SA Paratroops Complete Course", *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 October 1943.

124. "Stoep Talk: Truck-Jumping Champion", *The Star*, 29 October 1943.

parachutists, an effort was made to prepare the men for the parachute training they were required to undergo in Palestine (photographs can be viewed in Appendix 17).¹²⁵

There was a great deal of press coverage at the time about the tough commando training of prospective paratroopers and of the SAAF Regiment being established to capture and hold enemy airfields for subsequent use by SAAF squadrons of aircraft,¹²⁶ but there is no official documentation to substantiate this view. The winner of the Battle School's floating trophy for the best student was Captain A.A. van Niekerk, MC, a veteran of the North African campaign, where he had served with the 4th SA Armoured Car Regiment which had been attached to the British 7th Armoured Division, the famous "Desert Rats".¹²⁷ Van Niekerk was then appointed commander of the new Paratroop Company and he used the opportunity to recruit more potential paratrooper officers from among the Battle School staff. One of these was Captain Ossie Baker, who became his second-in-command.¹²⁸

The Air Directorate at DHQ in Pretoria had in the meantime formulated policy regarding the parachute training of the company, which was then based in Lyttelton pending its departure for the Middle East.¹²⁹ While they waited for this move, the men of the SAAF Paratroop Company were used to give Red Cross fund-raising demonstrations;¹³⁰ they also designed their own insignia of Pegasus, the winged horse, within an Air Force roundel. See Appendix 18 for a photo of the insignia painted on a vehicle door. It is possibly an indication of the importance attached to the Paratroop Company that it became the recipient of the first American Jeep to be delivered to South Africa (See Appendix 19).¹³¹ Tragically, shortly afterwards the company commander, Captain Van Niekerk, was killed when he rolled the vehicle.¹³²

125. O. Baker, "The Original South African Parachute Troops", *Dickie Fritz Bullsheat*, May 1988. The same article appeared in the MOTH magazine, *Home Front* of June 1990, under the heading "These were the First of the Springbok Paras".

126. DOD, G-1646, Box 83, "SA Paratroops Complete Course", *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 October 1943; Lieut A.M. Pollock, "Commandos of 1943", Supplement to *Iscor News*, August 1943; Anon, "Building up... a SAAF Regiment", *Wings*, December 1943; "Air Force Paratroops': Where Every Man Becomes a Self-contained Unit, Toughening Body and Mind", *The Star*, 6 November 1943.

127. N. Orpen, *War in the Desert*, pp. 30, 171, 197, 238 and 414.

128. Interview with Cmdt O. Baker, Johannesburg, 1990.

129. DOD, Miscellaneous Group, Secret letter DGAF.24/49/1, "Airborne Company: Policy", from DGAF to DAP and ORG, 20 October 1943.

130. "Citizens see Commando Tactics: Realistic Display at Wanderers", Report in unidentified newspaper (thought to be *The Star*), 31 October 1943.

131. "Building up... a SAAF Regiment", *Wings*, December 1943, p. 20.

132. Interview, Cmdt O. Baker, Johannesburg, 1990. See also M. Alexander, "Paratrooping Pioneer: David McCombe, South Africa's First Serving Paratrooper", *Military History Journal*, 10, 2 (December 1995).

It proved to be a bad omen for the SAAF Paratroop Company. Faced with an acute problem of finding sufficient manpower for the 6th SA Armoured Division, committed by the UDF to the Italian campaign where the Allies were already engaged in a bitter struggle against the Germans, the UDF authorities were compelled to take a decision on the future of the whole SAAF Regiment. On 25 November 1943, the Administrative HQ in Cairo was informed by cable that South Africa was pulling out altogether from the plans to form an Airborne Company. The SAAF Regiment was being ordered forward as reinforcement to the 6th SA Armoured Division.¹³³ The signal was initialled by the South African Chief of the General Staff himself, who had just returned from a visit to the British War Office in England and the 6th SA Division in Egypt.¹³⁴ At a General Staff Conference held on 1 December 1943 in Pretoria, Van Ryneveld stated that he had informed Middle East that South Africa had abandoned any idea of providing an Airborne Company.¹³⁵ The short-lived SAAF Paratroop Company had existed for less than four months and did not carry out a single parachute jump. The SAAF Regiment was amalgamated with the Natal Mounted Rifles on 22 January 1944 to form the NMR/SAAF.¹³⁶ The unit formed an armoured reconnaissance regiment of the 6th SA Armoured Division and fought with distinction through the arduous Italian campaign, where it was known simply as the NMR.

South Africa's only further exposure to the airborne concept during the Second World War was through the more than 100 individuals who served in the British Forces in an airborne role, most of them on secondment from the UDF. They included both David McCombe and Ossie Baker. About 40 South Africans served in the plethora of small units that would today be known as "Special Forces", such as the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), Popski's Private Army (No. 1 Demolition Squadron, or PPA), Special Air Service (SAS), Special Boat Squadron (SBS), Raiding Support Regiment (RSR) and others, including specialist sections of the Royal Marines.¹³⁷ The South Africans in these units were all eventually parachute trained. At least another 36 South Africans served in shadowy clandestine organisations about which little is known even today, such as ME-66, MO4, Force 133, Force

133. DOD, CGS (War), Box 351, File "Paratroop Training", Encl. 51, Secret signal, Dechief to Unidef G.55040, 25 November 1943.

134. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 17. See also Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, *War Diaries, 1939–1945* (London, Phoenix Press, 2002), pp. 460, 467 and 471. From the entry on p. 471 it seems Van Ryneveld (whose name is incorrectly spelled "Van Reinweld" by Alanbrooke) accompanied Churchill and Alanbrooke, the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, from the UK to Cairo.

135. DOD, CGS (War), Box 351, "Paratroop Training", Encl. 54, Extract, Staff Conference No. 95, 1 Dec. 1943.

136. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 8.

137. DOD, Miscellaneous Group, File "WAR APPTS OFFS: MAINT OF RECORDS : SECONDED PERSONNEL".

266, Force 399, 37 Military Mission and No. 1 Special Force.¹³⁸ All those who served in an airborne role in these Special Forces organisations were parachute trained by the British at parachute schools set up in either Palestine or in Italy. They were dropped behind German lines and operated sometimes for many months at a time with partisans in Greece, Albania, Yugoslavia and Italy.

No less than 25 officers from the UDF served on secondment in the constituent units of the British 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade Group. They all served in a combat role as infantrymen and because a brigade of that type, with three parachute battalions, would have had approximately 90 infantry officers, the South Africans formed a substantial percentage of the total (about 28%). While the South Africans were with the brigade, this formation, besides fighting in Italy, took part in two major airborne operations.¹³⁹ The first of these was Operation ANVIL (later renamed Operation DRAGOON), which was the invasion by the Allies of the southern coast of France. The second operation, code-named MANNA, involved the dropping of paratroopers to establish an airhead and advance on Athens. This was to enable an armoured force to land by sea and reinforce them so that the country could be occupied in the wake of the German retreat. A photograph of a South African paratrooper after the drop in Greece can be viewed in Appendix 20. During these operations some were decorated for bravery, one was killed in action, several were wounded and in general they were highly regarded for their abilities.¹⁴⁰

There were a number of South Africans who served in British airborne units in other operational theatres. At least eight South Africans took part in the abortive Operation MARKET-GARDEN, the attempt to take the bridge at Arnhem in the Netherlands. Others participated in airborne operations elsewhere in Europe as well as in the East.¹⁴¹

138. The personal military files of many of those who served in these units were consulted in the SANDF Archives (DOD), as well as other official files and several books written by participants.

139. Details of the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade Group's activities are well documented in literature available on the British Airborne Forces. These include Gregory, *British Airborne Troops*; H.St.G Saunders, *The Red Beret: The Story of the Parachute Regiment at War, 1940–1945* (London, New English Library, 1971); Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*; Macdonald, *By Air to Battle*; Norton, *The Red Devils*; J. Thompson, *Ready for Anything* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989); R. Kent, *First in! Parachute Pathfinder Company* (London, B.T. Batsford, 1979).

140. DOD, Box 133, File 826/18/3/1 (A) "Paratroop Coy" Vol. 1, Encl. 20, Letter A/5/2 "ACCEPTANCE OF UDF PERS FOR PARATP TRG" from D/GOA (Land Forces) ADV UDF ADM HQ CMF to G1 (Brit) AFHQ BNAF, HQ AAI CMF, HQ 2 Dist CMF, HQ 3 Dist CMF, Comd 2 Indep Para Bde Gp CMF and AAG UDF ADM HQ MEF, 27 June 1944; DOD, Personnel Records Section, Personal File 2nd Lt J.E. Blanckenberg. See also Letter from Tom Rowlands, 28 June 1991; Letter from Gen Sir Anthony Farrar-Hockley, 30 January 1992.

141. An extensive array of sources, both archival and published, as well as interviews conducted and correspondence received, provided details of these individuals. All are included in the source list.

The South Africans who emerged from the Second World War with exposure to airborne operations had between them firsthand experience of the application of airborne forces in both the strategic and the tactical roles, albeit with a very low level of practical participation. Four of the officers are known to have remained in the Permanent Force (regular army) after the war, two of them until their retirement. A number of the others remained active in certain of the part-time Active Citizen Force (ACF) regiments and the Commandos. Therefore, although South Africa had no airborne capability during and after the war, there was a degree of experience and expertise available to draw on should the establishment of such a capability be considered. At the very least, this experience covered the technical and lower tactical military levels that are absolutely essential as the basis of any airborne capability.

3.5. THE AIRBORNE CONCEPT AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In the rapidly changing geo-political landscape that followed the Second World War, with the downscaling of armed forces and the increase in insurgency wars around the globe, the employment of airborne forces had to be adapted. Yet there was now no longer any question about the value of vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre on the battlefield. The rapid development of the concept during the Second World War had firmly established it as a part of modern warfare in the minds of soldiers throughout the world and there would henceforth be few staff colleges that would not include a study of airborne operations in one form or another in their curriculum.

With the ending of hostilities in 1945 and the coming of the “peace” that heralded the beginning of the Cold War, the various belligerents rapidly downscaled their military forces. The airborne forces became much smaller in all countries except the Soviet Union. Yet even those countries that had never fielded airborne forces during the world conflict now adopted some form of airborne capability.¹⁴² Aircraft began to change. The combat glider, had been used extensively to deliver both troops and materiel during the war, but by its end was largely obsolete and was soon consigned to the trash heap of history. In some ways it was to be replaced by the helicopter. The helicopter introduced a battlefield mobility that paratroopers lacked, and had the added advantage that almost any troops could be transported by air with a minimum of simple training. Yet the helicopter had two

142. See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1996/97* (London, Oxford University Press, 1997); Servicio de Publicaciones del Estado Mayor del Ejército, *Balance Militar, 1983–84, Volume 44*, No. 526 (Madrid, November 1985); O. von Pivka, *The Armies of Europe Today* (Reading, Osprey, 1974).

big drawbacks: it was limited in size and payload and could therefore only move a small number of troops or relatively light cargo; and it had a short range. At the same time, fixed wing transport aircraft were increasing both their payload and their range, adding further value to the military parachuting technique. But the threat in hostile airspace had also increased, with radar-guided or heat-seeking missiles, some of them shoulder-launched. There were now also proximity-burst rockets posing a danger even in low intensity operations. And yet, military planners have found ways to counter these threats so that even as recently as 2003 the Americans dropped paratroopers during the invasion of Iraq and early in 2013 a parachute operation was carried out by the French in Mali.¹⁴³ There is therefore no doubt that there is still a role for airborne troops in modern wars.

The years after the Second World War saw airborne troops used in many places around the world, albeit on a far smaller scale than had been the case during that conflict. For the most part, these actions took place during the demise of the overseas empires of the European nations as the suppressed and emergent new nations fought to throw off the colonial yoke. Lateral and unconventional thinking was practised and encouraged by the officers of the new and elite airborne units, giving them a somewhat cavalier and daredevil reputation. The tide of history was against the causes they found themselves defending, however, and their successes on the battlefield brought no victories in their wars. In Java in 1948 the Dutch carried out a direct parachute assault on Maguwo airfield near Djakarta, securing it for follow-up airlandings against local insurgents. But it was the nationalists who eventually won their independence.¹⁴⁴

Those who made the most use of parachute troops in the immediate post-war years were the French during their war in Indo-China.¹⁴⁵ According to Burleigh, “Airborne insertions played a greater part in the First Indochina War than they have done in any conflict since”.¹⁴⁶ Though this is a claim that could feasibly be contested by the Rhodesians, it is true that in the seven-year war that they waged against Viet Minh insurgents from 1946 onwards, the French carried out 156 parachute operations varying in size from a patrol to a brigade

143. O. Tramond and P. Seigneur, “Early Lessons from France’s Operation Serval in Mali”, *Army Magazine*, (June 2013). The American drop in Iraq, the longest operational pre-jump flight in history (2,900km), was onto a secured airfield, so although into a combat area, they encountered no resistance during the drop.

144. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, p. 297; R.J. Bragg, and R. Turner, *Parachute Badges and Insignia of the World*, (Poole, Dorset, Blandford Press, 1979), p. 217.

145. W. Fowler, “Airborne Operations in French Indo-China”, in De Ste Croix, (ed), *Airborne Operations*, pp. 170–177.

146. M. Burleigh, *Small Wars, Faraway Places* (London, Pan Books, 2013), p. 233.

group, but mostly of company size.¹⁴⁷ Operations sometimes included as many as three battalions at a time, using up to 56 C-47 Dakota aircraft to drop as many as 2,354 paratroopers in two lifts. But these were usually tactical in nature, with a link-up force in vehicles joining the airborne element within a day or two. It is ironic that the last and biggest airborne action by the French, Operation CASTOR, was to prove their nemesis. An attempt to lure the Communist Viet Minh into a trap for a battle of attrition by their paratroops at Dien Bien Phu was turned against them, with the French being caught in their own trap and suffering a disastrous defeat in May 1954 after a six-month siege. This spelled the end of the French Empire in the Far East. A total of 16,544 men had been parachuted or flown into Dien Bien Phu. Of them, 9,000 surrendered and only 3,000 survived. It was a failure in strategic thinking to employ airborne troops in an attrition battle and a departure in French thinking from their innovative earlier operations.¹⁴⁸

While the French were fighting their war in Indo-China, the Korean War broke out. During that war the Americans carried out two conventional airborne operations.¹⁴⁹ One involved the dropping of 2,860 men and 306,036kg of equipment from 71 (some sources give the figure as 76) Fairchild C-119 "Flying Boxcar" aircraft and 40 C-47 Dakotas, while in the other a total of 3,300 men were dropped and the paratroopers faced determined opposition when they landed, suffering 782 casualties in the fighting. It was this war, more than anything else, that resulted in the design and production of the ubiquitous Lockheed Hercules C-130 aircraft, which, with its ability to carry 92 troops or 64 paratroopers and with a range in excess of 2,400km, was to become, in a variety of models, the mainstay of parachute operations in most of the world (including South Africa) for more than half a century.¹⁵⁰

In the meantime, the British, fighting an insurgency war in Malaya in the early 1950s, developed a technique for deep penetration patrols inserted into the jungle by parachute to

147. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, p. 297; P. Gaujac (ed.), *Histoire des Parachutistes Français, Volumes 1 and 2* (Paris, Société de Production Littéraire, 1975).

148. The definitive works on the strategic victory of the Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu remain Jules Roy, *La Bataille de Dien Bien Phu* (Paris, René Julliard, 1963), trans. as *The Battle of Dienbienphu* (New York, Harper & Row, 1965); and B.B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1967).

149. Rees (ed.), *The Korean War: History and Tactics* (London, Orbis, 1984), pp. 51–52 and 66; C. Chant, "The Korean War", in De Ste Croix, (ed), *Airborne Operations*, pp. 164–168; Merglen, *Surprise Warfare*, pp. 176–185; Hickey, *Out of the Sky*, pp. 184–187; Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, pp. 299–300.

150. "Hercules, C-130 Lockheed", *Encyclopedia of Weapons and Warfare, Volume 12*, pp. 1298–1301; W. Green and G. Swanborough, *The Observer's Basic Military Aircraft Directory* (London, Frederick Warne, 1974), p. 127; J.W.R. Taylor (ed.), *Jane's all the World's Aircraft 1976-77* (London, Macdonald & Janes, 1976), pp. 319–321; Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, p. 300.

lower themselves by means of *abseiling* from 60m-high trees they were caught up in.¹⁵¹ And then, a decade later, in Borneo, they also pioneered the use of helicopters in counter-insurgency to provide tactical mobility to troops in difficult terrain.¹⁵²

After Indo-China and Korea, the next major post-Second World War airborne operation took place during the Suez crisis in 1956.¹⁵³ In an attempt to reverse the nationalisation of the Suez Canal by Egypt, a combined airborne and amphibious assault was launched on the canal by Britain and France. Three battalions of paratroopers were dropped onto heavily defended objectives, and in the Sinai desert the Israelis dropped another battalion to seize the Mitla Pass. Although international condemnation and political pressure forced the British and French to carry out an ignominious withdrawal, the parachute drops were all singularly successful against considerable resistance. The operation also included one of the first conventional opposed helicopter assaults in history; certainly the first of battalion size and the first to be launched from the sea.¹⁵⁴ Politically, the assault on Suez was a debacle. But from a military point of view it illustrated the transition from the cumbersome Second World War employment by the Allies of huge formations of airborne troops to a more clinical look at positioning a smaller force at the crucial point – the *schwerpunkt* – and the adoption of battlefield mobility by means of helicopters.

After Suez there were many more examples of vertical envelopment around the world. Some of these have been used as examples to illustrate the conceptual aspects of vertical envelopment discussed in Chapter 2. However, as the initiation of a viable airborne capability by South Africa will be seen to have had its origin about the time of the Suez operation and therefore forms a part of the continuing airborne story, further discussion in this thesis will be restricted to those operations and campaigns that directly influenced the South African development. This applies particularly to the war in Algeria and the use by the French of helicopters in that conflict as well as the wars in Rhodesia and the Portuguese

151. P. Warner, *The Special Air Service* (London, William Kimber, 1971), p. 205; T. Geraghty, *Who Dares Wins: The Story of the SAS, 1950–1980* (Glasgow, Fontana/Collins, 1980), pp. 31–33.

152. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, pp. 298 and 323–324; H. James and D. Sheil-Small, *The Undeclared War: The Story of the Indonesian Confrontation, 1962–1966* (London, Leo Cooper, 1971), pp. 86–91; W.J. Boyne, *How the Helicopter Changed Modern Warfare* (Gretna, Louisiana, Pelican, 2011), p. 68.

153. H.P. Willmott, “The Suez Fiasco”, in R. Thompson (ed.), *War in Peace* (London, Orbis, 1981), pp. 90–100; M. Orr, “The Israeli Attack on Sinai”, in Thompson (ed.), *War in Peace*, pp. 101–107; Hickey, *Out of the Sky*, pp. 188–191; Norton, *The Red Devils*, pp. 159–168; S. Cavanagh, *Airborne to Suez* (London, William Kimber, 1965); I. Westwell, “Death on the Pass”, *The Elite*, 2, 14 (undated), pp. 276–280; G. Ferguson, “The Paras Go In”, *The Elite*, 5, 52 (undated) pp. 1020–1027; W. Fowler, “The Suez Crisis”, in De Ste Croix, (ed), *Airborne Operations*, pp. 179–185; Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, pp. 305–311; Weeks, *Assault from the Sky*, pp. 139–146.

154. Hickey, *Out of the Sky*, pp. 202–205.

territories in Africa. The French experience in Algeria, as will be seen, had a profound effect on South African counter-insurgency thinking, more especially in regard to the use of helicopters.

3.6. DEDUCTIONS

Airborne operations moved, from a tentative, unproved idea between the two World Wars to a revolutionary new form of manoeuvre during the Second World War. Although early military parachuting in South Africa only took the form of enabling pilots to escape from disabled aircraft, the outbreak of the Second World War brought about some innovative airborne thinking in the UDF, far ahead of any other Allied nation. There can be no doubt that South Africa initially envisioned the application of the airborne concept as a strategic capability. The planning and rehearsal of the operation in 1940 to seize the airfield at Lourenço Marques by means of an air-landed *coup de main* showed clear strategic thinking. In direct contradiction to this ambitious strategic airborne thinking, however, the scaling down of ambitions to establish a far smaller force, culminating in the failed efforts to create a parachute company, appear to have had purely tactical motives. Those South Africans who served in Airborne Forces or Special Forces during the Second World War participated in three large-scale airborne operations or in numerous small-team insertions behind enemy lines. The small-team operations are of peripheral interest to this thesis, but the three larger actions are of considerable significance and provided the participants with first-hand experience of vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre.

Although many mistakes were made in the development of the transport of troops by air to battle, a doctrine emerged from the crucible of conflict during the Second World War; the means of delivering troops and equipment by air were refined; and the post-war years saw airborne operations taking place with smaller forces in an increasingly complex political and military environment. From this there crystallised a realisation of the strategic potential of airborne forces being used like a rapier thrust at a critical point rather than employing the bludgeon of heavier, slower and more unwieldy ground forces with their potential to leave a footprint of indiscriminate destruction.

Airborne operations on a much reduced scale after the Second World War showed that in small wars and insurgencies the importance of airborne forces as a part of any ground operation has remained relevant. This is particularly so where the element of surprise can be achieved by means of a parachute assault, or where helicopters can provide

a high level of tactical mobility. The three forms of airborne operations (helicopter, air landed and parachute) have, during the post-Second World War years, been used to carry out effective support to ground forces as well as to conduct independent airborne operations, both for belligerent and humanitarian reasons.

CHAPTER 4

CRUCIAL DECISIONS: SOUTH AFRICA'S ACQUISITION OF HELICOPTERS AND THE TRAINING OF THE FIRST PARATROOPERS

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter briefly sketches the situation that prevailed in South Africa in the decade after the National Party came to power in 1948 before dealing with the gradual realisation by the South African military authorities, in the light of the changing face of war, that there was a need for an airborne capability. It then examines the first tentative efforts to achieve a degree of air mobility, the influence of the war in Algeria on South African military thinking and the decisions to acquire helicopters and to train paratroopers. In view of this, the envisaged concept of how such a capability would be employed is considered, reflecting the ambiguity of the General Staff regarding its strategic or tactical potential. This hazy thinking on the conceptual and doctrinal level was, as will be seen throughout this thesis, to impact negatively on the South African airborne forces during the Thirty Year War and the same trend continued into the period of democratisation. This contrasted markedly with the almost simultaneous establishment and employment of airborne forces in Africa by the Portuguese and the Rhodesians; and from both of these the South African Defence Force ultimately learnt a great deal about vertical envelopment in a counter-insurgency campaign.

Finally, the chapter discusses the selection and training as paratroopers of those who were destined to become the backbone of the country's first truly airborne unit. This emphasises how the focus was on acquiring a technical capability, with little or no regard for the doctrinal, organisational and command, and control issues required to guide and define the employment of that capability. An attempt is made in the narrative to integrate the often-disparate links between military thinking, political agendas and technology during this formative period in the history of the South African airborne forces.

4.2. THE POST-SECOND WORLD WAR ERA: SOUTH AFRICA IN THE YEARS PRECEDING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN AIRBORNE CAPABILITY

As in the rest of the world, there was a downscaling of military forces in South Africa after the cessation of hostilities in 1945. In the fractured society that was South Africa, the years following the Second World War were a time of social upheaval, adjustment, reintegration,

disillusionment and political tension. The demobilisation process after the war did not go smoothly and caused much resentment.¹ Those whites who had opposed participation in the war (most of them Afrikaners) still harboured deep feelings of resentment towards the Union Defence Force and all that it represented. Economic stringencies, the influx of rural blacks to the cities, labour unrest, a lack of clear policy, the immigration scheme to import skilled labour, a changing demography and the ever-present issue of race, all contributed to the National Party election victory in 1948.² During the decade following the election, the new government systematically legislated its policy of apartheid in an effort to secure and entrench white dominance in South Africa.

It was a time of extreme tension between the high command of the UDF and the new government, represented by the new Minister of Defence, Advocate F.C. Erasmus. He had scant respect for anyone's war record, understandably did not trust his top generals, and felt the situation was untenable.³ One of his first actions was to abolish the post of Deputy Chief of the General Staff and to banish its occupant, Major General Evered Poole to Germany in the comparatively low-status post as head of the South African Mission to Berlin, after which he was permanently kept out of the country in ambassadorial posts. Poole was an exceptional soldier with an outstanding wartime record, broad international military experience and close ties to the wartime Allies; he was also in line to take over as Chief of the General Staff from the retiring General Sir Pierre van Ryneveld.⁴

His initial attempts to replace Van Ryneveld with a National Party supporter in the form of General Len Beyers, floundered because Beyers, a highly professional officer, would brook no political interference in the running of the UDF.⁵ But in the end, Erasmus appointed someone more malleable and embarked on a purge of those within the Defence Force who opposed his efforts to Afrikanerise the establishment. Frankel intimates that the experiences of individuals who were dismissed are perhaps over-dramatised and exaggerated and that what happened to the UDF is not readily comparable to a purge of

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1. SANDF Archives (hereafter DOD), Gp AG (2), Box 80 "The Operation of the UDF Demobilisation Scheme", 6 August 1945; SA National Museum of Military History, *Demobilisation and Reconstruction*, File B34 (42).
 2. M. Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid, South Africa, 1910–1984* (Aldershot, Gower/M.T. Smith, 1985), p. 278; K.J. Gibbs, "Demobilisation after World War II: The Process and Politics of Reinstating the Union Defence Force Volunteers into Civilian Life, 1943–1948" (History Hons essay, UNISA, 1990), p. 47.
 3. DOD, KG Group, KG/AOH/1/2, Verdedigingsargief, Correspondence, Part 1, Encl. 101; MV Botha Group, Box 86, MV62, Directorate of Military Intelligence Service, Encl. 4, 22 August 1948, and Encl. 13 9 August 1948. See also *Hansard*, 16 March 1943, col. 3496, and 17 September 1948, cols 2699–2705.
 4. DOD, DC, Box 3428, File DC 2426/1, "Military Mission to Germany", General, Part 2. See also G.E. Brink, "Tribute to late Maj Gen Evered Poole", *Military History Journal*, 1, 4 (June 1969).
 5. DOD, MVEF, Box 127, File MV109/1, "Generaal Len Beyers".

military ranks and institutions.⁶ This, however, is the opinion of one with no working knowledge or experience of the military, and who therefore would not fully appreciate the disruption and undermining of capability that such actions were destined to have on a defence force.

Erasmus went on to change the uniforms, ranks, insignia, medals and decorations and names of some units as part of his campaign to remove all British traces from the military and to change its innate culture. This naturally caused resentment in many quarters, an encouragement of factionalism, the erosion of morale and a loss of expertise as competent officers left the UDF to join the British or Rhodesian forces or enter civilian life.⁷

The new government did acquire new aircraft, tanks and ships; it took a strong anti-communist stance by participating in the Berlin Airlift; the Korean War with one squadron of the SAAF; the short-lived Middle East Defence Organisation (MEDO) and negotiating the Simonstown Agreement in 1955. Nevertheless, the UDF experienced a sharp decline in operational effectiveness under the tenure of Erasmus as defence minister. This elicited disparaging comment from countries such as the USA and Britain.⁸ Van der Waag refers to the “dearth of expertise at Defence Headquarters, ensuring an incoherent defence policy for much of the 1950s”.⁹

Erasmus’s tenure as minister also saw the introduction of regular conscription, the first since the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910. Until then, the UDF had been maintained largely through volunteers, who underwent 30 days of military training and then attended annual camps of 21 days for three years.¹⁰ But Erasmus, in the face of considerable opposition from the prime minister and the rest of the cabinet, eventually managed to get limited conscription of less than 50 per cent of white males introduced on a

6. P.H. Frankel, *Pretoria’s Praetorians: Civil-Military Relations in South Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 18–19.

7. R.S. Boulter, “Afrikaner Nationalism in Action: F.C. Erasmus and South Africa’s Defence Forces, 1948–1959”, *Nations and Nationalism*, 6, Part 3 (July 2000), pp. 53–80; B. Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich* (Belville, Mayibuye Books, 1986), Chapter 8; L. Jooste, “Die Politieke Koerswending van 1948 Besorg ‘n Nuwe Identiteit aan die Unieverdedigingsmag”, *Militaria*, 26, 2 (1996), pp. 114–116; C. Louw, “Profiel van ‘n Vegsoldaat”, *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, December 1992/January 1993, p. 12; UK Public Record Office, London (hereafter PRO), DO 38/7529, Letter, Bass to Stanley, 20 October 1960; G.J. Jacobs, *Beckoning Horizons: An Autobiographical View of our Times* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1985).

8. I. van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball, 2015), pp. 227–232; Boulter, “F.C. Erasmus”, pp. 76–80 and 83; Stockton, B., *A Navy for Three Oceans: Celebrating 75 Years of the South African Navy* (Cape Town, BP Southern Africa, 1997), p. 11; Central Files of the US State Dept, 848A.00/0458 and 0754, 745A.00(W)/0952, 0052,0091 and 0475; PRO, DO 35/2368 and 38/7529, ADM 116/6049.

9. Van der Waag, *A Military History*, p. 223.

10. Section 64 of the Defence Act, No.13, 1912; N.D. Orpen, *Price Alfred’s Guard, 1856-1966* (Cape Town, Books of Africa, 1967), p.289.

system of random selection known as balloting (similar to the draft used in the United States during the Vietnam War era). The initial period of training was increased to 90 days in 1954 (the year in which conscription was first introduced varies in different sources between 1952 and 1953).¹¹ This is the system and the period of training that remained in place until 1962.

The passing of the new Defence Act (Act No. 44 of 1957), together with several subsequent amendments, empowered the government to give impetus to what became an escalating programme of militarisation. That South Africa's defence organisation and its legal framework had become anachronistic and needed overhauling is beyond doubt. Since the passing of the South African Defence Act of 1912, two world wars had taken place, the British Empire had disappeared, South Africa had become a self-governing country, effectively independent in terms of the Balfour Declaration of 1926 and the 1931 Statute of Westminster, and importantly, the nuclear age with its Cold War tensions had dawned. The Defence Amendment Act of 1922 was also outdated. In terms of the new Act, passed at the instigation of Erasmus, the UDF was renamed the South African Defence Force (SADF), the disparate elements of the military were brought together under a single commander known as the Commandant General; a new Military Disciplinary Code (MDC) was introduced; and provision was made for the military training of aliens resident in South Africa.¹²

These developments within the South African military were taking place at a time of great upheaval in South Africa and in Africa as a whole. In the post-Second World War era of the 1950s, colonialism had become a dirty word. The retreat of the European powers from their colonies soon became a stampede and the swelling tide of black nationalism in Africa served as fuel for the seething dissatisfaction among the subjugated people throughout the continent. White minority governments to the south were particularly vulnerable. Incidents of black resistance to the imposition of apartheid legislation, such as the Defiance Campaign of 1952,¹³ boycotts, stayaways and major strikes, in turn fuelled the fears of whites.¹⁴ In the words of Ben Turok, "The pressures to the north are bearing down toward the south, confirming the overwhelming view among white South Africans that they are firmly trapped

11. DOD, MVEF Gp, Box 6, MV8/1, "Aktiewe Burgermag: Agemeen", Vol. 2, Letter Adjutant General to Chief of General Staff, 27 Sept. 1951; and Letter F.C. Erasmus to D.F. Malan, 16 October 1951; L. Jooste, "F.C. Erasmus as Minister van Verdediging, 1948–1959" (MA dissertation, University of South Africa, 1995), p. 123; Van der Waag, *A Military History*, p. 237; Orpen, *Prince Alfred's Guard*, p. 293; R.J. Bouch (ed.), *Infantry in South Africa, 1652–1976* (Pretoria, Documentation Service SADF, 1977), p. 201.

12. Defence Act No. 44 of 1957, Ch 1, Sect 3(1)(a) and (b).

13. G.H.L. le May, *Black and White in South Africa: The Politics of Survival* (London, Book Service, 1971), p. 86.

14. W. Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 159.

in a geographic laager from which there is no escape.”¹⁵ The belligerence of the Asian-African bloc towards South Africa in the forum provided by the United Nations¹⁶ drove whites even further into their laager.

This growing unease among whites in South Africa and its immediate neighbours meant that the white-ruled states began to look tentatively towards one another for support in the region. Defence contacts were already taking place by 1957. Early in that year a Portuguese representative visited the SAAF for successful negotiations for a radio link-up between Mozambique and the Union. The Air Officer Commanding the Royal Rhodesian Air Force also visited the Union for talks on air defence at Air Force HQ in Pretoria.¹⁷ At a special meeting of the UDF General Staff Committee on 3 May 1957 the Commandant General, H.B. Klopper, contended that in future the Union would not be able to rely on Britain and the United States for material military support.¹⁸

In the meantime, at what was called a Congress of the People at Kliptown near Johannesburg in 1955, various black movements (and other left-oriented organisations), drawn together by the increasing oppression of the National Party government, met to agree on a Freedom Charter. It committed the Congress movement, of which the ANC took the leading role, to a non-racial democracy; equal opportunities for all the people of South Africa; and some redistribution of land and wealth.¹⁹ This was anathema to the government and in a sense was the seal upon the conflict that was to follow.

Towards the end of 1957 there was a crucial shift in South African defence policy. The government now accepted the change in the world’s *status quo* and the international opposition to what they were trying to implement. Their response was to dig in their heels and oppose the threat rather than adapt to neutralise it. The cabinet of J.G. Strijdom, the new prime minister of South Africa, resolved that the country “should concentrate more on internal security and less on the preparation of a task force for use outside South Africa”.²⁰

The Defence Force, it seems, was anticipating this and had already appreciated that the future threat would come from guerrilla forces. The lessons learnt from both the British

15. B. Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle* (Johannesburg, Jacana Media, 2010), p. 101.

16. T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History* (London, Macmillan, 1992), pp. 313–314.

17. DOD, MVEF Gp, Box 150, Confidential File MV205, “Annual Report: UDF 1957”, 17 April 1958.

18. DOD, MVEF Gp, Box 178, Minister of Defence’s Papers, “Minutes of the General Staff Committee Special Conference”, 3 May 1957.

19. Le May, *Black and White in South Africa*, p. 100; Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa*, p. 149.

20. DOD, MVEF Gp, MV18/10, Minister of Defence’s Papers, Letter, Steyn to De Villiers, 12 December 1957.

successes against communist insurgents in Malaya²¹ and the French defeat in Indo-China²² were not lost on them. In addition, military experts around the world were studying the ongoing war that the French were waging in Algeria at the time.²³ By 1957 the UDF had already issued a training publication entitled *Internal Security Instructions* and a second training manual had been prepared on *Anti-Guerrilla Operations*. By then internal security was included in all training and had become a qualifying subject on all officer promotion courses. In that year, the first of several counter-guerrilla field exercises in South Africa was carried out in the Oudtshoorn area, during which troops in the field were sustained by dropping supplies by parachute for the first time within the UDF.²⁴

In June 1958, Erasmus announced a major reorganisation of the Defence Force. Although then still in the planning stages and essentially envisaging a smaller, more streamlined force, Erasmus spoke of a greater striking power.²⁵ On the eve of his departure from the Ministry of Defence 18 months later, he finally made the details of this reorganisation known, giving the primary role of the Army and Air Force as “conventional warfare against lightly armed forces of aggression apart from its internal security task”. “Fast, lightly armed security forces” would combat subversive elements.²⁶ It was in the light of these developments that the decision was taken to establish a parachute battalion.

4.3. ABSENCE OF AIRBORNE: REALISATION OF A NEED

In May 1957, the Inspector General of the UDF, Major General Stephen Melville, made mention during a special conference of the General Staff Committee of the need to create “a hard-hitting and highly mobile force, possibly also air-transportable”.²⁷ This comment could be regarded as South Africa’s first tentative step towards creating a real airborne unit.

At the time, the SA Army was devoting considerable energy to the study of guerrilla warfare, including available literature on the subject²⁸ and the approach of the US Army to

21. On the Malayan Emergency of 1948–1960, see N. Barber, *The War of the Running Dogs: How Malaya Defeated the Communist Guerrillas, 1948–1960* (London, Collins, 1971); and R. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1972).

22. P. Gaujac, *Histoire de Parachutistes Français* (Paris, Société de Production Littéraire, 1975); J. Roy, *The Battle of Dienbienphu* (New York, Harper & Row, 1965); and B.B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1967).

23. See A. Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954–1962* (Taipei, Imperial Books and Records, 1977).

24. DOD, MVEF Gp, Box No. 150, Confidential File MV205, “Annual Report: UDF 1957”, 17 April 1958.

25. *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 June 1958.

26. DOD, MVEF Gp, Minister of Defence’s Papers, File MV 13/3, Vol. 2, “Press Statement by F.C. Erasmus, Regarding the Reorganisation of the South African Defence Force”, 2 December 1959.

27. DOD, MVEF Gp, Box 178, “Minutes of the General Staff Committee Special Conference”, 3 May 1957.

28. Including works such as C.A. Dixon and O. Heilbrunn, *Communist Guerilla Warfare* (New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1954); and F.O. Miksche, *Secret Forces* (London, Faber & Faber, 1950).

dealing with guerrilla actions in the future.²⁹ In view of the tendency during post-Second World War conflicts, in both conventional and guerrilla wars, to resort increasingly to air-mobility, it was inevitable that this thinking would take root in South Africa. Officers in the SA military also studied the British experience in Malaya and later in Borneo, and this would have brought home to them the importance of helicopters in conducting counter-insurgency operations. But it was the French who caught the attention of the South Africans with regard to the employment of the vertical envelopment concept. Besides their many parachute operations in Indo-China and later in Algeria, they did pioneering work in the tactical employment of helicopters.³⁰ The Algerian conflict was in fact, according to the authoritative work by Colonel Walter J. Boyne, the first true helicopter war.³¹ The employment of helicopters in the Algerian War had a direct influence on the application of these aircraft in the airborne tactics used during the Thirty Year War. According to McCuen, an analyst of counter-revolutionary war who was highly regarded in the SADF, the French achieved significant tactical success in Algeria through “highly mobile operations supported for the first time by the wide use of transport and weapons helicopters”.³²

As early as 1948, the SAAF had purchased the first of three Sikorsky S-51 helicopters from the USA for insecticide spraying in the tsetse fly elimination campaign in Natal and Zululand.³³ But by 1954 only one remained in flying condition and it was transferred to Langebaanweg to supplement the air-sea rescue launches operating from Saldanha. Three of the larger Sikorsky S-55C helicopters were delivered from 1957, initially also for air-sea rescue duties.³⁴ These were used during one of the counter-guerrilla exercise referred to earlier, held in the Oudtshoorn area.³⁵ Although this indicated an awareness of their tactical value, as yet, however, the South African military had no doctrine for their employment in a tactical role. See Appendix 21 for photographs of both Sikorsky helicopter types.

Equally, there was no experience of or doctrine for the deployment of troops by parachute, although internationally it was a well known and proven technique during the

29. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 352, Secret File KG/GPW/15, Vol. 1, “Guerrilla Warfare”, Encl. 1, Letter Army Chief of Staff to CG, UDF, “Teen-Guerrilla Oorlogvoering”, 29 June 1957 and Encl. 2, Letter Inspector General, UDF to Commandant-General, UDF, “Guerrilla Warfare”, 24 September 1957.

30. Gaujac (ed.), *Histoire des Parachutistes Français, Volumes 1 and 2*.

31. W.J. Boyne, *How the Helicopter Changed Modern Warfare* (Gretna, Louisiana, Pelican, 2011), pp. 69–76.

32. J. J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: The Strategy of Counter-Insurgency* (Harrisburg, Stackpole Books, 1966), pp. 317–318.

33. D. Becker, *75 Years on Wings of Eagles: South African Military Aviation History* (Pretoria, South African Air Force, 1995), p. 91.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

35. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box No. 396, File KG/KV/20 Vol. 1, “Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters”, Encl. 4, Letter DGAF/42/48/AIR, Air Chief of Staff to Commandant General, 28 April 1958.

1950s, thanks to its widespread use during the Second World War and thereafter. The South African General Staff would most certainly have been conscious of this shortcoming in the SADF order of battle. An indication of this was the interaction of Commandant General H.B. Klopper with a civilian parachutist in 1958. Terence Daly was a member of a small but very enthusiastic group of civilian parachutists in South Africa, trying hard to promote their sport. After meeting with the Minister of Defence and the Commandant General during an air show at which he had carried out his 50th parachute jump, Daly and Klopper engaged in discussions and correspondence regarding the possible introduction of a military parachute capability for the SADF.³⁶

At the General Staff Conference of 4 May 1958 the whole matter of paratroops for the South African military was discussed. Although economic constraints prevented any definite action being taken, a decision was recorded to budget for the introduction of paratroopers for the future.³⁷ Less than a month later, Klopper stated that due to economic considerations the matter of paratroopers would not at that stage be pursued.³⁸

4.4. THE MOBILE WATCH AND LIGHT MOBILITY

At the same time, in line with the Army's concerns about countering a future guerrilla threat, there was a change in thinking, moving away from the concept of conventional operations, similar to those conducted during the Second World War. Instead, the approach was increasingly one of preparing to carry out what were termed internal security (IS) operations (known as *binnelandse beveiliging*, or *BB* in Afrikaans). In subsequent years the SADF changed the name to one that was more universally used in international military circles, namely counter-insurgency operations, abbreviated as COINOPS (in Afrikaans they became *teeninsurgensie operasies*, or *TEINOPS*).

To this end a decision was made in 1957 that a Permanent Force mobile unit should be established so that an immediately available force would be able to deploy in the event of unrest or disturbances breaking out in the country. Until then, there was no standing Army combat unit available in South Africa and the part-time, largely volunteer Citizen Force had to be called up and mobilised when there was a requirement for troops. This had

36. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 306, Confidential File KG/GPT/3/1/6, "Parachute Training", Encl. 1, 20 Jan. 1958 and Encl. 2, 20 Jan. 1958; Box 209, KG/GM/5/3, Vol. 1, Secret Minutes of General Staff Conference, No 2/58 held at DHQ on 17, 18 and 19 February 1958.

37. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 306, Confidential File KG/GPT/3/1/6, "Parachute Training", Encl. 3, 4 May 1958.

38. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 209, KG/GM/5/3, Vol 1, "Notule van Generale Stafvergadering No 3/58 Gehou te VHK", 22, 23 and 24 May 1958.

proved to be time-consuming and disruptive of the civilian sector and was no longer tenable. Erasmus, however, envisaged that the new unit, known as the Mobile Watch, would also undertake assistance to other state departments.³⁹

The recommendation was to recruit white youths with a low educational qualification, train them as artisans and improve their education. These youths had to also be trained in all the military musterings of infantry, armoured car crews and combat engineers. The intention was to train them for subsequent employment in the civilian sector, and more specifically, in other government departments.⁴⁰ All this was in line with Erasmus's avowed intention of bringing the Defence Force closer to the people and making it more acceptable to the Afrikaners specifically.⁴¹ His purpose was political, ideological and social; he saw the proposed unit as a means of uplifting the Afrikaner; the importance of the military role of the unit appeared to be lost on him. For the military minds on the General Staff, however, this would resolve a severe shortcoming in the composition of the extremely weak Defence Force of the time. It seems they accepted the trade-off: by agreeing to the minister's dual role foible, they could get the unit they saw as a military necessity.

In the event, the Mobile Watch was divided into two, and later three units, each situated at a different location, and they were established between 1958 and 1960. They were given the appellations 1, 2 and 3 Mobile Watch. A fourth unit, 4 Mobile Watch was planned, but never came into being. Of the three units, 2 Mobile Watch eventually became the predecessor of the country's first parachute unit, and it was established at Tempe, the military base just outside Bloemfontein, on 1 April 1959.⁴² At the time of its founding, however, there was no thought yet of converting it to a parachute role.

The Mobile Watches were small units, with an ultimately approved strength of between 100 and 200 officers and other ranks but usually consisting of somewhat less than that and resembling a field engineer squadron in their organisation.⁴³ They were Army units consisting only of Permanent Force (regular) troops.⁴⁴ Although they wore the cap badge of the South African Engineer Corps, this did not reflect their primary role. They were intended

39. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, KG/GPO/3/2/24, "Organisasie: 1 Mobiele Wag", Encl. 3, 29 August 1957, Appendix B and Copy No. 17, Minutes, "Inter-Departementele Vergadering VHK, Pretoria", 30 August 1957.

40. Ibid., Encl 4, Minutes, "Spesiale Generale Staf Vergadering, VHK, Pretoria", 29 August 1957.

41. See K.W. Grundy, *The Militarization of South African Politics* (London, Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 8; also J. Rauch, "War and Resistance", in G. Cawthra, G. Kraak and G. O'Sullivan (eds), *War and Resistance: Southern African Reports* (London, Macmillan, 1994).

42. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, File No KG/GPO/3/2/24/1, Encl. 9 and 11, respectively 14 March 1959 and 23 March 1959; "Mobile Force will be stationed at Tempe", *The Friend*, 28 April 1959..

43. DOD, AG Gp, Box No. 290, File AG9 (AG 213/5/43), "SAPF Strength: 2 Mobile Watch".

44. DOD, C Army Gp, File No. G/PLANS/1/3/1 for 1957.

to be internal security units: a light force that could be rapidly transported by air to any trouble spot in the country to serve as a stopgap fire brigade while the Citizen Force and Commandos were being mobilised.⁴⁵ This essentially required them to be an infantry force. But the work that it was envisaged they would do for other state departments required engineering skills, hence their allocation to the Engineer Corps. This non-military assistance to other government departments, known as land service (*landsdiens*) included the building of dams, aid in drought-stricken areas and the provision of trained recruits for other departments.⁴⁶ Initially, they were used extensively in this role.⁴⁷

It is not unusual for military forces to be used to render humanitarian assistance to their countrymen, but the Mobile Watches were used almost exclusively to ease the lot of white communities in distress. The plight of other communities, the majority of the country's population, was apparently not considered as warranting this sort of assistance. Erasmus's efforts to bring the SADF closer to the *volk* (the Afrikaans term for their own people and signifying Afrikaner nationalism) were in fact driving a widening wedge between the military establishment and the black majority in the country.

The first attempt at an airborne exercise by 1 Mobile Watch was held to coincide with the opening of parliament in January 1959 and was accompanied by considerable fanfare. "In order to give the Mobile Watch training in movement by air, as well as making it more air-minded" members of the unit were transported to Cape Town in a newly acquired Vickers Viscount aircraft of the SAAF.⁴⁸ The Viscount was not a tactical military aircraft, but merely a small airliner used for flying government ministers and officials around.⁴⁹ It could only accommodate 20 passengers in its VIP configuration,⁵⁰ so the press release quoted above was no more than propaganda to give the new unit publicity. It was merely a logistic transportation of a small number of soldiers and had no tactical value. Those who flew to Cape Town were met, inspected and addressed by the Commandant General and the press were invited to attend. After being joined by the rest of the unit (who had not travelled by air), participating in both street-lining for the opening of parliament and parades, two days were spent in the mountains around the Steenbras Dam on manoeuvres. Here, they used

45. D.F.S. Fourie, "Paratroops 'Answer to Terrorism'", *Pretoria News*, 16 April 1960.

46. DOD, AG Gp, Box No 290, File AG9 (AG 213/5/43), "SAPF Strength: 2 Mobile Watch".

47. "Mobile Watch to Repair Natal Bridges", *Sunday Times*, May 1959; "South Coast Bridge Dismantled", *Daily News*, 8 December 1959; "2nd Mobile Watch Gets its First Job", *The Friend*, 31 December 1959; "Soldiers Bear Heat and Hardship in Kalahari", *Sunday Times*, 13 December 1959.

48. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, File KG/GPO/3/2/24, "Organisasie: 1 Mobeiele Wag", Encl. 41a, Press release.

49. Potgieter and Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force* (Cape Town, Struik, 1981), p. 152.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

the SAAF's piston-engined Sikorsky helicopters during their exercise.⁵¹ This, at least, appeared to be a genuine effort at practising air mobility and is the second recorded occasion on which helicopters were utilised during a military exercise.

At the same time, resistance to white oppression throughout southern Africa was increasing. Early in 1959, there had been outbreaks of violence in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (also known as the Central African Federation) and isolated government outposts had been cut off by sabotaged bridges and culverts, road blocks and airfields littered with petrol drums, rocks and tree stumps. The rainy season had further delayed soldiers making use of wheeled transport. The military detachment that was surrounded at the aerodrome of Fort Hill (subsequently known as Chitipa) in the far north of Nyasaland (now Malawi) was forced to wait for up to two weeks before they could be relieved.⁵² Distances were vast and mobility over land was severely hampered. The current of cold air that blew south with the news of these disturbances heightened concerns in the South African military. Based on these disturbances, by 23 April 1959 the SA Army had laid down standby times of between six and 48 hours for the Mobile Watch to be deployed on active service, depending on the type of military task it would be called upon to perform.⁵³

Already, it was proving impossible for the Mobile Watch to conform to the over-ambitious plans devised by Erasmus. Much of the envisaged vocational training could not be done because of the heavy commitment of military training.⁵⁴ By August 1959 the military training was already almost two months behind schedule.⁵⁵ Even with the establishment of the second Mobile Watch that year, it proved difficult to rotate personnel so that leave could be taken and a proper training programme could be followed.⁵⁶ It was becoming crucial to re-assess the land service commitment of the Mobile Watch. But by then Erasmus had suffered a heart attack and his deteriorating health brought to an end his long tenure as defence minister – and with it, the demise of his political ambitions for the Mobile Watches.

4.5. HELICOPTERS AND THE INFLUENCE ON SOUTH AFRICA OF THE WAR IN ALGERIA

While the Mobile Watches were metamorphosing from a political tool to operational military units, the perceived threat was producing other developments that would impact

51. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, KG/GPO/3/2/24, "Organisasie: 1 Mobiele Wag", Encls 45, (2 January 1959), 53 (12 January 1959), 55 (15 January 19 59), 58 (19 January 1959) and 59 (23 January 1959).

52. Fourie, "Paratroops 'Answer to Terrorism'".

53. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box No. 238, File KG/GPO/3/2/24, "Organisasie: 1 Mobiele Wag", Encl. 64, 23 April 1959.

54. Ibid. Encl. 36, 14 October 1958, and Encl. 37, 28 October 1958.

55. Ibid., Encl. 70, 15 August 1959.

56. Ibid., Encl. 71, 21 October 1959.

on the establishment of an airborne capability in South Africa. In line with Melville's thinking of emphasising light mobility, as early as 28 October 1957 two modern turbine powered helicopters, the light two-seater Djinn and the bigger, five-seater Alouette II, had been demonstrated to the SAAF at Youngsfield in the Cape. However, a report was cautious in its assessment of the two French aircraft. While the turbine engines were admired, the technical aspects of needing metric tools, the different operating systems and the very limited payloads caused considerable concern.⁵⁷ At the time it seems they were being considered primarily as trainers for the bigger Sikorsky helicopters and for air-sea rescue duties, but they were not deemed suitable for either role. The Air Force was not yet seeing helicopters as troop transporters and the Army was still in the early stages of adapting its thinking to the concept of air mobility on the battlefield.

However, in April the following year the Army Chief of Staff, Major General P.H. Grobbelaar, DSO, brought the matter to the attention of the General Staff, stating that the time had come for the SA Army to commence with training in the use of helicopters in order to improve its battle efficiency. He pointed out that for local defence problems the helicopter would be invaluable, as had been strikingly shown by the French in Algeria. His staff had done a detailed analysis of American, British and French organisations and practices, as well as their intended future development of the capability, showing only the French in Algeria as placing the primary emphasis on troop transportation by helicopters and the arming of helicopters. The Army, basing its argument on the practice in the USA, UK and France, laid claim to have helicopters included in its organisation. The Air Force opposed this with convincing arguments, and it was a debate that the Air Force ultimately won. But at a General Staff Conference held in May 1958 it was decided that with an eye to current budget cuts, the whole matter would be deferred.⁵⁸

However, as has been shown, the following year saw a renewed emphasis on operational matters in the thinking of South Africa's military. The acquisition of modern helicopters was reassessed,⁵⁹ and a request for the acquisition of modern turbine-engined

57. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 396, File KG/KV/20, Vol. 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Encl. 1, H. Jaboulay to Cmdt Gen H.B. Klopper, 9 Dec. 1957; and DC Gp 1, Box 78, DC 1785/443, "Visit to France and Algeria by Officers of SADF and SAP", Encl. 1d, Report, "Alouette II" and "Djinn" Helicopters, 9 Nov. 1957.

58. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 396, KG/KV/20, Vol 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Encls 2 and 3, respectively 2 and 15 April 1957; Encl. 4, Letter DGAF/42/48/AIR, 28 April 1958, Air Chief of Staff to Comm-Gen; Encl. 8, "Extract from Minutes: GS Conference No. 3/58 held on 22, 23 and 24 May 1958.

59. DOD, DC (Secretary for Defence), Gp 1, Box 78, DC 17850/443, "Visit to France and Algeria by Officers of SADF and SAP", Ref. DC 7/59/19, Encl. 1a, H. Jaboulay to Col C.H. Hartzenberg, SAAF HQ, 6 March 1959 and Encl. 1c, Chief Commandant Maritime Group to Commandant General, 5 March 1959.

rotary-wing aircraft was submitted to the Minister of Defence and the Commandant General by the Air Force.⁶⁰ The number of 15 aircraft of the same type as the French Alouette (at that stage in the forefront of helicopter technology in the world⁶¹) was mentioned and the matter was raised of the necessity to visit Algeria to see the helicopters being used in operational conditions.⁶²

The South African General Staff were acutely aware of the experiences of the French in both Indo-China and in Algeria, particularly as the Algerian conflict was raging at that time. There were many similarities between the Algerian and South African situations, so the French resort to airborne operations held a particular interest and relevance for the SADF when considering the development of an airborne capacity. The French had the marked advantage of having developed their helicopters and in fact their total airborne capability in the crucible of modern counter-insurgency combat. Based on their experience in Indo-China, the French Armed Forces had honed their parachute operations into a significant counter-insurgency technique. They continued this in Algeria, but had now included the use of helicopters as a means of supplementing their vertical envelopment manoeuvre. The intensity of their airborne operations at the time is significant. Between 1954 and 1959 the French Army had successfully dropped paratroopers in at least 15 major operations in that territory, rapidly engaging and destroying insurgents fighting for their independence from France. The insurgents had occupied airfields and other key installations and the French dropped between 100 and 380 men at a time to carry out counter-attacks, raids, reinforcement of beleaguered forces and the exploitation of ground attacks, sometimes combining parachute and helicopter assaults.⁶³ Over the same period, in the adjoining area of Western Sahara (what was then known as Spanish Sahara), another war against a colonial power was in progress. The French on occasion co-operated closely with the Spaniards in operations against rebel forces attempting to oust the Spanish.⁶⁴ These actions were also of relevance to the SADF because the Spaniards had used paratroopers with great success in that war.⁶⁵ These examples by the French and Spaniards, largely

60. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 396, KG/KV/20 Vol 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Encl. 10, "AANKOOP VAN HELIKOPTERS VIR SA LUGMAG", Ref. DGAF/SSOA/S/501/1/20/Eng (Confidential), 4 and 7 April 1959.

61. Ibid., Encl. 9a, "World Altitude Records for the 'Alouette'", Press release by H. Jaboulay, 20 June 1958.

62. DOD, DC (Secretary for Defence), Gp 1, Box 78, DC 17850/443, "Visit to France and Algeria by Officers of SADF and SAP", Ref. DC 7/59/19, Encl. 1, REPORT ON "ALOUETTE" AND "DJIUN" HELICOPTERS, Ref. No DC17850/443, 10 March 1959.

63. Gaujac (ed.), *Histoire de Parachutistes Français, Volume 2*, pp. 491–492; R.J. Bragg and R. Turner, *Parachute Badges and Insignia of the World* (Poole, Dorset, Blandford Press, 1979), pp. 223–224.

64. J. Besenyő, *Western Sahara* (Budapest, ID Research Ltd., 2009), p. 63.

65. M. Peláez Cortés, *Paracaidistas del Ejército: 50 Años de Historia* (Málaga, Grunoel Ediciones, 2004), p. 45.

unknown in Anglo-Saxon military circles, were evidence of the relevance of the vertical envelopment manoeuvre in counter-insurgency operations in Africa.

The significance of these actions (some of the largest airborne counter-insurgency operations ever carried out in Africa) and the new edge to counter-insurgency provided by the helicopters that the French were utilising so innovatively and successfully in the Algerian conflict, were not lost on the military authorities in Pretoria. There was a growing awareness in South Africa that airborne troops might hold the key to successful counter-insurgency operations. Yet South Africa possessed no airborne capability at all. It is therefore hardly surprising that the eyes of the general officers of the SADF were turning towards France.

In June 1959, three officers, Brigadier J.M. Keevy of the SA Police, Colonel J.H. Robbertze of the SA Army and Colonel J.G. Willers of the SAAF, spent one week in France. They attended the Paris Air Show to gain a comparative idea of the various helicopters that might be available on the international market, met with the French General Staff and then spent eleven days in Algeria to study the French approach to the war in that territory,⁶⁶ The visit was given a low public profile, with no mention that conflict-ridden Algeria had also been on the itinerary.⁶⁷ However, the visit had the enthusiastic approval of the French government,⁶⁸ and given South Africa's subsequent purchase of French aircraft, it seems the French saw this as an opportunity to market their arms to South Africa.

Towards the end of 1959 the visit to Algeria did make the news in the English-language press in South Africa, but only inasmuch as the report was used to ridicule the whole exercise as a total misreading of the situation in South Africa.⁶⁹ An anonymous retired Army brigadier was quoted as saying that the creation of Bantustans provided the only likely springboard for guerrilla actions and claiming that preparations being made in the Defence Force indicated a "state of siege and panic". He was clearly missing the boat. Like so many white South Africans, he appeared to be blind to the growing resistance to the government;

66. DOD, DC, (1), Box 78, DC 17850/443, "Visit to France and Algeria by Officers of SADF and SAP", Ref. DC 7/59/19, Encl. 6, Sect. Defence to Minister, 25 May 1959; Encl. 10, Sect. Defence to Sect. External Affairs, 28 May 1959; Encl. 11, Commissioner SAP to Sect. External Affairs and Sect. Defence, 3 June 1959; Encl. 13, Sect. Defence to Sect. External Affairs, 3 June 1959; Encl. 21, Itinerary, 10 June 1959, File KG/EXT/5/3. Also KG (5), Box 396, Confidential KG/KV/20 Vol 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Encl. 18, Melville to Hiemstra, June 1959.

67. DOD, DC, Gp 1, Box 78, DC 17850/443, "Visit to France and Algeria by Officers of SADF and SAP", Ref. DC 7/59/19, Encl. 19b, Concept Press Release. Also "SA Offisiere na Parys", *Die Burger*, 11 June 1959 and "Leërhoofde gaan Frankryk Besoek", *Transvaler*, 11 June 1959.

68. DOD, DC, Gp 1, Box 78, DC 17850/443, "Visit to France and Algeria by Officers of SADF and SAP", Ref. DC 7/59/19, Enclosure 19a, Letter from French ambassador to Sect. Defence, 9 June 1959, and Encl. 23, Reply from Secretary for Defence, 11 June 1959.

69. "Officers were Sent to Algeria", *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 December 1959.

unrest that was building up towards full-blown armed struggle among certain elements of the oppressed majority. The leaders of the ANC and the PAC were not in the Bantustans, but rather in the urban townships. The Bantustans would become part of the *raison d'être* for the outbreak of insurgency, rather than the springboard from where it was launched. (The notable exception was the Mpondo Revolt in the Transkei territory, dealt with in the next chapter). Within the military establishment, however, there was an acute awareness of a developing threat, wherever it might be launched – hence the growing emphasis in military circles on a new approach towards defence, including the creation of an airborne capability.

The following day the newspaper published a moderating report, claiming that neither Defence Headquarters nor the Security Branch of the police foresaw for one moment the occurrence in South Africa of a situation such as had arisen in Algeria.⁷⁰ But the media remained intrigued by the SADF's interest in the French Army's operations against the National Liberation Front (FLN) in a distant war in that territory.⁷¹

There can be little doubt that this visit profoundly influenced subsequent South African military thinking with regard to revolutionary warfare. This is apparent in an article on the lessons for South Africa to be drawn from Algeria, written in 1962 by Colonel Willers, one of the three officers who went to Algeria.⁷² The article outlines the essence of the counter-insurgency doctrine to be followed by South Africa in subsequent years. South African professional military minds were further imbued with French military doctrine by sending selected army officers on the yearlong French Army Staff Course between 1968 and 1972. Most of these officers later played a prominent role in both staff training and the conduct of operations by the SADF.⁷³ They included Major P.W. van der Westhuizen (later the SADF Chief of Staff Intelligence) and Commandant R. Badenhorst (later the OC Sector 10 during the height of the war in Namibia), both of whom retired as lieutenant generals. Another, Commandant W.J. Wolmarans, returned from France to become the Chief Instructor at the Staff Duties Branch of the SA Army College in 1970.

Furthermore, the writings of André Beaufre, the French general and strategist who had commanded troops in Indo-China, Algeria and during the airborne assault on Suez, came to form a critical part in South Africa's approach to counter-insurgency.⁷⁴ Beaufre is

70. "No 'Algeria' Foreseen Here", *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 December 1959.

71. "SADF Officers' Study of War in Algeria", *The Cape Times*, 19 March 1960.

72. J.G. Willers, "Algerië het 'n Groot Les vir Suid-Afrika", *Die Burger*, 14 June 1962.

73. M. Alexander, *SA Army Staff Training, 1927–1996*, (Pretoria, SANDF, 1997), p. 116.

74. P.E. Louw, *The Rise, Fall and Legacy of Apartheid* (Santa Barbara, Greenwood, 2004), pp. 91–93; Grundy, *Militarization of SA Politics*, p. 118; D-P. Baker and E. Jordaan (eds), *South Africa and Contemporary*

credited with coining the term Total Strategy and its concept, as subsequently adopted by South African apartheid state. Frankel was to write in 1984:

The ideological and strategic spirit of the South African military is particularly and peculiarly Francophile in character and if there is any single figure whose writings have had a formative influence on how the current generation of Defence Force leaders interpret the world in relation to counter-insurgency, it is above all the French general, André Beaufre, whose various works are the basis of virtually every lecture at the Joint Defence College.⁷⁵

4.6. THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND GROWING AIRBORNE AWARENESS

The year 1960 was one of great turmoil and uncertainty in South Africa. It commenced with the “wind of change” speech in Cape Town by British Conservative prime minister, Harold Macmillan which many whites in South Africa considered intimidatory and inflammatory. The murder of nine policemen in the riot at Cato Manor in January heightened tensions among white South Africans, while there was simmering unrest in Sekhukhuneland and the Western Transvaal. In addition, the situation in Pondoland in the Transkei was highly volatile and the Sharpeville massacre in March, fuelled tension and unrest, increasing international condemnation of the government. Nine days later, after stay-at-home campaigns and rioting, a state of emergency was declared, and in April both the ANC and its offshoot, the PAC, were outlawed.⁷⁶ On 9 April, while opening the Rand Easter Show in Johannesburg, the Prime Minister, H.F. Verwoerd, was shot and wounded by a would-be assassin; and in July eleven people were shot dead and 13 wounded by police at Ngquza Hill in the Transkei while attending a meeting.⁷⁷ In October the referendum on the decision whether South Africa would become a republic was held among whites and the drawn-out Treason Trial of ANC activists came to a climax. In addition, the country experienced the traumatic events of the Coalbrook mining disaster, the worst in South Africa’s history, when 438 miners were trapped underground – their bodies were never recovered.⁷⁸ Externally, events in the former Belgian Congo that year with the granting of independence seemed like a portent of things to come: a mutinying military, no government control, the massacre of whites and the impotence of the United Nations to stem the mayhem. When a motion was tabled in the UN General Assembly, condemning South Africa’s racial policies, she alone cast the only

Counterinsurgency: Roots, Practices, Prospects (Claremont, UCT Press, 2010), pp. 89–90; A. Hochschild, *The Mirror at Midnight: A South African Journey* (Geneva: ILL, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007), p. 198.

75. Frankel, *Pretoria’s Praetorians*, p. 46.

76. H. Barrell, *MK: The ANC’s Armed Struggle* (London, Penguin Books, 1990), p. 3. See also N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Randburg, Macdonald Purnell, 1994), p. 226.

77. Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, p. 77.

78. T. Eksteen, *The Statesmen* (Cape Town, Don Nelson, 1978), p. 102.

vote against the motion. Only reluctant British vetoes saved South Africa from a worse fate in the Security Council. African and Asian countries formed a militant and vociferous anti-apartheid bloc at the UN.⁷⁹

Public debate about introducing general conscription was rife in the media, with an outspoken and out of line Combat General Rudolph Hiemstra (Inspector General of the SADF at the time, he later became the Commandant General) directly involved.⁸⁰ This did little to allay white fears.

In 1959, events in the then Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, prompted a young Armoured Corps CF officer in the Pretoria Regiment, Lieutenant Deon Fourie (eventually to rise to the rank of brigadier and in his civilian profession to become Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of South Africa) to write an article that appeared in the *Pretoria News* during April 1960.⁸¹ He argued the case for converting the Mobile Watches into parachute units to provide the SADF with the ability to deal rapidly and effectively with “guerrilla banditry” of the type experienced in Nyasaland. His article appeared in print barely days before the Sharpeville killings.

Soon afterwards, and in the wake of Sharpeville, Fourie, together with two other junior officers (Captain C.F. Vermeulen, a Permanent Force infantry officer, and Lieutenant J.A.N. Groenewald, a CF armour officer, also from Pretoria Regiment) then drew up a memorandum on the establishment of a paratrooper capability within the SADF. It was submitted to the Chief of Army Staff.⁸² Fourie’s thoughts and suggestions were clearly based on careful research and the line of argument he adopted was remarkably prophetic in terms of the conflict that lay ahead for the SADF. Citing the situation and tendencies in various parts of Africa and the world, he went on to outline typical phases of revolutionary war and warned that South Africa needed to prevent any would-be guerrillas from progressing through these phases. It had been found, claimed Fourie, that only small sub-units of highly mobile troops that are able to launch immediate counter-attacks before the guerrillas can

79. G. L’Ange, *The White Africans: From Colonisation to Liberation* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2005), p. 259.

80. R. Warwick, *White South Africa and Defence, 1960-1968: Militarization, Threat Perceptions and Counter Strategies*, PhD thesis, UCT, 2009, pp. 118–124; “Veggeneraal vra: Manne Moet Jaar Lank Opgelei Word”, *Transvaler*, 11 June 1960; “Militêre Opleiding”, *Burger*, 13 June 1960; “Hiemstra Plan: SA het nie Geld of Manne sê Min Fouché”, *Transvaler*, 15 June 1960; “Minister Examines Plan for Full-time Army Training”, *Sunday Times*, 12 June 1960; “Military Plea gets Support”, *Pretoria News*, 14 June 1960; “Army or Police Reserve?”, *Pretoria News*, 13 June 1960; “Minimum-diensplig van Een Jaar Voorgestel deur Weermaghoof”, *Vaderland*, 11 June 1960; “Langer Diensplig, Vra Genl Hiemstra: Slagvaardige Manne Nodig”, *Burger*, 11 June 1960; “SA must Enforce a Year’s Training, Says General”, *Star*, 11 June 1960.

81. Fourie, “Paratroops ‘Answer to Terrorism’”.

82. D.F.S. Fourie, “Memorandum oor die Totstandkoming van Valskermtroepe Binne die SA Weermag”, 1960.

get away, could effectively combat them. He argued that the required level of high mobility for such counter-attacking forces could, under South African conditions, only be achieved by making use of the airspace. The means of doing so lay with either helicopters or paratroopers. While not discounting the value of helicopters, Fourie correctly pointed out that their operational range, speed and capacity are limited. He added that the high costs of acquiring sufficient helicopters and then deploying them over a large area, as well as their vulnerability to small-arms fire limited the use of this option. Paratroopers, on the other hand, had the advantages of economy, speed, tactical employment, easy and inexpensive training and the availability of troops. Whatever arguments might be raised against paratroopers, Fourie stressed, it had to be acknowledged that this capability could be made available in South Africa at a relatively minimal expenditure. Whether the capability was to be used or not, it remained sound military preparedness that would never be wasted. His argument was essentially a strategic one in that the very possession of an airborne capability would act as a deterrent.

Fourie's conclusion was that the internal security policy of the SADF should not be based primarily on the use of helicopters, but rather on the employment of paratroopers. His recommendation was that the Mobile Watch be trained as paratroopers, and also suitable Citizen Force units located in cities. These part-time units could then be mobilised as follow-up task forces, which could be deployed from nearby Air Force bases, particularly when the Mobile Watch was employed elsewhere.

Although Fourie's paper displays some serious errors of assumption due to an absence of practical experience in airborne operations (for instance, he underestimates the value of helicopters, and underestimates both the cost and the technical demands of military parachuting, not to mention the requirements for recruiting and selecting volunteers), in principle his arguments are solid and show an exceptional grasp of the concept of vertical envelopment adapted to a counter-insurgency role. His thinking was in essence implemented more than a decade later with the Rhodesian fire force technique and with the first operational parachute jumps by the South Africans in the Caprivi Strip area (both dealt with later in this thesis). To what extent the appeals by Lieutenant Fourie influenced the General Staff of the SADF at the time is not known, but his writings proved to be prophetic.

The departure of Erasmus as Minister of Defence during 1959, to be replaced by J.J. "Jim" Fouché, brought an almost immediate more pragmatic and less ideological approach

to the SADF. The affable Fouché was a very different leader compared to the inflexible ideologue that he succeeded. It was on his watch that the cabinet decreed during 1960 that the four approved Mobile Watches were to be expanded to a total strength of 600 men, that they were to be organised to carry out their primary role, namely to fight, and that their secondary tasks were to become exactly that – secondary. It was also under Fouché that it was decided to replace the current weapons used by the Mobile Watch (they were armed with bolt-action Second World War .303-inch rifles at the time) with modern automatic firearms. The focus was on combat effectiveness and it was emphatically stated that these units were not to be specially equipped to assist other government departments.⁸³ This indicated a change in the thinking of the political masters in South Africa – for the first time the SADF was being seen seriously as a buffer against the growing internal threat posed by the oppressed black population.

In April 1960, when the South African Railways and Harbours and the Department of Transport attempted to persuade the military to acquire and maintain helicopters for their use, the SADF had the confidence to make it clear that its primary function was to meet the defence needs of the country and not to render services to other departments.⁸⁴ After almost a decade and a half of being regarded as something of a stepchild by most of those in government, the Defence Force, it seems, now began to feel that the time was right to start flexing its muscles. Effectively, from 1960, the Defence Force was showing the first real outward signs of professionalising since the Second World War.

The Mobile Watches, hatched as hybrid units, now took on a more purely military character, because they were the first resort of the SADF to carry out IS duties. By the middle of the momentous year of 1960, Jim Fouché, was telling a group of senior officers of the CF and the Commandos that the Mobile Watches were to be brought up to full strength and trained exclusively for internal security tasks. Stressing the dangers of Communist infiltration and revolution, he assured them that planning was geared towards preventing this and the purchase of equipment placed emphasis on what was necessary for internal security.⁸⁵ This speech by Fouché, as will be seen, also heralded the planned acquisition by

83. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, KG/GPO/3/2/24, "Organisasie; 1 Mobiele Wag", Extract, minutes of GS Conference, 2 June 1960. Also Box 210, KG/GM/5/3, "Notule van GS Vergaderings 1960", Sub-File "Notule van GS Vergadering" 2 June 1960.

84. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 396, KG/KV/20 Vol. 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Encl. 31, "Note for Record Purposes. Purchase of Helicopters for Joint use by Govt Depts and the National Parks Board".

85. Archive for Contemporary Affairs, (hereafter ACA), UFS, Holder PV 467, File 9, "Toespraak, J.J. Fouché by Offisiersvergadering, Voortrekkerhoogte", 4 August 1960.

South Africa of a truly airborne capability. This reflected the growing concern at the highest level of government regarding the vulnerable position South Africa found herself in.⁸⁶

4.7. THE DECISION TO TRAIN PARATROOPERS AND TO ACQUIRE HELICOPTERS

In that year, on 29 July 1960, Stephen Melville, now the Commandant General of the SADF, issued an urgent verbal instruction to his Army Chief of Staff, Combat General Sybrand Engelbrecht, to investigate the training of one of the Mobile Watch units in parachuting techniques. He followed this up the same day with a written instruction, indicating that the formal appreciation for the investigation should be carried out by Commandant J.H. Burger, assisted by the necessary Air Force officers and that he (Melville) wished to be briefed on the outcome within ten days so that a presentation could be submitted to the minister.⁸⁷ Engelbrecht immediately sent a signal to the Military Advisor at the South African High Commission in London and obtained dates and other relevant information about the various courses available for training of South African parachute instructors by the British Armed Forces that same year of 1960.⁸⁸

No indication could be found in the available records on the reasons behind this sudden urgency for a parachute unit, but given the volatile situation in the country following Sharpeville and the consequent animosity of many countries towards South Africa, combined with Melville's advocacy of an air transportable capability more than three years earlier when he had been the Inspector General, it is feasible to surmise that he felt the time was now auspicious to establish an airborne unit. It is also possible that Fourie's article and staff paper may have had some influence. The prime minister, Hendrik Verwoerd, was apparently deeply concerned about the operational state of the Defence Force,⁸⁹ so in the light of the unstable security situation in the country it is possible that Melville realised this was his window of opportunity, as funds would have been more readily made available.

His identification of Jan Burger, a decorated artillery veteran of the North African and Italian campaigns during the Second World War, to lead the investigation was significant. Burger had been sent to the USA on a Command and Staff Course in 1948 and

86. Warwick: *White South Africa and Defence, 1960–1968*, p. 49.

87. DOD, Gp 5, Box 297, KG/GPT/2/2/1/5, Encl. 11, 24 July 1960; Box 238, KG/GPO/3/2/24, "Organisasie: 1 Mobiele Wag", Encl. 148, 29 July 1960, and File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Encl. 21, 29 July 1960.

88. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 297, File KG/GPT/2/2/1/5, "Opleiding en Aanwending van Mobiele Wagte", Vol 1, Encl. 13, Signal from Army CS to High Commissioner, London, 29 July 1960, and Encl. 14, Signal from Oppositely to Army Chief of Staff Pretoria, 1 September 1960.

89. Warwick, *White South Africa and Defence, 1960–1968*, pp. 16–17 and 126.

the Americans had also trained him as a paratrooper and in the use of combat gliders.⁹⁰ Although gliders were never again used in battle after the Second World War, the Americans continued to provide glider orientation rides as part of their courses at Fort Benning into the early 1950s.⁹¹ Burger was a dynamic officer and a man with an impressive wartime record, so he tackled the task with both enthusiasm and competence.

Melville's promotion of an airborne capability may well have been a consequence of his somewhat chequered and unconventional background. He had a broad exposure to a range of military challenges, which would doubtless have made him a more lateral thinker than those general officers with a narrow, traditional military career. As an airman (he was a former Air Chief of Staff, effectively the Chief of the SAAF) who began his military career in the Army's artillery corps (he had left the Army to become a merchant seaman and professional boxer, later re-joining the UDF to become a pilot, in which capacity he served during the Second World War⁹²) his thinking was probably uniquely joint (ie he was able to see things from the points of view of all three Arms of Service – see the terminology list for a definition of “joint”). It was unusual for someone who had not spent his whole life in the military to rise to the top position in the Defence Force, but it probably did not hurt to be the brother-in-law of Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom (Melville became the Commandant General of the SADF in September 1958, the same month that Strijdom died in office⁹³). But whether the urgency was his or the minister's, could not be established. It was, after all, at the time of the state of emergency in the aftermath of the Sharpeville shootings. See Appendix 22 for a photograph of Melville.

It was just six days after Melville had tasked Engelbrecht, that Fouché announced in his speech that the possibility was being investigated of training the members of 2 Mobile Watch in Bloemfontein as paratroopers.⁹⁴ This was the first official announcement that South Africa was considering the training of paratroopers.

At the same time, also given impetus by the events of 1960, the wheels were turning for the acquisition of helicopters for the Air Force. The four existing obsolete piston-engined helicopters in the Air Force had been used to help quell disturbances in the Cape Town area,

90. DOD, Personnel Records Section, Personal File of Brig J.H. Burger, SM, OBE.

91. J.E. Mrazek, *The Glider War* (London, Robert Hale, 1975), p. 287.

92. R. Warwick, “The SADF Leadership During the Years 1960 to 1974”, summary of lecture, in *South African Military History Society Newsletter*, No. 360, November 2008.

93. I. Uys, *South African Military Who's Who, 1452–1992* (Germiston, Fortress, 1992), p. 285; and Eksteen, *The Statesmen*, p. 96.

94. ACA, Holder PV 467, File 9, “Toespraak, J.J. Fouché”, Voortrekkerhoogte, 4 August 1960.

proving their value to the military.⁹⁵ Their employment appears to have been more for purposes of command and control from the air than for the tactical movement of troops, and according to Venter, to monitor about 30,000 black activists marching on the Houses of Parliament.⁹⁶ Spurred by the unrest that was sweeping the country, the Air Force, in close conjunction with the Army, went through an accelerated process of evaluation and comparison on paper of available turbine-powered helicopters. On 12 May 1960 it was recommended that a total of 30 helicopters be purchased: 24 to serve in an operational squadron of the Air Force and six in reserve. The envisaged squadron would be divided into two and based in Pretoria and Cape Town.⁹⁷ The roles outlined for these helicopters included support of police or army during IS operations, such as close reconnaissance and airborne control; tactical troop transport; supply and casualty evacuation; and offensive action (which would entail the fitting of machine-guns, rockets and missiles to the helicopters).⁹⁸

In this recommendation six major urban centres in the country were identified as potential trouble spots to which helicopters could be deployed in the event of internal disorder. This was an acknowledgement that internal unrest was likely to be centred on urban and not rural areas and was an accurate assessment of what still lay 15 years in the future. This was in sharp contrast to developments in the liberation struggles of other southern African countries. As will be seen in this thesis, in Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) and Namibia (then South West Africa) the armed confrontations would be almost exclusively in the countryside (hence the term Bush War). In South Africa the crucial action took place primarily in the crowded townships and other urban centres.

It was further recommended that a team be sent abroad to investigate the suitability of available helicopters. It later emerged that the only helicopters that would suit the SADF's requirements were the French Alouette III and the American Bell 204⁹⁹ (the forerunner of

95. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 396, File KG/KV/20 Vol. 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Encl. 31, "Note for Record Purposes: Purchase of Helicopters for Joint Use by Govt. Depts and National Parks Board".

96. A.J. Venter, *The Chopper Boys: Helicopter Warfare in Africa* (Halfway House, Southern, 1994), pp. 125–126.

97. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 396, Conf. File KG/KV/20 Vol 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Encl. 32, CG SADF to Air Chief of Staff, 5 May 1960; Encl. 33, Air Chief of Staff to CG SADF, 6 May 1960; Encls 34, 34a and 34b, 12 May 1960. See also KG Gp 5, Box 210, KG/GM/5/3, "Notule van GS Vergaderings 1960", Sub-file "Notule van GS Vergadering", 19-23 April 1960.

98. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 396, Confidential File KG/KV/20 Vol 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Encl. 34b, "Memo, Requirements for Helicopters for Internal Security and other SAAF Commitments", Ref. DGAF/S/501/1/20/Eng, 12 May 1960.

99. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 210, File KG/GM/5/3, "Notule van GS Vergaderings 1960", Sub-File "Notule van GS Vergadering", 2 June 1960.

the UH-1 Iroquois, or Huey, which rose to prominence during the Vietnam War¹⁰⁰). Ultimately, the French Alouette III was the only suitable and available helicopter close to production stage. The team, headed by the Air Chief of Staff himself, therefore visited France in July 1960 and the upshot was a recommendation to purchase six of the smaller Alouette II helicopters immediately for training purposes, to be followed by 24 of the more advanced and larger Alouette III helicopters as soon as these were in production.¹⁰¹

Significantly, the Minister of Defence, Jim Fouché, spoke of the acquisition of reconnaissance helicopters in the same speech, on 4 August 1960, at which he announced the plans to establish a parachute unit. He stressed that the helicopters would not be for the transportation of soldiers or their equipment.¹⁰² This was untrue, because all the deliberations by the General Staff concerning helicopters centred on their ability to rapidly transport troops to wherever they were needed. One can only surmise that Fouché's comment was a smokescreen created because of limitations that the French might have placed on the use of their helicopters (a common practice for countries selling aircraft to politically dubious regimes, often simply turning a blind eye to the subsequent employment of the aircraft), or that it was an attempt to play down such a military acquisition in the face of anticipated international objections from those opposed to South Africa at the time.

The year 1960 was an election year in the USA and politicians in both the Democratic and Republican Parties were highly sensitive to the impact of the Civil Rights movement and the growing influence of the black vote. Martin Luther King, Jnr was coming to prominence and the Greensboro Sit-in had raised the matter of inequalities and continued racial segregation in the United States to a major issue. Although the arms industry in that country was anxious to sell its helicopters to South Africa, the Union's Embassy in Washington warned that there could be political restrictions placed on their use and that future support could be curtailed if there was any hint of them being used to suppress protest by the black population. The Department of Defence in Pretoria was therefore advised by the South African Embassy to look elsewhere for their helicopter purchases.¹⁰³ At the same time, the Armed Forces Attaché in Washington reported great consternation among Americans, both from the Bell Helicopter Corporation and US Government officials, at the prospect of losing

100. "Iroquois, Bell UH-1", *Illustrated Encyclopaedia 20th Century Weapons and Warfare*, 14, pp. 1465–1468.

101. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 396, Conf. File KG/KV/20 Vol 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Encl. 41, Air Chief of Staff to Commandant General, Ref. DGAF/SSOA/C/501/20/Eng, 4 August 1960.

102. ACA, Holder PV 467, 9, "Toespraak, J.J. Fouché" Officer's meeting, Voortrekkerhoogte, 4 August 1960. Fouché's remarks on helicopters are handwritten on his typed notes, as if they were an afterthought.

103. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 396, Conf. File KG/KV/20 Vol 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Encl. 46, SA Embassy Washington to Sect Foreign Affairs, 19 August 1960; Encl. 47a, 22 August 1960.

the contract to the French. He warned of strong diplomatic action being taken by the US through their embassy in Pretoria to prevent the French sale going ahead, but emphasised that there was also political opposition to the USA dealing with South Africa and that this could lead to future restrictions on the purchase of additional helicopters, supporting equipment and spares.¹⁰⁴

On the face of it, the South Africans were faced with a conundrum: should they opt for the American helicopters, which had a greater carrying capacity (they could lift eight troops, the size at the time of a section of men, the smallest complete tactical grouping) but would come with a Sword of Damocles; or should they opt for the French helicopter with its smaller capacity (it could lift only five troops), which would mean dealing with a more pragmatic and less threatening government? However, the decision had already been made to purchase the French Alouette helicopters and the process was underway to place the initial order when the reports from the USA were coming in. Arrangements were in place for the first South African Air Force pilots and ground crew to proceed to France for training.¹⁰⁵

The Americans lodged a strong protest with the South African Minister of Foreign Affairs, saying the decision had been politically motivated and asserting that within the SAAF the preference had been for the American Bell helicopter, which the Air Force officers knew was a better machine. To this the Air Chief of Staff took strong exception, pointing out that the decision had been made after detailed evaluation of the available data and that merit had been the deciding factor. To justify the decision, he referred to the 17 June 1960 publication of the prestigious British aeronautical publication, *Flight*, which had highlighted the achievements of the French aeronautical industry, particularly their helicopters.¹⁰⁶ There can be no doubt that the political uncertainty around an American purchase did play a major role and no government could be expected to run the risk of contract termination because of the disconnect between the supplying country's armament industry and its political masters. However, it is also true that the French were leading the world in the development of turbine-powered helicopters at the time and had more operational experience of the employment of helicopters in combat than any other country. As will be seen, the South African experience a year later with the attempt at the acquisition of American parachutes justified the decision regarding helicopters. Furthermore, the Alouette proved exceptionally well suited to operations in Africa. The British Ministry of Aviation had

104. Ibid., Encl. 89, Armed Forces Attaché to Commandant General, 19 August 1960.

105. Ibid., Enclosures 42 and 43.

106. Ibid., Encl. 47, Air Chief of Staff to CG and Sect for Defence, 26 August 1960. Also Encls 48 and 49.

also appealed for South Africa to consider their helicopters, but their approach was brushed aside.¹⁰⁷ They were never really contenders, because their technological development was not on the level of that in France and the USA.

On 30 August 1960 the South African *Chargé d’Affaires* in France signed the contract on behalf of the South African government at the head office of Sud Aviation in Paris. It was for the initial purchase of seven Alouette II helicopters.¹⁰⁸ They would provide the introductory experience to crews for the later arrival of the bigger and more sophisticated Alouette III. It was a significant decision, because the Alouette proved to be the ubiquitous helicopter workhorse of the counter-insurgency campaigns against the liberation movements in all the southern African countries during the next three decades. The SADF was the first security force in southern Africa to acquire these helicopters and it is not inconceivable that the Rhodesians and Portuguese took their cue from this.

The acquisition of the Alouette helicopters signalled the beginning of a long association between the SAAF and the French aviation industry that included not only the purchase of more Alouettes, but also the Mirage supersonic jet fighter/bombers, reconnaissance planes and trainers as well as the Super Frelon and Puma medium transport helicopters. France, particularly under Charles de Gaulle, saw the looming imposition of an arms embargo on South Africa by other Western powers as an opportunity to acquire the much-needed strategic materials South Africa could supply for the French nuclear programme. There is a considerable historiography on French-South African armament collaboration.¹⁰⁹

4.8. THE ABSENCE OF A DOCTRINAL CONCEPT

To the detriment of the nascent airborne capability, when the decisions were taken to acquire the basic essentials, it appears that the deeper implications did not come to the fore. The complexities of sustaining an airborne force once it is deployed, its command and control for operational employment within existing organisational structures, the principles for its employment, the very concept of its employment and the specific purpose of the

107. Ibid., Enclosures 51, 52, 53, 53a, 54 and 57, Report on Visit to Westlands, Yeovil by Brig H.J. Martin, 22 August 1960, to Commandant General, SADF, 25 August 1960.

108. Ibid., Enclosure 71a, Letter from *Chargé d’Affaires* to Secretary for External Affairs, 30 August 1960.

109. For more on the French-South African armament collaboration see V. Moukambi, “Relations between South Africa and France with Special Reference to Military Matters, 1960–1990” (PhD thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2008); I. du Roy, “Remembering French Investments in Apartheid South Africa”, *Multinationals Observatory*, 17 December 2013, at, <http://multinationales.org/Remembering-French-Investments-in>; and I. Robertson and P. Whitten (eds), *Race and Politics in South Africa* (New Brunswick NJ, Transaction Publishers, 1978), p. 189.

airborne force had not been considered; and these should have dictated the size and role of any envisaged capability. Would it be designed only to crush internal dissent, or would it also be organised to participate in conventional military operations? And if the latter, in what capacity? Was it to be developed only to act in support of and supported by ground forces, or should it also have the ability to operate independently? Was it to be a tactical or a strategic capability? Or was it to be a tactical tool with a strategic capability? Was it to be considered for small group operations with strategic intent? In short, was the requirement for a unit of special forces or for conventional parachute and air-mobile forces?

These questions, it seems, were never asked. It was only the very basic matter of moving troops rapidly by air that served as the driver for the decisions to purchase modern helicopters and establish a parachute unit; beyond that the actual concept for the employment of airborne forces was never very clear to the SADF at the time. In fact, the decisions around the two capabilities were not even related. As a result of this ill-defined thinking in principle by those in authority, the SADF parachute force came to be seen as something of a Jack-of-all-trades. This remained the case even during the initial years of building up the capability. In stark contrast, as will be seen later in this chapter, both the neighbouring Portuguese and the Rhodesians embraced a definite principle for employing an airborne capability right from the onset of their conflicts.

The SADF under the National Party government had, however, unlike the Portuguese and Rhodesians, been isolated from international military thinking and support for more than a decade. There was a consciousness that the military would be called upon to help the police to suppress dissent,¹¹⁰ and for this parachuting was probably vaguely seen as a means of getting troops to remote parts of the country as quickly as possible. But there was no airborne doctrine extant in the SADF to govern or guide thinking on the employment of airborne forces; instead there was a growing awareness of insecurity among the white population.

The turbulent internal situation in South Africa was clearly and understandably dominating military thinking at the time. It was therefore seen as logical that one of the Mobile Watch units, as the first line of defence, would be converted into the parachute role in order to speed up the SADF's reaction capability in times of unrest or rioting. This thinking tended to support the option of a conventional parachute battalion, but the size of a Mobile Watch made it more suited for small group actions.

110. Warwick, *White South Africa and Defence, 1960–1968*, p. 17.

Despite the lack of senior officers versed in airborne organisations or operations in the SADF in the early 1960s, no effort was made to gain this vital knowledge (other than the brief visit to Algeria). Those few officers with wartime or other airborne experience who were still serving in the SADF had not been exposed to higher level planning involving the employment of airborne troops during their service as paratroopers. As a result there was a dearth of conceptual thinking about the envisaged employment of an airborne capability. The one exception was perhaps Major H.K.J. “Pik” van Noorden, as reflected in an article he wrote that was published in the Defence Force magazine *Commando* on the value of airborne soldiers.¹¹¹ But Van Noorden was not among the senior ranks and he would have exercised little influence on their thinking. It was also true that his own airborne experience in the Second World War had been at the very lowest level as a young lieutenant.

For those in the top echelons of command in the SADF, ignorant of the intricacies of airborne operations, it therefore seemed that acquiring the technical expertise to parachute was regarded as sufficient. A clear concept of employment had not been formulated and the maxim “Structure follows Strategy” had not been considered.¹¹² In the military, doctrine is determined by strategy, which in turn leads to structures that can execute the doctrine. Though this forms an essential part of modern military staff training, it had not yet been clearly articulated in the 1960s and the South African General Staff at the time would not have been schooled in the principle. There was in any case, as yet no strategy put in place by the apartheid government to counter the perceived threat.

However, this does not excuse the generals from failing to exercise common sense on the matter. It was a failure that was to plague the South African paratroopers for much of their existence, seriously affecting their ability to function and the ability of commanders to employ them properly on the higher tactical and operational levels of war.

4.9. CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN AFRICAN AIRBORNE DEVELOPMENTS AND DOCTRINE IN THE THIRTY-YEAR WAR

The development of the airborne capabilities of both Rhodesia and Portugal form an integral part of the theme of this thesis and cannot be separated from the South African

111. H.K. van Noorden, “The Paratrooper: The Mobile Soldier *par excellence*”, *Commando* (September 1960), pp. 4–7.

112. The eminent historian Alfred Chandler of Harvard Business School authored a seminal work on the history of strategic decision-making at the highest level of corporate America, coining the dictum “Structure follows Strategy”. See his *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Mass, Harvard University Press, 1977).

account if that account is to be fully understood. This applies to both the strategic and the tactical employment of airborne forces and South Africa's application of both. At this point in the thesis, it is useful to examine their respective doctrinal approaches.

Unfortunately, in contrast to information on the South African situation, primary source material on the Rhodesian and Portuguese airborne history is not as readily available here in South Africa. Much of the Rhodesian military archival material was spirited away when the country became Zimbabwe and it was in any case not possible to travel to either Zimbabwe or Portugal to conduct archival research. However, space only permits a cursory overview of their developments, and most of the relevant information has been gleaned from publicly available secondary sources and from correspondence and interviews with individuals. Some details were found in the files of the Department of Defence (DOD) Documentation Centre housing the SANDF Archives.

4.9.1. Portugal

The commencement of the Portuguese counter-insurgency campaigns preceded the outbreak and intensification of the conflicts in Rhodesia and South West Africa/Namibia, and as such held many lessons for the Rhodesian and South African armed forces. Coming as it did at just the time when both these military forces were in the process of establishing their own airborne capabilities, the beginning of the war in Angola served to confirm to the Rhodesian and South African military authorities their respective decisions to take this step.

The role of the Portuguese in developing and applying the vertical envelopment concept in southern Africa has been neglected (if not played down) in most accounts of the Thirty Year War. Perhaps this is because the war has generally been compartmentalised, and forming as it did part of Lusitanian African history, it simply did not elicit the same degree of attention in the Anglophone sphere. The works by Van der Waals¹¹³ and Cann¹¹⁴ are well-researched exceptions, but neither specifically analyses airborne operations. Venter produced several good books on the Portuguese conflict at the time it was raging, but these were for popular consumption and do not focus on airborne operations.¹¹⁵ Yet from a tactical viewpoint, the Portuguese, as much by their failings as their successes, laid a

113. W.S. van der Waals, *Portugal's War in Angola, 1961–1974* (Rivonia, Ashanti, 1993).

114. J.P. Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa: The Portuguese Way of War, 1961–1974* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1997).

115. See, for example, works by A.J. Venter, *Terroris: 'n Ooggetuieverslag* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1971) and *The Terror Fighters: A Profile of Guerrilla Warfare in Southern Africa* (Cape Town, Purnell, 1969). In later years he produced a book on helicopter operations in Africa, but it contained disappointingly little of substance on the Portuguese airborne employment. See Venter, *The Chopper Boys*, pp. 57–74.

foundation for the way both the Rhodesians and the South Africans were to wage war. This applies particularly to the tactics and techniques for the conduct of airborne operations with tactical intent, in support of other ground forces.

The Portuguese established their first parachute battalion when they were already part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Trained in the 1950s by the French, Spaniards and Brazilians, the Portuguese airborne capability was a component of their Air Force.¹¹⁶ Although the intention was to utilise this battalion in its colonial empire,¹¹⁷ it was understandably established along similar lines to those of Portugal's Cold War allies. The French influence was particularly apparent from the start, with a study being conducted by the Portuguese military of French employment of their paratroopers in the Algerian conflict.¹¹⁸ The parachute battalion's purpose was seen from the outset as intervention in the so-called overseas provinces, initially giving it a strategic role to deal in force with contingencies, because it was located in metropolitan Portugal. This changed once the wars began. Based almost exactly on the French doctrine, it was not structured or trained for small group, special forces-type tasks such as reconnaissance and sabotage.¹¹⁹

After the initial employment of the paratroopers in Angola on company-sized independent parachute operations in 1961, the Portuguese came to see their paratroopers and helicopter-borne forces as an elite military "fire-brigade", specialising in small-scale airborne reactions to insurgent initiatives. Specific tactics were adopted for their employment, and the SAAF helicopter crews gained some of their earliest operational experience working closely with the Portuguese armed forces in Angola. The helicopter tactics that the Portuguese employed were based on those of the French in Algeria, which in turn had been refined from those employed by the British in Malaya.¹²⁰ But the Portuguese, with their vast African territories and limited numbers of helicopters, went much further in developing their techniques and tactics, adapting them to the African bush and jungles. Their employment of the limited rotary-wing assets at their disposal in fact mirrored the

116. "Tropas Pára-quedistas Portuguesas", at <http://www.paraquedistas.com.pt>.

117. H.F. Matias de Atougua de Alvarenga, "Portuguese Paratroopers in KTM", *KFOR Chronicle*, NATO Kosovo Force, March 2011, p. 10.

118. F. Klose, *Human Rights in the Shadow of Colonial Violence: The Wars of Independence in Kenya and Algeria* (Philadelphia, Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 120; M. Nunes Silva, Book Review of J.P. Cann, "Counterinsurgency in Africa: the Portuguese Way of War 1961–1974", *Small Wars Journal*, 10, May 2013.

119. W. Schrepel, "Paras and Centurions", Special issue, *Military Ethics and Peace Psychology: A Dialogue*, in *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 11, 1 (2005), pp. 80–82.

120. S.N. Mans, "Victory in Malaya" and H. Bethouart, "Combat Helicopters in Algeria", both in T.N. Green (ed.), *The Guerrilla and How to Fight Him* (New York, Praeger, 1962), pp. 126–127 and 266–267.

British use of the helicopter in Borneo during the Indonesian Confrontation in the early 1960s¹²¹ rather than the lavish helicopter operations of the USA in Vietnam.

Although the Portuguese paratroopers were retained as a theatre reserve,¹²² both they and the Army commandos were employed as airborne specialists using helicopters and were decentralised and placed under a local commander for the duration of a specific operation or during the movement of convoys. Parachute operations were also carried out in Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique,¹²³ but airborne operations for the Portuguese were, once their wars had commenced, a purely tactical concept and increasingly they resorted to helicopters for their vertical envelopment.¹²⁴ A constant shortage of fixed wing and helicopter transport aircraft prevented the Portuguese from undertaking larger airborne operations, but they did at times utilise a force of company-strength (a little more than 100 men) to attack identified bases inside Portuguese territory. However, the Portuguese strategy was to fight their war only within their own colonial territories. They did not engage in cross-border operations or hot pursuit into neighbouring countries the way that the Rhodesians and South Africans would later do, so there was not the same need to carry out major operations of this nature.¹²⁵ Indeed, the establishment of insurgent bases within liberated areas of the vast Portuguese territories compelled them to focus on those bases rather than looking further afield.

The Portuguese did not see their airborne elements operating independently of ground forces and they were always simply an extension of a larger operation by ground forces. They consequently had recourse to logistic and fire support from these ground forces. It was a highly flexible tactical capability within the larger ground force, providing the ground force commander with an ability to project some force by air, and to do so rapidly, within his area of responsibility. Ultimately, the Portuguese established a total of five

121. W. Walker, "Lessons from the Vietnam War", Report of a seminar at the Royal United Services Institute in London, 12 February 1966, p. 7. General Walker's description of the use of helicopters in Borneo shows similarities to the way the Portuguese later used them.

122. Van der Waals, *Portugal's War in Angola*, p. 112.

123. Bragg and Pugh, "History of Military Operational Parachute Jumps" (1951–1978): "Para Regiment in Portuguese Colonial War", available at <http://www.militaryphotos.net>; K. Cole, "History of Military Operational Parachute Jumps" at http://www.specialforcesassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Combat_Jump_Record_03.07.2013.pdf. Confirmed in correspondence with Peter Laubscher, 18 October 2014 and discussions in Port Elizabeth, 9 May 2015. Laubscher served as a paratrooper with both the Portuguese and the South Africans.

124. Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa*, p. 131.

125. This strategy was forced on the military commanders by the politicians. See A.J. Venter (ed.), *Challenge: Southern Africa within the African Revolutionary Context* (Gibraltar, Ashanti, 1989), pp. 234–235.

operational parachute battalions based in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, with a regimental HQ and a training battalion in Portugal.¹²⁶

The Portuguese Air Force took delivery of the first of their fleet of modern Alouette III helicopters in 1964.¹²⁷ Their choice proved fortuitous, because like the Rhodesians, they benefited from the secondment of both helicopters and their crews from South Africa. Although they were the last of the three white southern African security forces to receive the Alouette, the Portuguese were the first to use them seriously in operations. The Portuguese were the first to equip their Alouettes with the 20mm gun,¹²⁸ which was far more accurate and effective than the light machine guns the French had fitted to medical evacuation helicopters, and the rockets and missiles that had been installed on their earlier and smaller Alouette II and some Alouette III helicopters in Algeria.¹²⁹ Its fire was devastating and it was much feared by insurgents. Subsequently it was adopted by both the Rhodesians and the South Africans and came to play a vital role in almost all their counter-insurgency operations. Essentially, the helicopter techniques developed by the Portuguese military contained all the elements later refined by first the Rhodesians with their fire force and then developed further by the South Africans into even more sophisticated variations such as lunar operations. These are discussed later in the thesis.

At no stage did the Portuguese possess enough helicopters or fixed-wing transport aircraft to concentrate everything they had in one theatre for major airborne operations. The size of the areas in which they were fighting and the distances that separated each of their three theatres of operations made this impossible. Although they had the largest helicopter fleet of the three white-ruled countries, fighting the liberation forces (at the culmination of their war when the revolution brought it to an end in 1974 the Portuguese Air Force had a total of 93 helicopters on its inventory, including two Alouette IIs, 80 Alouette IIIs and eleven SA330 Pumas¹³⁰), they were also the only force engaged in fighting in three widely separated theatres simultaneously, operating as they were on external lines of communication from distant metropolitan Portugal.

126. Bragg and Turner, *Parachute Badges and Insignia of the World*, p. 49.

127. Warwick, *White South Africa and Defence, 1960-1968*, pp. 186–187.

128. Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa*, p. 131–132.

129. J.R.T. Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky: The Rhodesian All-Arms Fireforce in the War in the Bush, 1974–1980* (Johanneburg, 30° South Publishers, 2009), p. 55; and Boyne, *How the Helicopter Changed Modern Warfare*, p. 74.

130. T.N. Dupuy, J. C. Andrews and G.P. Hayes, *The Almanac of World Power* (Dunn Loring, T.N. Dupuy Associates, 1974), p. 112.

The Portuguese, however, never saw their airborne capability in a strategic light and only ever used it to gain tactical advantages. In this they were hampered by the overall political strategy, which did not allow them to hit the insurgents at their nerve centres outside of the Portuguese territories.

4.9.2. Rhodesia

The Rhodesian experience more closely paralleled that of South Africa. For what appears to have been almost identical reasons, the government of the Central African Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland made a similar decision to establish an airborne capability at almost exactly the same time as South Africa did. But significantly, the Federation had a very different approach; an approach that enabled it to avoid some of the fundamental mistakes made by the SADF in the establishment of their airborne capability. This was largely due to the Rhodesians' understanding of doctrinal issues.

There can be little doubt that the difference in approach had much to do with the close military ties between the Federation and Great Britain. In fact, the armed forces of the Federation were in many respects merely an extension of those of the United Kingdom, and they displayed a marked British character, ethos and tradition. Many of the professional soldiers and instructors in both the Army and the Air Force of the Federation were seconded from the British Army and RAF and almost all its officers were trained in Britain.¹³¹ With such close British links and a commitment to Commonwealth defence, the Rhodesians, when deciding on an airborne capability, simply adopted a tried and tested British model. Their close ties with the British ensured access not only to airborne training and technical expertise, but also to the doctrinal concepts for the employment of airborne forces.

The Rhodesian decision, like that of South Africa, was prompted by the growing anger of the oppressed black majority. During the unrest that occurred in the Federation during the late 1950s, the inability of lorried infantry, and even air-transported infantry, to be delivered where troops were needed in regions where there was poor infrastructure was noted with concern by the government of the Central African Federation. There was no means of deploying men on the ground in remote areas that were far from airfields; sabotaged airfields easily neutralised the effectiveness of air-transported troops; there were no helicopters or aircraft equipped for dropping paratroopers; indeed, there were no paratroopers. Yet the military situation called for the employment of airborne troops. As a

131. K.R. Coster, "The Training of Rhodesian Officers at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst", *Scientia Militaria*, , 9, 3 (1979), p. 53.

direct result of these identified shortcomings, two important steps were taken. Firstly, the Federal Minister of Defence, J.N. Caldicott, announced in the federal parliament towards the end of 1959 that advice on paratrooping techniques was being sought from the United Kingdom with a view to forming a mobile paratroop commando force in the Federation. Secondly, the Federation placed orders for the French Alouette III helicopters. In March 1960, tests commenced on military parachuting at the high Rhodesian altitude.¹³²

SADF records show that the Rhodesians were quite clear that the isolation of Fort Hill (Chitipa) in Nyasaland, because of the blocking of the airfield during the unrest in that territory, had a direct bearing on the decision to investigate parachute training by the military in the Federation. It was the starkest possible illustration of how vulnerable remote areas could be to insurgency and that only an airborne force could overcome this vulnerability.¹³³ Ultimately, this was to lead to the establishment of a Rhodesian squadron of the British Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment, as part of the Federal Army.¹³⁴ There were both historical and operational reasons for this.

The Rhodesians had provided a contingent of volunteers to fight in Malaya during the Communist insurgency, the so-called Malayan Emergency in the early 1950s.¹³⁵ They formed the C-Squadron of the British 22 SAS (Malayan Scouts) and served in Malaya between 1951 and 1953. There they underwent parachute training at the RAF Parachute Training School set up at Changi Airfield in Singapore and participated in small-group airborne operations against the insurgents.¹³⁶ They were under command of acting Major Peter Walls, who went on to become the military supremo in the Rhodesian bush war of the seventies.¹³⁷ On the return of the Rhodesians from Malaya, the squadron was disbanded.¹³⁸

Rhodesia, like South Africa, therefore had no airborne unit in 1960. But unlike the South Africans, the Rhodesians did have experience of airborne actions in a COINOPS context and understood exactly how to employ their envisaged airborne unit. A number of RAF Parachute Jumping Instructors (PJIs) were sent out to Rhodesia from the United

132. D. Cowderoy and R.C. Nesbit, *War in the Air: Rhodesian Air Force, 1935–1980* (Alberton, Galago Books, 1987), p. 29; Fourie, “Paratroops ‘Answer to Terrorism’”.

133. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol 2, “Organisasie: No 1 Valskermbataljon/Organisation, No 1 Parachute Battalion (Voorheen 2 Mobiele Wag)”, Encl. 14A, Confidential Report: “Besoek aan RRAF Salisbury”, 14 July 1961.

134. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, KG/GPO/3/2/24/1, Vol 2, Encl. 14A, “Besoek aan RRAF Salisbury”, 14 July 1961.

135. P. Warner, *The Special Air Service* (London, William Kimber, 1971), p. 206.

136. J. Pittaway (ed.), *Special Air Service: Rhodesia, the Men Speak* (Durban, Dandy Agencies, 2010), p. 129.

137. T. Geraghty, *Who Dares Wins: Story of the SAS, 1950–1980* (Glasgow, Fontana/Collins, 1980), pp. 26, 39.

138. B. Cole, *The Elite: The Story of the Rhodesian SAS* (Amanzimtoti, Three Knights Publishing, 1984), p. 12.

Kingdom and a Parachute Evaluation Detachment (PED) was formed to carry out tests and to investigate how best to go about establishing an SAS squadron.¹³⁹

At the conclusion of the tests it was decided that the envisaged SAS squadron be formed. Volunteers were called for from the Royal Rhodesian Air Force (RRAF) to be trained in the UK as parachute instructors and from the Federal Army to fill the ranks of the SAS squadron. From commencement, the new unit was called “C-Squadron, 22 SAS”, making it a resurrection of the Rhodesian squadron that had served in Malaya,¹⁴⁰ and technically a component squadron of Britain’s 22 Special Air Service Regiment.

In early 1961 a team of three officers and three NCOs was selected as the nucleus of the new unit and the men embarked on a period of tough training, concentrating on physical preparation, but also honing their military skills.¹⁴¹ In April 1961 the Rhodesians were sent to the UK, where those of the new C-Squadron were attached to the British 22 SAS Regiment at their base in Bradbury Lines, Hereford for three months. During this time they completed their basic parachute course at No. 1 Parachute Training School (PTS), located at RAF Abingdon in Berkshire. They also participated in a regimental exercise in Denmark, completed the gruelling SAS selection course, received instruction in kayaking, rock climbing, navigation and demolitions as well as making a study of the SAS organisation and equipment. The six RRAF volunteers, all NCOs, were at the same time trained at No. 1 PTS as Dropping Zone Safety Officers (DZSOs) and PJs,¹⁴² completing their courses in October 1961.¹⁴³

As will be seen, the scope of the Rhodesian training in the UK, commencing only three months after the South Africans completed theirs, was far broader than the training provided for the South Africans. It exposed the trainees to both the technicalities of parachute training and the operational application of the airborne force they had opted to introduce. Unlike the South Africans, the Rhodesians made a clear distinction between the two. The doctrine for the employment of the new unit was therefore already clear to them during its formative stage.

139. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol 2, “Organisatie: No. 1 Valskermbataljon/ Organisation: No 1 Parachute Battalion, Encl. 14A, Confidential Report: “Besoek aan RRAF Salisbury”, 14 July 1961 and Letter from Sqn Ldr G.E. Sizeland, 15 July 1991; Cole, *The Elite*, p. 15.

140. Cole, *The Elite*, p. 15.

141. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

142. Pittaway, *Special Air Service: Rhodesia*, p.155; Cole, *The Elite*, pp. 16–17.

143. DOD, KG Gp, File No KG/GPO/3/2/24/1, Vol 1, Encl 14A, “Besoek aan RRAF Salisbury”, 14 July 1961; Copy of scrapbook of No 1 PTS, RAF Abingdon provided by Sqn Ldr G.E. Sizeland, 16 April 1992. See also <http://www.rhodesianforces.org/ParachuteTrainingSchGallery.htm> and also D. de Kock, “The Parachute Training School , April 1961–April 1980”, at <http://www.ourstory.com/thread.html?t=479739>.

On their return to the Federation, the SAS nucleus began to set up the new C-Squadron, extending recruiting to Britain and South Africa.¹⁴⁴ From the outset, the SAS squadron was seen as a “whites only” unit, and the relatively small white population of the Federation meant that even with a strength of only 184 men¹⁴⁵ it would be difficult to fill the ranks, particularly with the stringent selection process that was adopted. South Africa would experience the same difficulties.

The five Rhodesian parachute instructors who qualified, accompanied by three experienced RAF instructors to assist them,¹⁴⁶ returned to Salisbury, where the modest new Parachute Training School was already in the process of being set up beside the airfield at New Sarum. The RAF provided almost all the equipment and training apparatus that was required and installed or erected it in the hangar that had been identified for the purpose. An absolute minimum of items had to be produced by the Rhodesians themselves. This, as will be seen, was in stark contrast to the situation that the South Africans found themselves in. Towards the end of October 1961 the first Rhodesian parachute course commenced.¹⁴⁷ The generous assistance from Britain meant that despite having done their training in the UK many months after the South Africans, the Rhodesians were in a position to present their first parachute course almost three months before the South Africans.

The Rhodesians had adopted an important principle: parachute training would be done by the Air Force and the Army would do the fighting. The operational airborne unit was therefore able to focus on its primary task. This was the practice of the British Armed Forces and the Rhodesians simply followed it. It will be seen that this was not the model adopted by the South Africans and this did lead to problems in the SADF, with the operational parachute battalion being burdened with parachute training. This model divided the focus of commanders and placed a strain on instructors.

As special forces, the SAS troopers were trained to carry out small-scale operations that would have a strategic impact. This role was markedly different from that of a conventional parachute unit, which is trained to operate as a unit and not in small groups. The Rhodesians would modify their approach to the employment of an airborne capability when most of the rest of their Army’s infantry became parachute trained over 15 years later

144. Cole, *The Elite*, p. 15.

145. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

146. De Kock, “The Parachute Training School”.

147. DOD, Gp 5, Box 238, File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol 1, Encl. 14A, “Besoek aan RRAF Salisbury”, 14 July 1961.

and the capability was then used principally a tactical tool. But the SAS always retained their speciality as special forces.

In October 1961 Army Headquarters in Salisbury issued a training directive for the new SAS squadron.¹⁴⁸ Its primary role was spelled out as the Army's external commitment for Commonwealth defence, with a secondary role in defence of the Federation and in internal security operations. Specifically, it was tasked to be capable of producing teams to carry out those offensive and intelligence gathering operations peculiar to special forces. All ranks had to be capable of entering and withdrawing from a target area by land, sea or air and the squadron had to be able to undertake operations in all phases of conventional war. SAS soldiers had to be trained to carry out long term, long range operations deep in enemy-held territory either as members of a small group or as members of a troop or squadron. In addition, they had to have the expertise to train and assist friendly guerrilla bands, and the squadron was to be trained to operate as a highly mobile vehicle-borne force in either an offensive or a reconnaissance role. Unlike the Portuguese paratroopers, the SAS had a clear mandate to train for and carry out independent missions of strategic import.

In September 1962 the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) instigated a campaign of arson on white farmlands and timber plantations in the Melsetter and Chipinga areas of Southern Rhodesia in an effort to sabotage the economy and intimidate the farmers and foresters. The SAS was dropped by parachute into the affected areas, based on intelligence reports. This action in the mountainous Eastern Highlands took the saboteurs by surprise and the campaign was contained.¹⁴⁹ This seemed a clear justification for the acquisition of a parachute capability.

At the same time, the process for the acquisition of the other arm of a modern airborne capability, that of helicopters, was well under way. Surprisingly, the Rhodesians did not opt for British aircraft, and like the South Africans and later the Portuguese, placed an order for the French Aérospatiale Alouette III helicopters. All other aircraft and equipment used by the RRAF were of British origin. According to Wood, the reasons for this decision were that the Alouette could fly in Rhodesia's hot and high conditions and that its price suited the Federal Treasury.¹⁵⁰ Because the French were at the time leaders in the field of light turbo-shaft engines, their helicopters did have the ability to operate at extreme

148. Federal Army Training Directive 17/61, Ref. 402/37/G(Trg), 19 October 1961, copy in DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 306, Confidential File KG/GPT/3/1/6, Encl. 14A.

149. R. Shay and C. Vermaak, *The Silent War: The Fight for Southern Africa* (Salisbury, Galaxie Press, 1971), pp. 17–18; Cowderoy and Nesbit, *War in the Air*, p. 34; Cole, *The Elite*, p. 21.

150. Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky*, p.31.

altitudes.¹⁵¹ The SAAF had by then already taken delivery of its first Alouettes and one of the earliest examples of military co-operation between South Africa and Rhodesia in the insurgent war that had barely begun, was the training of personnel from the RRAF by the SAAF on Alouette helicopters, even before the first of these aircraft were delivered to the Federation.¹⁵²

It was the beginning of a long and intimate helicopter assistance programme between the two countries. During the subsequent war that the Rhodesians fought, the SAAF supplied them with large numbers of Alouette III helicopters on permanent loan.¹⁵³ At one stage the Rhodesian Air Force (RhAF) was using as many as 50 Alouette III helicopters, though it is unclear just how many of these belonged to South Africa. With the advent of independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean Air Force was left with only eight (the original number acquired by the RRAF in 1961 and 1962¹⁵⁴), so this gives some indication of South Africa's support for the RhAF.¹⁵⁵

With the dissolution of the Federation in 1963, Southern Rhodesia managed to retain the bulk of the armed forces, including almost all of the Air Force's aircraft and the SAS squadron.¹⁵⁶ The Parachute School, located at New Sarum in Salisbury, also became part of the Southern Rhodesian Armed Forces. This gave Rhodesia a viable airborne capability when the bush war took on a more earnest character a few years later and the Rhodesians, largely because they were compelled to do so through the effects of economic sanctions, were able to develop the capability to the point where almost the whole of their fighting infantry force could be regarded as airborne.¹⁵⁷ As such, they progressed from having as part of their arsenal not only a special forces airborne capability in the form of the SAS, but a substantial airborne infantry force trained specifically to apply their airborne skills in a counter-insurgency role. The Rhodesians were compelled by the constraints of the war to develop both a strategic and a tactical capability. This will be illustrated by examples later in this thesis. South Africa drew many lessons from the Rhodesian experience of employing their airborne capability; these are discussed in subsequent chapters.

151. Wood, "Fire Force: Helicopter Warfare in Rhodesia, 1962-1980" www.jrtwood.com/article_fireforce.asp.

152. **B. Salt, *A Pride of Eagles: A History of the Rhodesian Air Force*, p. 395; P.J.H. Petter-Bowyer, *Winds of Destruction*, p. 92.

153. Cowderoy and Nesbit, *War in the Air*, pp. 163-164; Wood, "Fire Force".

154. Cowderoy and Nesbit, *War in the Air*, p. 34; Black, *Fighting Forces of Rhodesia*, p. 29.

155. Wood, "Fire Force".

156. Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky*, p. 31; Cole, *The Elite*, pp. 22-23.

157. Wood, "Fire Force".

4.10. SELECTION AND PREPARATION OF THE INITIAL SADF VOLUNTEERS FOR PARACHUTE TRAINING

Commandant General Melville's instruction that an investigation be carried out into the feasibility of converting a Mobile Watch into a parachute unit was acted on with alacrity. He had asked for a report within ten days – he received it in three. On 1 August 1960 the three officers who formed the working group submitted their detailed appreciation (see terminology list for a definition of the military term “appreciation”). Under the chairmanship of Commandant Jannie Burger, assisted by Major “Pik” van Noorden (a Second World War paratrooper veteran) and Major G.C.H. Freeman of the SAAF, a seven-page appreciation with 13 pages of appendices was produced.

The appreciation was based on the assumption that a unit of 180 men would need to carry out company-sized airborne assaults and continue to operate for up to three days without re-supply.¹⁵⁸ While it could be argued that this went some way towards formulating the basis for a doctrine, it is based on a faulty premise – they began their appreciation with the size and shape of an airborne organisation instead of commencing with an identification of the likely tasks or missions that an airborne force could be called upon to perform. Had they done this the right way around, they might have arrived at a different size and shape. But their instruction was to convert a Mobile Watch, so they worked on the approved strength of such a unit.

Of interest is that the envisaged size of the proposed airborne unit (a reinforced company) was almost identical to the size of the reinforced squadron of SAS that the Rhodesians were taking decisions on and setting up at about the same time. However, there is no evidence that there was any consultation between the South Africans and the Rhodesians on the matter. The vague and broad mission parameters outlined above by the working group in any case ruled out special forces-type tasks such as those envisaged by the Rhodesians. Costs for the conversion of a Mobile Watch to a parachute role were estimated, and these included the training of personnel, the acquisition and maintenance of equipment and the payment of allowances. However, the working group's estimate turned out to be woefully insufficient, both in terms of apparatus needed and costs entailed. The report also made provision for the training overseas of four parachute instructors. It was pointed out that there were only four parachute-trained Permanent Force (PF) personnel in the SADF at

158. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 297, File No KG/GPT/2/2/1/5, “Opleiding en Aanwending van Mobiele Wagte”, Vol 1, Encl. 18, “Parachute Training of Members of the Mobile Watch”, 1 August 1960 and attached Confidential Report, “Airborne Conversion Training of a Mobile Watch Unit”.

the time (Commandant Burger, Major Van Noorden, Captain Tommy Renfree and a Staff Sergeant Van Dyk). All of them had undergone their parachute training during or just after the Second World War and none was up-to-date with the latest techniques or acquainted with modern equipment, so none of them could be considered as instructors.

Emphasis was placed on the need to establish and maintain an extremely high standard of training and fitness to minimise the chances of injury or death. There was a recommendation for a two-week period of pre-selection training, including physical and mental adaptation, to precede the actual parachute training, which would in turn extend over a further four weeks. Eight jumps some with equipment and at least two at night, were recommended for qualification as a parachutist. The jumps were seen as building up progressively from individual instructional jumps to tactical jumps by sections, platoons and eventually the whole company. Four subsequent jumps would have to be carried out annually, interspersed with regular periods of synthetic parachute training.

The appreciation gave an outline of facilities available at three possible centres that could be modified and upgraded to enable the necessary parachute training and packing that had to be done. These centres were at Tempe and Bloemspruit, both outside Bloemfontein, and the third outside Potchefstroom. Each of the three had an aircraft hangar and an old parachute packing building that had been used during the Second World War for the packing of emergency parachutes for aircrews. There was also a recommendation that four small, folding vehicles known as Harriers be purchased to provide the paratroopers with limited air-droppable motorised mobility.¹⁵⁹

There was no further elaboration of the concept of employment of the unit once its conversion had been accomplished. The working group assumed that it would be used as a company, (which is how the Portuguese employed their paratroopers) and not in small teams (as the SAS doctrine dictated). But a company was too small an entity to be used as a viable tactical element on its own and the appreciation quietly deferred from any mention of this reality, while advocating that this was how it would be employed. The Portuguese, operating with battalions, would have the means to back up or follow up any action by a company, but the SADF was not making provision for this. Doubtless, the Portuguese commitment to NATO and the Rhodesian commitment to the Commonwealth strongly influenced their airborne thinking. South Africa, however, had no such external

159. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 297, File KG/GPT/2/2/1/5, "Opleiding en Aanwending van Mobiele Wagte", Vol 1, Encl. 18, "Parachute Training of Members of the Mobile Watch", 1 August 1960 and attached Confidential Report "Airborne Conversion Training of a Mobile Watch Unit".

commitments, and while this robbed her of access to advice, it also absolved her from outside pressures and presented her with an open slate on which to design the new unit.

On 19 August 1960, less than three weeks after the appreciation had been submitted, a signal was sent from Defence Headquarters in Pretoria to the military advisor at the High Commission in South Africa House, London. He was informed that approval had been obtained for the conversion of 2 Mobile Watch into a paratroop unit and that he was to make arrangements urgently with the British Armed Forces for the training of a contingent of 15 volunteers in parachuting, air portability, safety equipment and as parachute instructors. Exactly why it was 2 Mobile Watch that was chosen for conversion could not be established. The military advisor in London confirmed that arrangements were provisionally being made to accommodate the South African contingent on a course in October.¹⁶⁰

This did not leave a great deal of time to select and prepare the prospective paratroopers for their training in the United Kingdom. An instruction from the Adjutant General, sent on 30 August 1960 to the Army Chief of Staff, the Air Chief of Staff, the Quartermaster General and the Surgeon General, tasked them to provide a pool of 34 volunteers with specified qualifications from which the selection would be made. Stringent requirements and subsequent conditions of service were set out for the volunteers.¹⁶¹ It was at this time that the Minister of Defence revealed the intention to establish a parachute capability and shortly afterwards reports began to appear in the Afrikaans press that a parachute unit was to be formed.¹⁶²

Urgent representations had to be made to the Treasury to authorise the air travel of the team. The short time available before the commencement of the course in England necessitated travelling by air rather than by sea (the cheaper and more common form of travel at the time). Ministerial authority was eventually only issued a week before the team of volunteers departed.¹⁶³ Aware of the decision by the Rhodesian Armed Forces to establish a parachute capability too, the SADF made enquiries about the financial allowance that they intended to pay their paratroopers once they had qualified, and was informed that they

160. Ibid., Encl. 12, "Paratroop Training", 30 August 1960.

161. Ibid. A copy of the letter in Encl. 12 is also in DC Gp 1, Box 78, Confidential File DC 17850/445, Encl. 1.

162. "Valskermsoldate: SA Manne na Brittanje", *Die Transvaler*, 30 August 1960.

163. DOD, DC Gp 1, Box 78, Confidential File DC 17850/445, "Paratroop Training", Encl. 3, Adjutant General to Sec for Defence, "Paratroopers Training Course, UK", 31 August 1960; Encl. 4, Sect. for Defence to Sect Treasury, "Opleidingskursus: Instrueteurs Valskermeenheid", 9 September 1960; Encl. 7, Sect. for Defence to Chief Accountant, "Opleidingskursus: Instrueteurs: Valskermeenheid", 19 September 1960.

would probably follow the British Army regulations governing the payment of such allowances.¹⁶⁴

The request for volunteers that was sent out did not produce an overwhelming response, but there were those who figuratively “jumped at the chance” to become paratroopers.¹⁶⁵ There were enough of them to make a provisional selection on paper and make up the numbers required to undergo final selection. The short-listed volunteers reported at the SA Military College in Voortrekkerhoogte on Monday 5 September 1960.¹⁶⁶ A total of 35 volunteers arrived, 26 of them from the Army. Ten of the NCOs came from the Army Gymnasium, four from 1 SA Infantry Battalion, three from the Military College, three from Witwatersrand Command, two from 1 Special Service Battalion, and one from 4 Field Regiment. Not surprisingly, there were none from any of the Mobile Watches. These were operational units and their personnel were not generally qualified military instructors, which was a requirement for the volunteers. The NCO instructors were usually posted to training units or territorial commands and this was reflected in those who reported. Of the three Army officers, however, two were from 2 Mobile Watch and one from 1 SA Infantry Battalion.¹⁶⁷

The two Air Force officers were both transport pilots who had flown the C-47 Dakota, the SAAF’s only transport aircraft at the time. The six Air Force NCOs were all from the parachute packing and maintenance section of the Swartkop Air Force Base in Pretoria. The solitary officer from the SA Medical Corps was a major who was not only a doctor, but also a qualified pilot who had flown Vampire jet aircraft.¹⁶⁸ Only the Officer Commanding and the Medical Officer were assured of their places in the team; among the rest there was intense competition to win a place in the 15-man team to go to England.

The course, officially Course No. 817P Paratroopers – Selection (Permanent Force), was conducted over two and a half weeks from 6 to 21 September 1960. A copy of the official course photograph appears in Appendix 23. The course was presented by staff of the College’s Physical Training Branch, all of whom were qualified physical training instructors (PTIs), and its aim was given as “To prepare members of the Permanent Force physically and

164. DOD, DC Gp 1, Box 78, Confidential File DC 17850/445, Encl. 2, Mil Adviser, Salisbury to Secretary for External Affairs, “Allowances: Paratroops”, 23 August 1960.

165. Interview, Lt Col Ronnie Claassen (retd), 13 June 1995; Memoir by Maj G.J. Leibbrandt on the occasion of his retirement in 1991, for the Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion.

166. Memo TRG1247, “Kursus 817P; Valskermsoldate Keuring en Uitdunning”, 6–21 September 1960, Army Chief of Staff to Commands, Commandant, SA Military College and various Army units, 1 September 1960.

167. Ibid.

168. J.J. Malan, “Brothers in Arms”, unpublished memoir.

mentally for selection for further training as instructors for paratroops".¹⁶⁹ It was tough and demanding and the instructors were relentless in what they imposed on the volunteers. None of the PTIs had any parachuting background and had no idea what was required to prepare anyone for parachuting, but they were tough martinets who showed no compassion to the volunteers.¹⁷⁰

The course involved progressive physical training, based on approved exercise tables,¹⁷¹ gymnastics, team games, Bacon-style wrestling, swimming, obstacle training, close combat, road-running and cross-country running. The candidates also had to jump from a 22 foot (6.7 metre) installation and leap from the back of a moving truck. The emphasis, according to Ronnie Claassen, one of those who participated, was on being super-fit and super-strong, rather than developing any ability.¹⁷² Major J.J. Malan, the Medical Officer (MO) who attended the course and who was also the Assistant Surgeon General (Air) of the SADF, subsequently wrote that there was no information available regarding medical standards and psychological selection methods, so volunteers were chosen only on the basis of their physical prowess.¹⁷³

When, after two weeks, members of the press were invited to see the volunteers being put through their paces, there were only 23 left of the original 35. The press was told that the physical training was being done "just in case it should be finally decided to establish a parachute unit".¹⁷⁴ This might have been to avoid embarrassment should the final arrangements for the training in the United Kingdom fall through, as these were still in the process of finalisation. Inevitably, because they had been given vague information, the media began to postulate on the matter and it was speculated in press reports that an announcement on the parachute training of instructors, most likely in England, was expected very soon.¹⁷⁵

In the meantime the military advisor in London had forwarded details of the courses that the prospective paratroopers would attend. Considerable information was also

169. Syllabus and Block Programme, "Paratroopers: Selection (PF)", Ref. MK/28/3/3.

170. Five of the volunteers were interviewed years later: Cmdt Rufus Mathews (1991), Cmdt Ronnie Claassen (1990 and 1995), Lt Col Johnny Kieser (1995), Maj Gerrie Leibbrandt (1990) and SSgt Harry Finlay (1993).

171. "Tables for Preliminary Physical Training", Ref. MK/138/5/1 and "The 'Wilbeebes' Tables", Ref. MK/138/5/5, SA Military College, August 1961.

172. Interview with Lt Col Ronnie Claassen (ret'd) on 13 June 1995.

173. J.J. Malan, "Verslag oor Suid-Afrikaanse Valskermopleidingskursus by Nommer 1 Valskermopleidingskool, Abingdon, Engeland", 27 September to 22 December, 1960, p. 2.

174. *Star*, 16 Sept. 1960, *Pretoria News*, 16 Sept. 1960, and *Ons Vaderland*, 16 Sept. 1960.

175. "Valskermtroepe Stap Nader? Verklaring oor Opleiding Word Binnekort Verwag", *Transvaler*, 19 September 1960.

provided on likely equipment and clothing needed once the volunteers returned to South Africa and it was intimated that the blueprints for construction of parachuting apparatus would be made available to the South Africans.¹⁷⁶

The volunteers continued with their training. During the third week, two days of field exercises took place, involving route marches with heavy kit and crossing obstacles, including the Hennops River. By then the final selection of the 15 candidates had already been made.¹⁷⁷ Their names appear in Appendix 24. It is indicative of the times that all had to be certified as security cleared and without any communist tendencies.¹⁷⁸

The man selected to command the new parachute unit was Commandant Willem Louw, an officer with a broad military background whose dynamic leadership and autocratic energy was destined to have a profound effect on the South African paratroopers. He was born in 1920 in the little town of Bloemhof and grew up in the rural Western Transvaal. He joined the Special Service Battalion (SSB) in 1938, attested in the Permanent Force and later became an infantry instructor at the SA Military College. He served in this capacity throughout the first part of the Second World War, training officers and NCOs for combat service. But after attending a Cadet Officers' Course in 1943 at the College he was commissioned and immediately left to go "up north". He re-joined his old unit, the SSB (by then an armoured regiment equipped with Sherman tanks) as a troop commander and served during the Italian campaign under the 6th South African Armoured Division (see photograph in Appendix 25). As such he was involved in some of the bloodiest fighting of the campaign. After the war, Louw was again posted to the Military College, initially as an officer instructor and later, when he was promoted to captain, as the adjutant to the College Commandant. As a major he was appointed as the Officer Commanding North-Western Cape Command, based at Upington. When 2 Mobile Watch was established in early 1959, Louw was appointed as the Officer Commanding and promoted to commandant.¹⁷⁹ He was therefore an officer with extensive instructional, administrative, command and combat experience who had practical exposure to the infantry, armour and engineers. He was also

176. DOD, AG Gp 9, Box 290, AG/213/5/43 (SM), Part 1, "SAPF Strength: 2 Mobile Watch", Encl. 47, 15 September 1960.

177. *Ibid.*, Encl. 50, 19 September 1960.

178. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box No. 297, File No KG/GPT/2/2/1/5, "Opleiding en Aanwending van Mobiele Wagte", Vol. 1, Encl. 15, "Valskerm Opleiding", 20 September 1960.

179. CV, Lt Gen W.P. Louw, by Chief of SADF, 20 November 1974; "Bevelvoerder, SA Militêre Kollege", *Commando*, March 1965; "Parachute Unit says Good-bye to Father", *Friend*, 28 March 1975; "Parabat Founder Louw dies at 59", *Friend*, 5 July 1980.

an uncompromising disciplinarian – probably the best sort of man to carry out the difficult task of establishing a unit of tough paratroopers.

The training of the South Africans in Britain could not be kept a secret, and their departure was eventually released to the media. Press reports named Commandant Louw as the leader of the contingent and mentioned that his unit, 2nd Mobile Watch, was being considered for conversion to a parachute role.¹⁸⁰ On 27 September 1960 the selected volunteers departed for the UK on a South African Airways DC-7C flight. The trip involved stops at Salisbury in Rhodesia, Nairobi in Kenya, Khartoum in Sudan, Rome in Italy and Zurich in Switzerland before landing at London after a journey of some 28 hours. For most of those in the team it was their first flight in an aircraft and their first trip abroad.¹⁸¹

4.11. TRAINING AS PARATROOPERS IN THE UK

From London the prospective paratroopers travelled by train to Oxford, where they were met by the Parachute School Warrant Officer, Robert “Jock” Fox, and taken to the Air Base at RAF Abingdon, where Number 1 Parachute School (No. 1 PTS) was located at that time.¹⁸²

The arrival of the South Africans in the UK coincided with the annual conference of the British Liberal Party, being held at Eastbourne. Renowned author of *Cry the Beloved Country* and ardent opponent of apartheid, Alan Paton, who was president of the South African Liberal Party, was a guest at the conference. The arrival of the SADF men for parachute training had been announced in a news sheet issued by South Africa House in London, and Paton, speaking at a rally during the conference, said he had been absolutely astonished at the news. He was reported as protesting: “What do you think these paratroops are going to be used for? In defence of the West? South Africa is not an asset to the West but rather a burden to it at present.” Paton went on to add:

Nothing could be more calculated to alienate the people of Africa and cause them to distrust the Government of Britain than this particular decision to train paratroops here. I hope your party will be able to give some consideration to this very important matter.¹⁸³

The Liberal Party did give it very serious consideration. Jeremy Thorpe, MP for North Devon and future leader of the party (whose own political career would end in controversy), asked the meeting to authorise the dispatch of a telegram to the British prime minister,

180. “SA Troops to Train in Britain”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 September 1960, p. 13.

181. Diary of Air Cpl G.J. Leibbrandt.

182. Ibid. See also Malan, “Brothers in Arms”; and Letter from Capt Robert Fox (retd), 30 June 1991.

183. “‘Astonishing’ Decision: Training S. African paratroops”, *Evening News*, 30 September 1960.

then in New York, protesting against the training of South African paratroops in Britain. The meeting was reported as giving its approval by acclamation.¹⁸⁴

The meeting ruled that the training of South African troops in Britain would “weaken the ability of the Government to influence the future progress of the African continent” and stated that their protest to the premier should “strongly condemn” the training plan.¹⁸⁵ Their protest was a gesture, but little more. It did nothing to terminate the training of the South Africans, but for white South Africa it was another dark cloud on the horizon.

Just two days after the South Africans commenced their course, the referendum was held among white South Africans in which the electorate indicated, by a narrow margin, that the country should become a republic.¹⁸⁶ Continued membership of the Commonwealth had been in question ever since Verwoerd had made his intention to hold such a referendum known,¹⁸⁷ and relations between Britain and South Africa were at low ebb. Such uncertainty must have played on the mind of Commandant Louw, but the writings of some of those in his team and interviews with others, indicate that there was nothing but friendliness and camaraderie shown them by the RAF personnel at Abingdon. Jock Fox (their liaison man) formed a close bond with them and apparently the South Africans held him in great esteem.¹⁸⁸ See Appendix 26 for a photograph of Fox.

The 15 South Africans commenced the Basic Parachute Course on Monday 3 October 1960. Comprehensive details of the course content, relationships with the instructors, the high standard of the training, descriptions of the apparatus used and tales of how the South Africans passed their leisure time, are provided in the course report compiled by Major Malan. There is also information in an unpublished memoir written later by Malan when he was a colonel; a memorandum from Johnny Kieser, written when he was a major; and a personal diary maintained at the time by Air Corporal Gerrie Leibbrandt.¹⁸⁹ Interviews conducted with some of the surviving volunteers provided details of their memories,¹⁹⁰

184. Ibid.

185. “Paratroops Arrive and Start Row”, *Express*, 1 October 1960.

186. L’Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 258.

187. B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies (eds), *South Africa in the 20th Century* (Pretoria, J.L. van Schaik, 1994), pp. 366–372.

188. Malan, “Brothers in Arms”.

189. Ibid.; Also Diary of Air Cpl G.J. Leibbrandt; Maj Johnny Kieser, Memo in response to questions posed by Col M. Alexander, 31 July 1990.

190. Interviews conducted with: Maj Gerrie Leibbrandt, 1990; SSgt Harry Finlay, 1993; Cmdt Ronnie Claassen (ret’d), 13 June 1995; Lt Col Johnny Kieser, 29 June 1995.

while the parachute log book kept by Commandant Louw contains an accurate record of certain dates and course numbers.¹⁹¹

The badge of 1 Parachute Training School, RAF is a parachute with crossed flaming torches below it and a scroll bearing the motto “Knowledge Disperses Fear” (Appendix 27). Some photographs taken by the South African contingent of the training apparatus, as well as some official photos, are also reproduced in Appendix 28. In the popular literature, there are many publications that describe, sometimes quite graphically, the exhilarating process of British military parachute training.¹⁹²

The first jumps were from a dirigible balloon and not an aircraft,¹⁹³ and took place on 13 October 1960¹⁹⁴ (Appendix 29). Thereafter, jumps were done from the enormous Blackburn Beverley double-decker aircraft¹⁹⁵ that could accommodate a total of 70 paratroopers¹⁹⁶ (Appendix 30) and the Handley Page Hastings transport aircraft (Appendix 31).

On Tuesday 25 October, No. 1 PTS hosted a visit by the Duchess of Gloucester, and some of the South Africans gave her a demonstration of parachute training.¹⁹⁷ On other occasions, it seems, the South Africans were hidden from sight when certain visitors arrived, to prevent further embarrassment to the British by the press.¹⁹⁸

In order to qualify as paratroopers, two of the eight required jumps had to be done with personal equipment and weapon. During one of these, Louw experienced a “blown periphery”, when part of the edge of his parachute canopy folded under the remainder during opening, preventing the parachute from deploying properly. He immediately activated his reserve parachute and landed safely.¹⁹⁹

191. Copy of W.P. Louw’s Parachutist Log Book, entries for 1960.

192. See, F. Hilton, *The Paras* (London, BBC, 1983), pp. 148–151; and C. Gillman, *Para: Inside the Parachute Regiment*, (London, Bloomsbury, 1993), p. 66.

193. J. Weeks, *Airborne Equipment: A History of its Development* (Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1976), pp. 32–35.

194. Diary of Air Cpl G.J. Leibbrandt; Kieser, Memorandum in response to questions; Parachutist Log Books of W.P. Louw and J.H. Kieser, entries for 1960.

195. Correspondence between Col M. Alexander and Brian R. Holt, founder and secretary of Beverley Association in England, 4 August 1991, 4 January 1992 and 19 September 1992.

196. J. Weeks, *The Airborne Soldier* (Poole, Blandford Press, 1982), pp. 86 and 90; P. De Ste Croix (ed.), *Airborne Operations: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Great Battles of Airborne Forces* (London, Salamander Books, 1978), p. 20; and “Blackburn Beverley Aircraft”, Airborne Assault ParaData at, <http://www.paradata.org.uk/content/blackburn-beverley-aircraft>.

197. Interview with Cmdt Ronnie Claassen (retd), 13 June 1995; Diary of Air Cpl G.J. Leibbrandt; Letter from Capt Jock Fox (retd), 30 June 1991.

198. Interview, Cmdt Ronnie Claassen (retd), 13 June 1995; Kieser, Memorandum in response to questions.

199. Diary of Air Cpl G.J. Leibbrandt.

The eighth and qualifying jump was to be a night jump, but before that the South Africans were, by special request from Louw, allowed to do two jumps from a helicopter. This was because there were no barrage balloons in South Africa and they had long since been ruled out as a possibility for parachute training when the South African team returned to the Union.²⁰⁰ At that stage it seems that Commandant Louw was considering the use of a helicopter in South Africa to substitute the balloon when trainees did their first two jumps.²⁰¹ Accordingly, on 31 October 1960, the South Africans were taught how to exit from a helicopter and, despite heavy mist, each carried out two jumps from a Westland Whirlwind helicopter on Weston-on-the-Green.²⁰² See Appendix 32 for photographs. The Whirlwind was the British-produced version of the American Sikorsky S-55,²⁰³ which was the current helicopter in the SAAF, and it therefore served very well for the South Africans to learn the technique of parachuting from a rotary-wing aircraft. The helicopter could carry a stick of four paratroopers plus a dispatcher.²⁰⁴

The qualifying night jump, from a Hastings aircraft, was done on Monday 7 November 1960. But it was not without incident. The doctor, Major Malan, and the pilot, Lieutenant Lombard, suffered ankle fractures on landing and had to be evacuated to the Wheatley Military Hospital.²⁰⁵ The following day a wings parade was held for the South Africans and those who were not hospitalised and had successfully completed the course were awarded the modest blue and white cloth British parachute wings by the Commanding Officer of No. 1 PTS, Wing Commander Dick Mullins, AFC.²⁰⁶ See Appendix 27 for illustrations of the British Army and Air Force parachute wing insignia.

The team then split up to undergo the advanced specialist training they had been earmarked for, or to be given exposure for their specific military musterings. Two air corporals were sent to Bicester, north of Oxford, where they were to be trained in the

200. Leibbrandt notes in his diary that in the terrible weather they experienced while in England, a balloon was ripped from its moorings by gale-force winds, blew away and exploded when hit by lightning. The frequency of lightning on the South African Highveld and the accidents that occurred with balloons must have influenced South African thinking. See Weeks, *Airborne Equipment*, p. 35.

201. J.J. Malan, "Verslag oor Suid-Afrikaanse Valskermopleidingskursus in 1960", p. 3.

202. Copy of W.P. Louw's Parachutist Log Book, entries for 1960; Diary of Air Cpl G.J. Leibbrandt.

203. "Whirlwind, Westland", entry in *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of the 20th Century Weapons and Warfare*, Vol. 24, p. 2595.

204. Diary of Air Cpl G.J. Leibbrandt.

205. Malan, "Verslag", (report on training course in the UK in 1960), p.3.

206. "Die Ontstaan en Groei van 1 Valskermataljon", A/ADM/6/1 over G/SD/3/6, 1975. According to Fox, Wing Commander B.F. Stannard, was the CO 1 PTS in 1960. He identified the Senior RAF officer in the group photo as Wing Commander Mullins. See letter from Capt Jock Fox (retd), 30 June 1991.

packing of static line personnel parachutes.²⁰⁷ The pilot was attached to a transport squadron of the RAF to gain experience of what was involved in dropping paratroopers.²⁰⁸ The MO visited various units and establishments supporting the British airborne forces to ascertain the medical and psychological requirements and standards for personnel involved in the full spectrum of airborne operations.²⁰⁹

The MO, Major Malan, drew up a comprehensive report (the only one that has been traced covering the training of the South Africans as paratroopers). In it, he was able to make important recommendations regarding not only medical equipment and training that the new parachute unit would require in South Africa, but also concerning the personal protective clothing and other items that the paratroopers needed to minimise their chances of injury. What is significant about the Malan report, however, is the assumption that during a parachute operation casualty evacuation would have to be by helicopter if a surgical capability could not accompany the paratroopers; or alternatively, that the services of the local district surgeon and nearby civilian hospital with surgical facilities should be used.²¹⁰ This is a clear indication that the planned parachute unit was seen as being used internally in South Africa, probably to repress civil disturbances that might break out. Parachuting, it seems, was seen as the means of transporting the troops in the quickest possible time to a trouble spot. Close to that trouble spot, anywhere in the Union, there had to be the necessary infrastructure to provide logistic support to the paratroopers (including casualty evacuation and advanced medical care). This is an important point, because it was to have a strong negative affect on the subsequent development of an airborne capability by the South Africans and influenced their thinking to favour a tactical rather than a strategic role for the paratroopers.

Louw and the ten Army instructors, however, remained at Abingdon and completed the parachute instructor's course. See photographs in Appendix 33. The course, according to Kieser,²¹¹ included training and instruction in advanced parachuting techniques; standard operating procedures (SOPs) for parachuting; balloon and aircraft safety; and dropping zone safety officer (DZSO) duties. Each of the trainee parachute instructors also had to take a "stick" (or class) of volunteers through a complete basic parachute course in the hangar.

207. Diary of Air Cpl G.J. Leibbrandt; and "Die Ontstaan en Groei van 1 Valskermbataljon".

208. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 306, KG/GPT/3/1/6 Vol 1, "Parachute Training", Conf. Letter DGAF/S/204/212/TR, Air Chief of Staff to Commandant-General, 29 May 1961; Malan, "Verslag", p. 4.

209. Malan, "Verslag".

210. Malan, "Verslag", p. 42.

211. Kieser, "Memorandum" in response to questions posed.

This meant the stick of 12 students had to be taught everything about military parachuting from scratch. These were probably British national servicemen.²¹²

According to Louw's parachute logbook, the aspirant South African instructors carried out at least five more parachute descents during their training as instructors, four of them with equipment.²¹³ There were two more balloon jumps, both with equipment, apparently as part of their advanced parachute training for parachuting into jungle and lowering themselves by rope from their high perches.²¹⁴

A total period of five months had been agreed upon between the South African and British military authorities for the completion of all the training that was required. But it seems that it soon became apparent to the RAF personnel at No. 1 PTS that the South African servicemen were far better qualified in certain aspects than most of the foreign candidates that underwent training at Abingdon and that they evidenced a high level of military competence. One of the requirements specified by the SADF authorities for volunteers aspiring to be selected for training in the UK as parachute instructors was that they had to be qualified general duties (GD) military instructors.²¹⁵ This meant that they would all have undergone almost two years' of instructional training in many complex and technical military subjects, including map reading. Similarly, they had all undergone a lengthy instructor's course at the SA Military College in Pretoria and had qualified in the techniques of giving instruction. The standard of the instructor's course at the Military College was particularly high because instruction was the prime task of the Permanent Force and it had always been provided through the SA Military College since the establishment of the Union Defence Force in 1912.²¹⁶ Some of the RAF parachute instructors who trained them confirmed the quality of the South Africans as instructors.²¹⁷

This was not surprising. The members of the SA delegation had been rigorously selected; physically, they were far above average (Harry Finlay represented South Africa in boxing and Nic Visser in modern pentathlon, while most of them were competent rugby

212. Conscription in Britain ended just after the South Africans completed their parachute training in that country see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscription_in_the_United_Kingdom.

213. W.P. Louw's Parachutist Log Book, entries for 1960.

214. Interview with Cmdt Ronnie Claassen (ret'd) on 13 June 1995.

215. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 297, KG/GPT/2/2/1/5 Vol 1, "Opleiding en Aanwending van Mobiele Wagte", Encl. 26.

216. Bouch (ed.): *Infantry in South Africa*, p. 181.

217. Letter, Captain R. Fox, 30 June 1991; "SA Parachutist Team at end of Basic Training", *Cape Argus*, 4 November 1960.

players²¹⁸). Commandant Louw kept tight control of his men and did not tolerate poor behaviour or a lax attitude in those under his command.²¹⁹ He must have been acutely aware that with the international political freeze that South Africa was experiencing, very little further assistance could be expected from the British or anyone else once they returned to South Africa. They would be on their own with no advice or assistance forthcoming when they embarked on the setting up of a parachute unit, the construction of training apparatus and the training of paratroopers. Thus it was imperative that they mastered every aspect of what they were learning while they had the opportunity. Motivation would therefore not have been lacking in the group.

At the time there was much uncertainty regarding future military relations between South Africa and the United Kingdom. Erasmus's concerted campaign over more than a decade to weaken links between the armed forces of the two countries had already made them tenuous and Verwoerd's push for a republic, together with increasing international opposition towards South Africa's internal policies were inevitably forcing a reconsideration of the situation. Discussions between the SA military advisor from the High Commission in London and a General Price of the British Ministry of Defence, held in the light of "the embarrassing inquisitiveness of the press concerning the training of our paratroop unit"²²⁰ produced assurances that Britain would continue to place all her training facilities at the disposal of the SADF and would not be deflected from this course by a hostile press. Even in the event of South Africa leaving the Commonwealth, said Price, only those courses that were specifically for Commonwealth members would be affected. Not even the sale of war stores to South Africa was seen as a problem, with the possible exception of armoured vehicles. Comforting though this may have sounded, the South Africans were not naïve enough to be taken in by such talk. The military advisor pointed out that this was merely Price's view and did not necessarily reflect official policy. Louw, with his Afrikaner background and some allegedly very negative personal experiences at the hands of the British during the Second World War,²²¹ certainly did not seem to trust them and was making sure that he would be able to manage without them on his return to South Africa.

218. *SAW/SADF Sport, 1912–1987*, pp. 7, 19 and 30–31; *Jaarlikse Geskiedenisverslag, 1 Valskermbataljon, 1962, 1966 and 1969*; "Valskermsoldaat wil pad Oopveg na SA Bokstiel", *Landstem*, 1 September 1961; Letter received from Col A.H.S. Schoeman, 1 September 1994.

219. J. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike! The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga, 1978* (Sandton, Manie Grové Publishing, 2008), pp. 71–74 and 77–79.

220. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 136, Top Secret KG/EXT/1/1/3/1 Vol 1, "Maandverslae en Ander: MA Londen", Encl. 33, Report, October 1960, Ref. MA/TS/28/M, MA London to Comdt Gen, 31 October 1960.

221. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, pp. 71–72.

A visit to the SA paratroopers on 1 December 1960, while the parachute instructor's course was underway, by the South African military advisor in London, Brigadier "Kalfie" Martin, OBE, DFC of the SAAF,²²² produced the following comment in his official monthly report back to SADF HQ,

The men were fit and keen and were being employed in giving instruction in all phases to Army recruits. The officer in charge of training thought very highly of the South Africans and said that with few exceptions, their general level of achievement was higher than for similar classes. He lauded their enthusiasm, particularly the spirit with which they entered the sporting life of the station: Sgt Finlay in particular, impressed with the ease with which he knocked out his opponent in 10 seconds! Great things were also expected of the rugby players who were chosen to represent the Command later during the month. The Commanding Officer of the station endorsed these views, and commended Cmdt Louw and his men for the manner in which they conducted themselves.²²³

On 9 December all the South Africans were brought together at RAF Abingdon to have an official course photo taken together with their instructors (see Appendix 34). Each South African was presented with a paratrooper steel helmet to take back to South Africa.²²⁴ Louw, who had a reputation for being impatient, had apparently by then made a re-assessment of the training they were undergoing. For him, the important courses were the basic parachuting course and the instructor's course; he deemed the remaining courses largely superfluous. He therefore initiated their cancellation.²²⁵

The South Africans did visit the British Army's 22 Company, Royal Army Service Corps Air Despatch Unit at Watchfield in Berkshire. They were shown how light vehicles were rigged and prepared for dropping by parachute, and then attended the actual drop of a Land Rover and its trailer on a stressed platform from a Beverley aircraft. Photographs show Louw making notes (see Appendix 35), but the whole exercise was academic, because South Africa had no aircraft at the time capable of dropping such large loads. This could also have influenced Louw in his decision to cut short their stay in the United Kingdom. The courses that had been scheduled for them were an Air Portability Officers' Course of two weeks; an Air Portability NCOs' Course of one week; a Heavy Equipment Dropping Course of two weeks' and a Heavy Dropping Checkers' Course of five weeks.²²⁶

222. Letter from Sqn Ldr G.E. Sizeland, 15 July 1991, in which he referred to the official diary of No. 1 PTS.

223. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 136, Top Secret File KG/EXT/1/1/3/1 Vol 1, "Maandverslae en Ander, MA Londen", Encl. 34a, Monthly Report, December 1960, MA London to Commandant General, 19 December 1960.

224. Diary of Air Cpl G.J. Leibbrandt.

225. Malan, "Verslag", p. 5.

226. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 297, File KG/GPT/2/2/1/5, "Opleiding en Aanwending va Mobiele Wagte", Vol. 1, Encl. 14, Oppositely (London) to Army Chief of Staff Pretoria, 2 September 1960.

In all probability Louw, an astute man despite his impatience, also realised that with the mounting international political pressure on South Africa their training could be forcibly cut short with embarrassing publicity, and that without the necessary aircraft in South Africa to carry out the dropping of heavy equipment this was in any case not the time to undergo such training. Far better for the South Africans to return as soon as possible with the knowledge and expertise that they had already gained and to go ahead with establishing a parachute unit on a realistically small scale rather than being overly ambitious. By cutting out these courses he effectively shaved off more than two months of additional training, plus the unproductive holiday period over Christmas and New Year that they would have had to spend in England. Yet at the same time, Louw forfeited the opportunity to acquire doctrinal knowledge regarding airborne concepts and the intricacies of airborne operations. It seems inconceivable that he made no attempt to find out more about the actual employment of airborne forces by visiting either the British 16 Parachute Brigade or the Special Air Service. It is of course possible that he was denied access to this information.

A wings parade at which each of the newly qualified parachute instructors was awarded his RAF aircrew half-wing brevet (see Appendix 27) by the Station Commander, Group Captain Neil Cameron, was held at RAF Abingdon on 15 December 1960 (see Appendix 36). Malan described the speech by Cameron as exceptionally complimentary.²²⁷

On 22 December the 15 South Africans boarded one of the new Boeing 707 aircraft of South African Airways and flew back home in time for Christmas. Combat General S.A. Engelbrecht, the Army Chief of Staff, met them at Jan Smuts International Airport outside Johannesburg.²²⁸

4.12. DEDUCTIONS

After the National Party victory at the polls in 1948 the new government gave little priority to defence; but the new minister, F.C. Erasmus, set to with a will to change the UDF into an Afrikaner institution that would become an instrument of the Party. His handling of the Department of Defence undermined the efficiency and efficacy of the military, and despite the acquisition of military hardware there was a loss of morale and an outflow of competent officers. Limited conscription was introduced under Erasmus, though it was by random ballot and for a brief period. Yet his passage through parliament of the new Defence Act in

227. Malan, "Brothers in Arms".

228. "Parachutists Fly Home. . . Just in Time for Christmas", unidentified newspaper, 23 December 1960.

1957 was a significant achievement by Erasmus. It modernised the legal framework for defence, but also provided a foundation for the future militarisation of white society.

During the 1950s there was an increase in international opposition to the segregationist policies of the National Party government. Decolonisation and the growth of black nationalism, fuelled by the euphoria that accompanied the independence of the first of Africa's colonies and the wars of liberation being waged in other colonies around the world, produced a state of angst among the whites in southern Africa. The unrest and resistance to apartheid by the black majority in South Africa was further cause for nervousness. It was this perception of threat from the black majority inside the country, the antagonistic black states to the north and a range of economic and other sanctions to be imposed on South Africa by the international community, which created the climate for the war that was to come.

The change in the international scene and the internal tensions in South Africa resulted in a new approach to defence thinking. There was an emphasis on light, mobile forces and a realisation that future operations were likely to be against opponents waging a guerrilla war, rather than a conventional conflict. As a result, there was a growing awareness on the South African General Staff of the need for an airborne capability. Airborne forces were being used extensively in counter-insurgency operations around the world, but South Africa had no such capability.

A decision was therefore taken by the General Staff to create light, mobile units that could be easily transported by air to trouble spots. At the same time, the French experience in Algeria was studied as a conflict from which the South African Defence Force could learn valuable lessons. It became clear to the South African General Staff that both parachute and helicopter operations would be crucial components of any counter-insurgency campaign that might be waged in Africa. A simultaneous realisation of the value of troops delivered by air had taken hold in the other white-ruled states of southern Africa. In the wake of the Sharpeville massacre, the state of emergency and a sharp escalation in violence and unrest, the idea of air-mobility grew to the point that South Africa acquired modern helicopters and made a decision to train paratroopers. The role of Stephen Melville, first as Inspector General and later as Commandant General of the Defence Force, in initiating airborne thinking on the General Staff, in ordering the establishment of South Africa's first parachute unit and in acquiring a helicopter fleet, indicates that he could conceivably be seen as the father of South Africa's airborne forces.

However, the absence of a clear doctrinal approach to what the primary role of an airborne force would be and how it would be employed, reflected an ignorance on the General Staff of the potential and a resultant ambiguity concerning its operational employment. A nucleus of volunteers to be trained as paratroopers was selected and sent to the United Kingdom on the eve of South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth and becoming a republic. These men achieved an exceptionally high standard and acquired vital technical knowledge for the creation of an airborne unit in South Africa. But no information was acquired on the theoretical concept of airborne operations.

The resultant absence of a clear-cut doctrine for the employment and thus the structure of an airborne unit boded ill for the organisation that was about to be established. South Africa's immediate neighbours, Rhodesia and Portugal, both had a clear concept of employment for their airborne forces and structured them accordingly. The SADF, though reluctant to admit it, ultimately learnt from its neighbours regarding the employment of airborne forces and there would be increasing co-operation in this field, particularly with the Rhodesians. Yet ironically, the first experience of counter-insurgency and vertical envelopment was South African – not Portuguese or Rhodesian. This took place during the Mpondo Revolt of 1960–1961, which is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

THE MPONDO REVOLT AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF 1 PARACHUTE BATTALION: THE PROBLEM OF *RAISON D'ÊTRE*

5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter explains how the seeds of uncertainty were sown in the role and employment of South Africa's airborne capability at the very time of its establishment. In this, it goes to the heart of the argument under discussion in my thesis.

Events in South Africa unexpectedly delayed the establishment of the new parachute unit. The situation in the area then known as Pondoland now reached such a level of open rebellion that the government declared a state of emergency in the Transkeian territories while the paratroopers were being trained in the UK. This chapter deals firstly with this eventuality and the role some of the new paratroopers played in Pondoland. The military deployment was of particular significance to the concept of vertical envelopment because it saw the first employment of helicopters in southern Africa in counter-insurgency operations (well before the Portuguese or Rhodesians had acquired a helicopter capability). In this, it shaped thinking along airborne lines in the SADF. In a sense it formed the blueprint for what became one of the most characteristic features of the Thirty Year War in southern Africa. In another sense, the Mpondo uprising could itself be seen as initiating that war.

In this regard, the decision by the liberation movements to resort to armed struggle is touched on, before the chapter discusses the establishment of South Africa's first truly airborne unit, describing some of the difficulties encountered, the SADF's first contact with the nascent Rhodesian airborne organisation, and the ongoing ambiguity at this crucial stage regarding the *raison d'être* of the new parachute unit. The implications of the acquisition of modern transport aircraft on the infant airborne forces in the SADF are then considered.

5.2. THE MPONDO UPRISING AND PREAMBLE TO THE DEPLOYMENT OF THE SADF

By the end of the 1950s, opposition by the suppressed majority to the National Party (NP) government in South Africa was growing. In the rural tribal reserves (what would later be termed "homelands" or Bantustans by the NP government) there was spontaneous unrest, apparently not linked to the formal movements of resistance such as the ANC, its Communist Party ally and the recently established Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC).

These movements, with their largely urban support and activities, had driven the organised campaigns of non-violent resistance during the 1950s. But in the rural tribal reserves there was also spontaneous unrest, apparently not even linked to the resistance movements. The Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 had identified certain tribal reserves that were to be given self-government and eventual independence. The government-sponsored tribal authorities, with their chiefs and headmen on the payroll of the government, were encountering strong resistance from many of the people living in these areas. Poverty, overcrowding, government interference in traditional practices and the corrupt actions of many of those in the pay of the government (actions that included the collection of illegal and inflated taxes for themselves) were producing factions that either supported or opposed the authorities. Clashes increasingly occurred between these factions, and in the case of those who opposed the government, with the police.¹

During November 1960, while the fifteen paratroopers were abroad, the SADF was authorised to assist the South African Police (SAP) in restoring order in Pondoland.² After only a few days leave so that they could spend Christmas at home, those newly-qualified paratroopers from the Army assembled in Bloemfontein, were issued with the necessary equipment and were transported to Pondoland to join 2 Mobile Watch as part of Operation SWIVEL.³

Although this operation was a relatively small military undertaking, it played a foundational role in the future thinking of the SADF regarding airborne forces in a counter-insurgency war. Some of the junior officers who participated in the campaign subsequently went on to become generals and several of the young paratroopers participated in later operations. Louw himself eventually became Chief of the Army, and Mike Muller, who was a major and a pilot during the Pondoland insurrection, became Chief of the Air Force, while Lieutenant Daan Hamman went on to be appointed as the Army's Chief of Staff Intelligence as a major general. Corporal Nic Visser, one of the newly trained paratroopers, was killed in action as a major in Angola. He had by then commanded a company in 1 Parachute Battalion and served in the SA Special Forces. The Mpondo uprising therefore demands more than just a cursory mention, and cannot be ignored in terms of the central theme of

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1. N.J.S. Mathabatha, *The Struggle over Education in the Northern Transvaal: The Case of Catholic Mission Schools, 1948 to 1994* (Amsterdam, Rozeberg, 2005), pp. 29–32; V.N. Ehrenreich-Risner, "The Effect of Apartheid's 'Tribal Authorities' on Chieftaincy and the Zulu People: Separate Development in Mtunzini District 1950–1970", History and African Studies Seminar, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 27 February 2013.
 2. *Extraordinary Government Gazette* (Regulation Gazette No. 69), Pretoria, 30 November 1960.
 3. Interview with Lt Col Ronnie Claassen (retd), Centurion, 13 June 1995.

this thesis. Though it has received considerable attention in recent years from both political and social historians, military analysts have neglected it woefully.

The campaign in Pondoland was in many ways unique within the South African insurgency context, for although it coincided with unrest elsewhere in the country (largely because of the Bantu Authorities legislation and its implementation), it had its roots in a long history of tribal identity and yet independent thinking that was radically different from the stereotypical tribal concept. It was what Fidler calls “rural cosmopolitanism” in which members of iKongo (the insurgent movement),

... expressly rejected the Bantu Authorities system imposed on them by the apartheid government and between 1959 and 1962 sought to create a new political and social order that negotiated between cosmopolitan languages of citizenship and democracy while simultaneously employing familiar tropes of magic and the ancestors.⁴

During much of 1960 iKongo had almost complete control of many districts of Pondoland. It issued a constitution, established a political hierarchy and convened its own courts. This made it one of the more successful modern insurgent movements in southern Africa, and possibly the most successful that the apartheid government came up against, albeit for only a brief period.

The Mpondo were a Xhosa-speaking group with very traditional values and a strongly tribally based way of life, although significantly influenced by participation in migrant labour to the urban areas of South Africa.⁵ They resented the NP government’s interference in their affairs and particularly resented those chiefs and headmen who were embracing and abusing the powers that the Bantu Authorities Act had conferred on them. In 1959 the opposition of local people to the apartheid government’s Bantu Authorities representatives in Eastern Pondoland turned violent and the government reacted with police repression. The paramount chief of Eastern Pondoland, Botha Sigcau, who supported the government (and had in fact been installed by the government), became the target of the people. The resistance of local people reached levels of open rebellion that manifested itself in the formation of a so-called Hill Committee, or Intaba (Mountain) in March 1960 (see Appendix 37). The committee was formed to co-ordinate the activities of the organisation called iKongo, which some claim to be a Xhosisation of the word “Congress”,

4. K.G.V. Fidler, “Rural Cosmopolitanism and Peasant Insurgency: The Pondoland Revolt, South Africa, 1958–1963”, PhD thesis, Emory University, Atlanta, 2010), p. 4.

5. W. Beinart, “Environmental Origins of the Pondoland Revolt”, in S. Dovers, R. Edgecombe and B. Guest (eds), *South Africa’s Environmental History* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 76.

referring to the African National Congress (ANC).⁶ However, this appears to be political disingenuousness, because there is no evidence that the ANC as a movement had anything to do with the Pondoland Revolt.⁷ Indications are that it was rather a grassroots reaction to a government imposition that was highly resented by the traditionalist local people. In her thesis on the Pondoland insurgency, Fidler confirms this:

Unable to reconcile the lexicons of the supernatural that *iKongo* insurgents utilized, members of the ANC seized upon elements of *iKongo* commensurate with ANC ideology. The ANC transformed *iKongo* members (in their version of struggle mythology) ... from independent rural insurgents into members of the ANC's peasant vanguard.⁸

This is a contentious matter and, as Pieterse elaborates in his insightful historiographical review of the revolt, the argument that is put forth depends on the ideology represented by the respective historians, social scientists or politicians that are using the uprising to substantiate their approach to revolution as a social phenomenon or as a phase in the greater South African liberation struggle.⁹ The South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET) histories quote prominent members of the ANC (one of whom was involved in *iKongo* prior to joining the ANC) who admit that no political organisation can lay claim to having instigated or organised the revolt.¹⁰ Though there were individual members of the ANC who participated, the ANC had no significant rural structures to initiate or direct an insurrection at the time.¹¹

Fidler also questions whether the name *iKongo*, which appears to have no particular meaning in the Xhosa language, had anything to do with the ANC.¹² Certainly, the rural migrant workers of Pondoland were exposed to ANC influence during their periods of contract work in the large urban centres of South Africa, and much ANC literature and some ideas were brought back to the rural areas by these workers.¹³ But Mnaba and many others

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6. T.J. Stapleton, *Faku: Rulership and Colonialism in the Mpondo Kingdom, c.1760–1867* (Waterloo: Ontario, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001), pp. 136–137.
 7. R. Mhlaba, *Raymond Mhlaba's Personal Memoirs: Reminiscing from Rwanda and Uganda* (Pretoria and Cape Town, HSRC and Robben Island Museum, 2001), p. 111; J. Pieterse, "Traditionalists, Traitors and Sell-outs: The Roles and Motives of *amaqaba*, *abangcatshi* and *abathengisi* in the Pondoland Revolt of 1960 to 1961", MA dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2007, pp. 64–66.
 8. Fidler, "Rural Cosmopolitanism and Peasant Insurgency", Abstract.
 9. Pieterse, "Traditionalists, Traitors and Sell-outs", pp. 9–24.
 10. S. Matoti and L. Ntsebeza, "Rural Resistance in Mpondoland and Thembuland, 1960–1963", in SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Vol. 1 (1960–1970)* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2004), p. 207.
 11. Stapleton, *Faku*, pp. 137–138.
 12. Fidler, "Rural Cosmopolitanism and Peasant Insurgency", pp. 39–40.
 13. *Ibid.*, pp. 65–67.

identify the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 as the core issue that led to the Mpondo revolt,¹⁴ an issue that sparked fierce resistance from many black rural areas of South Africa – precisely the areas where the ANC did not exercise a major influence. Ironically, the ANC’s claims to have had a stake in the revolt were given early credibility by the very apartheid government they were opposing. The NP obsession with the so-called “red peril” (the threat of Communism) and the *swart gevaar* (the black menace) meant that the revolt was automatically ascribed to the subversive influence of the ANC.¹⁵ Military Intelligence identified “the Congo group [as] an affiliate of the Congress of Democrats”.¹⁶ The belief that the revolt was fomented by the Soviet Communists was openly propagated by the Afrikaans press in South Africa.¹⁷

Further reinforcement of ANC liberation mythology surrounding events in Pondoland was given by an ostensibly no less credible source than the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) when it referred to the Pondo Revolt as “an extended uprising by Pondoland groups – particularly ANC supporters who referred to themselves as iKongo members”.¹⁸ The impression is created by the TRC that this was a confrontation primarily between the ANC and the South African government with its security forces. However, this contention does not appear to stand up to the academic research and scrutiny undertaken to date and already referred to. Ntsebeza concludes that while some of the leaders of the Mpondo uprising did have links to the ANC and other political groupings, it was the people who were directly affected by the government’s Bantu Authorities legislation who were primarily responsible for driving the struggles in Pondoland.¹⁹

The unrest that pulsed through the area during 1960 led to protest gatherings and incidents of violence. Intaba or iKongo (both terms appear to have been used interchangeably in the literature, though the former seems to apply more to a committee or committees – also known as “village courts” – that held their meetings on hillsides, than to

14. V.M. Mnaba, “The Role of the Church towards the Pondo Revolt in South Africa from 1960–1963”, M Theol dissertation, University of South Africa, 2006, p. xiii; Pieterse, “Traditionalists, Traitors and Sell-outs”, pp. 23–24.

15. Pieterse, “Traditionalists, Traitors and Sell-outs”, pp. 60–61.

16. SANDF Archives (hereafter DOD), KG Gp 5, Box 322, File KG/GPW/1/5/4 Vol. 1 “Pondoland Onluste Operasie SWIVEL”, Secret Report, Situation in Pondoland by CG’s Intelligence Sect, DHQ, 10 January 1961.

17. “Oorlogskepe Tree op”, Editorial in *Die Transvaler*, 9 December 1960.

18. “Pondoland Revolt”, Explanation, Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter TRC), Special Report, SABC Transcripts. Also *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, Volume 2* (Pretoria, TRC, 1998), p. 428, paragraph 109.

19. L. Ntsebeza, “Resistance in the Countryside: the Mpondo Revolts Contextualised”, in T. Kepe and L. Ntsebeza (eds), *Rural Resistance in South Africa: The Mpondo Revolts after Fifty Years* (Leiden, Brill, 2011), pp. 40–42.

the organisation as a whole) initially invited government agents and magistrates to hear their grievances, but when they were rebuffed they commenced with a campaign of arson and attacks on policemen, chiefs and anyone known to favour the Bantu Authority system. With the headquarters of the insurgent movement based at Ndhlovu Hill near Bizana, the situation turned to open rebellion²⁰ with the insurgents imposing a rough “jungle justice” on many individuals identified and condemned by them as collaborators with the hated white-imposed authorities. The police and local magistrates were powerless to prevent the anarchy and mayhem that ensued.²¹ Those who belonged to Intaba were quickly made targets of police repression, so they hid in the remote mountains and forests of that part of the Transkei, set up a rival administration and attacked government supporters, burnt their huts and slaughtered their livestock. There were deaths in the violence that erupted. Rebels murdered two chiefs, two headmen, four councillors and seventeen commoners.²² The South African authorities reacted harshly to this challenge. There are many accounts of what happened on 6 June 1960 at Ngquza Hill, a meeting-place of one of the cells of iKongo. They differ substantially in the details, depending on the sympathies or the agenda of the writer, but there is no doubt that the police opened fire on a meeting of the insurgent movement, killing at least eleven people and wounding many more. Coming as it did less than three months after the Sharpeville shootings and six months after the Cato Manor killings, this was an ominous development in the overall South African situation.

There was a gathering of about 250 people on the hill and this was illegal in terms of the emergency regulations in place at the time. The hill was located near the Holy Cross Mission Station between Bizana and Lusikisiki – an area of poor infrastructure that was somewhat isolated from the larger centres of the Transkei. The police arrived in force, using 16 vehicles and supported by SAAF aircraft. These were apparently two Harvards and a Sikorsky S-55 helicopter. The Harvard was a two-seater training aircraft, known as the T-6 Texan in America, its country of origin. It was of Second World War vintage with a limited ability to deliver rockets and light bombs.²³ The aircraft operated from Durban to support the police during the Pondoland insurrection.²⁴ The Harvards dropped tear gas as well as

20. According to Pieterse, “Traditionalists, Traitors and Sell-outs”, pp. 100–101.

21. Fidler, “Rural Cosmopolitanism and Peasant Insurgency”, pp. 80–82.

22. SAPA report from Lusikisiki dated 23 March 1997; “Pondoland Revolt”, *ANC Today*, 3, 22, 6–12 June 2003; M. Horrell, *Action, Reaction and Counter-Action* (Johannesburg, Institute of Race Relations, 1971), p. 32.

23. W. Green and G. Swanborough, *The Observer’s Basic Military Aircraft Directory* (London, Frederick Warne, 1974), p. 184.

24. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 322, File KG/GPW/1/5/4 Vol. 1, “Pondoland Onluste (Bizana) (Operasie SWIVEL), Encl. 63, Secret, “Report on the Situation in Pondoland”, 10 January 1961.

smoke bombs.²⁵ The SADET histories refer to two helicopters and describe police as dropping tear gas canisters from them.²⁶ No substantiation of this could be found in the official military records. The Harvards were the only aircraft used during the revolt that were equipped for dropping any form of bomb. However, six months later, during the employment of soldiers for Operation SWIVEL, the Army commander did obtain permission from the Air Force commander to drop Type 59 tear gas bombs and thunder flashes from the Sikorsky helicopter. These pyrotechnics were small enough to be thrown from the open door of the helicopter.²⁷

At least one witness told the TRC 38 years after the event that “security force members had parachuted from the aircraft” and the TRC stated: “if there were any parachutists these were probably SADF members”.²⁸ Given that the SADF had absolutely no parachute capability at this time (the first 15 South African paratroopers only completed their training in England some seven months after the Ngquza Hill incident), it seems ludicrous that the TRC even entertained the possibility that a parachute drop took place.

Unfortunately, the TRC perpetuated another myth in terms of airborne operations by stating categorically “police launched a helicopter assault on a meeting at Ngquza Hill in June 1960, killing at least eleven people”.²⁹ While there was certainly one helicopter there when the shootings took place, it is not clear what the TRC means when it labels this a helicopter assault. At the time, South Africa had not yet armed any of its helicopters (this would only happen more than a decade later). If the TRC meant that the helicopter placed policemen on the ground in order to carry out an assault, it needs to be borne in mind that the Sikorsky S-55 was only capable of carrying four passengers when flying patrols in mountainous areas and along narrow valleys where air currents and turbulence had a negative effect on safety and overloading could be fatal.³⁰ Four men could hardly carry out an assault on a crowd of several hundred people. It is therefore likely that the helicopter was used for exercising control and coordination of the 16 police vehicles (which apparently approached from different directions) and which transported the significant force of policemen who were used to act against the dissidents. However, with a low flying

25. G. Cawthra, *Brutal Force: The Apartheid War Machine* (London, IDAF, 1986), p. 15.

26. Matoti and Ntsebeza, “Rural Resistance”, p. 186.

27. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 397, File KG/KV/20, Vol. 3, “Instandhouding van Vliegtuie en Helikopters”, Confidential “Report on Employment of Helicopters in Pondoland from HQ Battle Gp Alpha”, January 1961.

28. *TRC Report, Vol. 2*, p. 429, para. 111.

29. *TRC Report, Vol. 2*, p. 9, para. 32.

30. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 396, File KG/KV/20 Vol. 1, “Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters”, Encl. 10, Confidential Memo, “Aankoop van Helikopters vir SA Lugmag”, Ref. DGAF/S/501/1/20/Eng, 7 March 1959.

helicopter buzzing around and the sudden appearance of a large number of armed policemen who opened fire on them, the perception among the frightened local people could easily have been that their attackers were brought in by air.

While the members of the TRC could not be expected to have had a grasp of military terminology, it is unfortunate that their casual use of a term that is commonly accepted in international military circles has painted a picture that fuels false perceptions. Because of the importance of the TRC, such pictures are likely to be accepted by many people without question. In this regard it bears mentioning that various scholars and critics have called the credibility of the TRC into question. Rafael Verbuyst points out that: "Although some historians praise the TRC, most of them stand critically towards its epistemology, ethics, methodology and content".³¹ Nevertheless, the statements by the TRC regarding airborne operations are unlikely to be questioned by anyone without some military knowledge. Whatever inexcusable actions took place at Ngquza Hill in 1960, they certainly did not include an airborne operation and there could not have been a helicopter assault. This is important to establish in terms of this thesis.

The rebels apparently retreated to the bottom of the hill and raised a white flag, but the police advanced from three directions and shooting broke out. There are vastly conflicting reports of how this came about. The police claimed that the insurgents opened fire on them and they were forced to return fire in self-defence; the rebels state emphatically that the police were unprovoked and simply began firing.³² Stapleton says the police were in vehicles and helicopters when they opened fire.³³ However, the events took place many years before the firing of any weapons from helicopters was permitted by the SAAF, so the firing probably came from the vehicles. At least eleven rebels were killed and thirteen wounded during this confrontation. Another three rebels were killed as a result of subsequent police action. However, the number of casualties varies in different reports, with the wounded sometimes given as high as 60.³⁴

At the commission of inquiry after the shootings, the Mpondo people made further demands, all of which were ignored. They therefore instituted a boycott of white-owned

31. R. Verbuyst, "History, Historians and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission", *New Contree*, 66 (July 2013).

32. Fidler, "Rural Cosmopolitanism and Peasant Insurgency", pp. 86–88.

33. Stapleton, *Faku*, p. 137.

34. SAPA report from Lusikisiki dated 23 March 1997; "Pondoland Revolt", *ANC Today*, 3, 22, 6–12 June 2003; Stapleton, *Faku*, p. 137; Fidler, "Rural Cosmopolitanism and Peasant Insurgency", p. 87; Matoti and Ntsebeza, "Rural Resistance", p. 186.

businesses in the Transkei.³⁵ Rather than stopping iKongo in its tracks, the heavy-handedness of the government only served to fuel the insurgency. Between 7 June 1960 (the day after the shootings at Ngquza Hill) and 1 July that year, the South African Police recorded 49 incidents of hut burning in the Bizana magisterial district alone. The region was becoming totally ungovernable as the apartheid state struggled to suppress the insurgency and iKongo fought to establish its own vision of an independent Xhosa state.³⁶ Between July and October, attacks by iKongo on government appointed chiefs and headmen continued throughout the region.³⁷ The TRC recorded that “during the Pondoland revolt, at least eight chiefs and their councillors were killed and their huts were burned”.³⁸ This figure is less than those given by other sources, but whatever the true numbers, it is clear that violence and intimidation were rife. When the findings of the commission of inquiry into the shootings at Ngquza Hill were made known in October, stating the police had acted in self-defence, they were predictably rejected by the people of Pondoland, who refused to pay further taxes.³⁹

In September 1960, iKongo sent a petition to the United Nations rejecting the rule of the apartheid state and requesting recognition of its sovereignty as an independent state.⁴⁰ This alone, was in stark contrast to the ANC viewpoint that South Africa was indivisible. In his account of the revolt, Govan Mbeki makes no mention of the petition to the UN. He also plays down issues such as the murders committed by the members of iKongo, implying that they did not carry the approval of the real leadership of the movement. He deliberately but incorrectly gives the impression that the SA Army was already deployed in Pondoland before the shootings at Ngquza hill and that their presence became a long-term feature in the Transkei.⁴¹ Although Army elements were deployed there briefly earlier in 1960, they had been withdrawn by the time the Ngquza Hill incident took place.⁴²

The national state of emergency in South Africa following the Sharpeville shootings was lifted in August 1960. But the increasing lawlessness due to the continuing insurgency in Pondoland led to the South African parliament passing Proclamation R400 on 11 November and thereby instituting a state of emergency in Eastern Pondoland.⁴³ Subsequently,

35. Stapleton, *Faku*, p. 137.

36. Fidler, “Rural Cosmopolitanism and Peasant Insurgency”, p. 56.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

38. *TRC Report, Vol. 2*, p. 389, para. 282.

39. Fidler, “Rural Cosmopolitanism and Peasant Insurgency”, p. 141.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

41. G. Mbeki, *South Africa: The Peasants’ Revolt* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1964), Chapter 9.

42. *TRC Report, Vol. 2*, p. 430, para. 113.

43. *Extraordinary Government Gazette* (Regulation Gazette No. 69), Pretoria, 30 November 1960.

Proclamation R413, passed by parliament on 14 December 1960, extended the state of emergency to the whole of the Transkei. The SADF, in terms of the *Government Gazette* outlining Proclamation R400, was authorised to assist the South African Police in restoring order and elements of the SADF were mobilised and deployed in the area. The employment of troops to quell the disturbances caused headlines in the South African press, with the reports tinged with a nervousness that many whites no doubt felt.⁴⁴

5.3. OPERATION SWIVEL AND THE TACTICAL EMPLOYMENT OF HELICOPTERS

Govan Mbeki described the military deployment in an article, claiming that several columns of “Saracen tanks” were included among the units that were deployed into the Transkei from Natal.⁴⁵ It is possible that the police used some Saracen armoured personnel carriers (APCs) in Pondoland, as eight of the vehicles were on loan to the SAP from the SADF for a period,⁴⁶ but the Saracen is certainly not a “tank” and the Army did not use any armoured vehicles during their deployment between December 1960 and February 1961.⁴⁷ The confusion might have arisen from an earlier SADF deployment in Pondoland during Operation DUIKER, which took place from 21 March to 7 May 1960, when, according to an SADF submission to the TRC, six platoons and four Saracen APCs were used.⁴⁸ The revolt had not, at that stage, reached the dire proportions of the Ngquza Hill tragedy, so this deployment had been more a show of force than anything else.

Fidler’s failure to consult the military archives⁴⁹ is a significant and unfortunate shortcoming in her otherwise impressive piece of research about the nature of the insurgency in Pondoland because it leaves out vital information that contributes to an understanding of the counter-insurgency actions of the campaign. This shortcoming is evident in her claim that the South African security forces modelled their actions largely on those of the British during the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s. There appears to be no evidence in the available military archives of collusion between the South African and

44. “Troops Rushed to Pondoland”, *Sunday Express*, 11 December 1960; “Mobile Watch Speeds to Pondoland”, *Sunday Tribune*, 11 December 1960.

45. G. Mbeki, “Jackboot over Pondoland”, *Fighting Talk*, 15, 1 (February 1961), p. 2.

46. Description of the Alvis Saracen Mk3 APC at the exhibit in the SA Armour Museum at the School of Armour, Tempe, Bloemfontein.

47. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 322, File KG/GPW/1/5/4 Vol. 1 “Pondoland Onluste (Bizana) (Operasie SWIVEL)”, Encl. 5, Secret Op. Order No. 1, 8 December 1960.

48. *TRC Report, Vol. 2*, p. 430, par. 113.

49. Fidler, “Rural Cosmopolitanism and Peasant Insurgency”, p. 146.

British military forces at the time of Mau Mau.⁵⁰ In fact, under Defence Minister Erasmus there was a deliberate effort to minimise contact with the British military in all spheres during the 1950s. However, there is no shortage of evidence that the General Staff did indeed take note with concern of insurgent wars throughout the world. These included British, Dutch and French territories in the Far East, in Africa (including Kenya and Algeria), in Cyprus and even Cuba.⁵¹ But to single out the Mau Mau campaign in Kenya as the model for what unfolded in Pondoland is questionable, because the claim is not something that has been substantiated. What is indisputable is that several exercises were held in the late 1950s where the emphasis in the South African military shifted towards countering guerrilla threats rather than large-scale conventional offensives,⁵² but there does not appear to be any evidence of a particular “model” of counter-insurgency being adopted at the time.

When the SADF deployed in support of the police to counter the insurgency in Pondoland, the military operation was given the codename SWIVEL. For this operation, the Army was only deployed in Pondoland for a little over two months and the Air Force for about four. However, the confusion between police and military identities that permeates most pro-liberation movement narratives results in, at the very least, the absolutely incorrect impression that the area was saturated by the military from early 1960 until well into 1963.⁵³

At a preliminary planning meeting held by the General Staff in Pretoria on 6 December 1960 the decision by the government to employ the SADF in Pondoland was discussed and specific guidelines were highlighted that there was to be no bloodshed and no publicity. It was decided that two of the country’s three Mobile Watches, each of about 150 men, would be deployed under a Task Force HQ with two Alouette helicopters and other air support.⁵⁴ Defence HQ then issued an operational instruction to the Army and Air Force tasking them to prepare the two 150-man Mobile Watches, two Auster Air Observation Post (AOP) aircraft, two Alouette helicopters and two Harvard aircraft in

50. The Mau Mau experience in Kenya holds a particular fascination for some who seek parallels with the South African situation. The *Poqo* movement is also likened to Mau Mau in K.M. Kondlo, “The Exile History of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (South Africa) 1960–1990: In the Twilight of the Azanian Revolution”, PhD thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, 2003), pp. 290–291.

51. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 352, Secret File KG/GPW/15, Vol. 1, “Guerrilla Warfare”, Encl. 1, Army Chief of Staff to Comdt Gen, “Teen-Guerrilla Oorlogvoering”, 29 June 1957, and Encl. 2, Inspector General, to Comdt Gen, “Guerrilla Warfare”, 24 September 1957; Box 132, Confidential KG/DP/6, Vol. 1, “Newspapers, Books and Journals”, Maj. P. Coetzee “Die SA Weermag: Sy Taak en Ontwikkeling”.

52. DOD, MVEF Gp, Box 150, Confidential File MV205, “Annual Report: UDF 1957”, 17 April 1958.

53. Fidler, “Rural Cosmopolitanism and Peasant Insurgency”, pp. 146–147.

54. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 322, File KG/GPW/1/5/4 Vol. 1 “Pondoland Onluste (Operasie SWIVEL)”, Encl. 3, Secret hand-written “Notes on preliminary planning meeting on the trouble in Pondoland” 6 December 1960.

addition to the air support already provided to the SAP. It was again stressed that there was to be no bloodshed except in self-defence and assistance to the police was to include demonstrations of force, anti-patrol activities, enforcement of curfews, anti-riot operations with the use of gas and flame throwers and cordon tasks.⁵⁵

A day later the Army issued its operational order in which there was more detail.⁵⁶ A battle group composed of 1 and 2 Mobile Watches was formed to operate in the territory, under command of Commandant Jan Burger (promoted to colonel during the operation), the US-trained paratrooper. Designated Battle Group Alpha, Burger's force was instructed to exercise strict control of ammunition, which was only to be issued for a particular task on the personal authority of the two respective Mobile Watch commanders. Mortars were not to be taken on the deployment. Each Mobile Watch would comprise an HQ and three platoons, and vehicles would be standard 4x4 trucks and Jeeps. No armoured vehicles were to be used. Effectively, the force would consist of two infantry companies – less than half a battalion.⁵⁷ The air support in Pondoland to both the SAP and the SA Army from early December 1960 consisted of one older S-55 and two newly acquired Alouette II helicopters, four Harvards from 5 Squadron and two Austers. This was an increase in the number of aircraft initially earmarked for the operation. Photographs of the various aircraft types employed during Operation SWIVEL appear in Appendix 38. The airstrip at Bizana was primitive, but it did allow both Austers and Harvards to land there, as well as laden Dakota transport aircraft that were used for resupply. The Austers were based at Bizana airstrip during the deployment, while the Harvards operated from Durban and only remained at Bizana for brief periods when this was regarded as necessary. The Harvards were authorised to carry out strikes on request, using smoke or teargas bombs; lethal weapons could only be used with the personal authority of the Commandant General of the SADF.⁵⁸

Advance parties from the two Mobile Watches arrived in the Transkei on 8 December 1960 with the main body of troops following shortly afterwards. The Battle Group HQ, which was established at Bizana, was co-located with a composite Supply Platoon for logistic support to the Battle Group. Of the fighting force, 1 Mobile Watch was also at Bizana beside the landing strip, while 2 Mobile Watch (minus one platoon)

55. *Ibid.*, Encl. 4, Secret Op. Instruction, 7 December 1960.

56. *Ibid.*, Encl. 5, Secret Op. Order No. 1, 8 December 1960.

57. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 451, OP SWIVEL (OC's Diary). The commander's diary is maintained as standard military practice during operations. Usually maintained by his adjutant and records all actions undertaken.

58. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 322, File KG/GPW/1/5/4 Vol 1 "Pondoland Onluste (Operasie SWIVEL)", Encl. 6, Secret SAAF signal, 8 December 1960; Restricted Report, "Visit to Bizana: Info Collected", Capt M. le Roux, SAIC, 6 December 1960; Encl. 24, Secret Op. Order 1 (Op SWIVEL), HQ Battle Group Alpha, 13 December 1960.

established its base beside the airstrip at Lusikisiki. The platoon that was detached was positioned on high ground just outside Flagstaff near the road to Lusikisiki. Soldiers from 1 Mobile Watch took over from the police in the duty of guarding a mission hospital and the local power station and water reservoir. They were also responsible for the protection of the Battle Group HQ and the Air Force Detachment. The guarding of two reservoirs, two catchment dams and a power station in the vicinity of Lusikisiki and one reservoir at Flagstaff was taken over from the police by 2 Mobile Watch. With the numerous guard duties they had to perform, this meant that even with rotation of the available personnel, the Battle Group rarely had more than two platoons and a section available for other tasks.⁵⁹ Effectively, it could only employ about 70 men in actual operations, which was less than a company.

For the soldiers, the deployment in Pondoland was for the most part one of providing cordons for the SA Police during searches of kraals and rural villages where dissidents were suspected of hiding. However, in terms of a special government proclamation on 14 December 1960, wide powers of arrest were conferred on the military as well as the police in the Transkeian territories, and one newspaper reported that the Defence Force was “taking over” from the SAP in Transkei.⁶⁰ This claim was unfounded; it was never the case. The light aircraft (the Austers and Harvards) were used for reconnaissance and to “buzz” unlawful assemblies, causing dissidents to disperse. The Harvards also carried out teargas strikes on forest hideouts and troops were moved around the area by helicopter to conduct patrols through such forests and gorges.⁶¹

On 28 December 1960, after three months in England and a few days at home for Christmas, Commandant Louw reported for duty at the Headquarters of Battle Group Alpha in Bizana.⁶² He immediately resumed command in the field of his unit, 2 Mobile Watch and threw himself into the operation with the characteristic vigour that epitomised everything this dynamic officer did. He was joined by several of those who had accompanied him to England.⁶³

From the commencement of the deployment the military made extensive use of helicopters. Although helicopters had been used in South Africa earlier that year in support

59. Ibid., Confidential “Kort Oorsig van Militêre Operasies Gelei Deur Gevegsgroep Alfa” Period 12 to 31 December 1960”, Appendix A, Personal letter from Col J.H. Burger to Gen P.H. Grobbelaar, 2 January 1961; Encl. 24, Secret Op Order 1 (Op SWIVEL), HQ Battle Group Alpha, Bizana, 13 December 1960.

60. “Weermag Neem Oor in Transkei”, *Transvaler*, 15 December 1960.

61. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 575, SITREPS, Battle Group Alpha, OP SWIVEL.

62. Ibid.

63. Interview with Lt Col Ronnie Claassen (ret'd), Centurion, 13 June 1995.

of the SAP,⁶⁴ Operation SWIVEL, which commenced in November 1960, was the first-ever military operational employment of rotary-wing aircraft by the SADF as part of a carefully planned tactical application of the concept of vertical envelopment. The Sikorsky S-55 and the two new Alouette II helicopters from the SAAF's 17 Squadron were used both to aid command and control during the operation as well as for the transporting of troops. Trooping was done especially when men who had been patrolling in remote and inaccessible areas of the wild and rugged terrain had to be extricated. The deployment took place during the rainy season and much of the terrain was soft and muddy, making it impossible for vehicles to move away from roads. And because there were so few roads and those that did exist did not have all-weather surfaces, it was often impossible to reach patrols by vehicle. The helicopters therefore came to play an extremely useful role in this regard. General reconnaissance, road and airfield reconnaissance were primary tasks of especially the Auster aircraft. They and the Harvards were also able to watch for escape attempts during search operations.⁶⁵

For the most part, one Alouette II and one Auster were allocated to each of the two Mobile Watches for operations, though all were positioned at the airstrip at Bizana.⁶⁶ The Battle Group HQ held the S-55 for use or allocation. The tactics that Burger used for the helicopters were to position them with a section of troops at his Tactical HQ (which was mobile and could be located somewhere relatively near to where the operation was being executed). While the police carried out a raid or the soldiers were executing a sweep of the area that had been designated, an Auster or a Harvard would patrol along a specified route around the area. As soon as suspected insurgents were spotted from the air, having been flushed from a forest or a ravine by the troops, the helicopters and a waiting section of ten troops would be scrambled. While they flew to the area, the fixed-wing aircraft would keep the fleeing suspects under observation and then direct the approaching helicopters straight to them. Descending on them from above like some rapacious raptor, the noisy and frightening whirlybirds created confusion and terror in the hearts and minds of any iKongo

64. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 396, File KG/KV/20 Vol. 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Encl. 34b, Confidential "Memo on Requirements for Helicopters for Internal Security and Other SAAF Commitments, Part II", Ref. DGAF/S/501/1/20/Eng, 12 May 1960. See also A.J. Venter, *The Chopper Boys: Helicopter Warfare in Africa* (Halfway House, Southern, 1994), pp. 125–126.

65. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 322, File KG/GPW/1/5/4 Vol. 1 "Pondoland Onluste (Bizana) (Operasie SWIVEL)", Restricted Report "Visit to Bizana: Info Collected" by Capt M.J. le Roux, SAIC, 6 December 1960; Secret Report on the Situation in Pondoland by the CG's Intelligence Section, DHQ, 10 January 1961.

66. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 322, File KG/GPW/1/5/4 Vol. 1 "Pondoland Onluste (Bizana) (Operasie SWIVEL)", Encl. 24, Secret Op. Order No. 1 (Op SWIVEL), HQ Battle Group Alpha, Bizana, 13 December 1960.

insurgent and it was an easy task for the airborne soldiers to capture them. Burger himself stated that, "Quite frequently, more miscreants are caught in this manner than by an infantry platoon."⁶⁷ Considering that the three helicopters could transport a maximum total of ten troops at one time, while a platoon consisted of in excess of 30 men, this represented a considerable economy of force, particularly in view of the limited number of troops that Burger had at his disposal.

On several occasions a full platoon was air-transported in successive lifts by the helicopters and positioned so as to prevent suspected members of iKongo from escaping across or through ravines as a cordon was tightened around an area. On another occasion a total of 66 troops was positioned by helicopter, mostly as "stoppers" on otherwise inaccessible mountainsides. The entire operation was controlled from the air with the Army commander in an Auster light aircraft.⁶⁸ Once, an air strike by a Harvard dropping teargas bombs was directed from a helicopter.⁶⁹

Being airborne, however, was the exception rather than the rule for the men of the Mobile Watches. There simply were not enough helicopters for proper air-mobile operations and the scale of such actions was infinitely smaller than what later transpired in Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia and South West Africa/Namibia. In Pondoland, for the most part operations were just hard, infantry foot patrols. The hilly and often mountainous terrain made communications between the various platoons and their Watch HQs extremely difficult, particularly with the Second World War vintage radios with which they were equipped. Heavy rains turned the unpaved roads into slippery slides and visibility in the mist was at times down to less than 100 metres. The mist naturally also put a sharp limitation on air activity. Most of the cordons and searches took place at night, on foot. However, one such cordon, executed by day, saw the Mobile Watch troops mounted on Jeeps. This proved highly successful and a significant number of suspects were rounded up.⁷⁰

Agitators were hunted down in the forests and mountains, hundreds of arrests were made and the military force systematically quelled the unrest.⁷¹ Nevertheless, an admission

67. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 397, File KG/KV/20 Vol. 3, "Instandhouding van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Report on Employment of Helicopters in Pondoland, HQ Battle Gp Alpha (Appendix A to DGAF/S/501/1/20/ENG), January 1961.

68. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 575, SITREPS: Battle Group Alpha, Op SWIVEL.

69. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 397, File KG/KV/20 Vol. 3, "Instandhouding van Vliegtuie en Helikopters", Report on Employment of Helicopters in Pondoland, HQ Battle Gp Alpha (Appendix A to DGAF/S/501/1/20/ENG), January 1961.

70. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 451, OP SWIVEL (OC's Diary); Box No. 575, SITREPS, Battle Group Alpha, Op SWIVEL.

71. Ibid.

was made that many of the political leaders of the revolt had not been captured and had apparently managed to flee the area. The military did, however, report a change in the attitude of the local population and its general disillusionment with iKongo,⁷² although this was clearly superficial, because the insurgency struggled on for many months before it finally fizzled out. Even while the Army was deployed in Eastern Pondoland, the intensity of the unrest waned to the extent that there were times when soldiers had little to do but wait around for something to happen (see Appendix 39).

Ben Turok mistakenly refers to the military force used in this operation as “the crack Black Watch Brigade”.⁷³ His failure to check his facts and the resultant inaccuracy of his statement creates a wrong perception on two fronts. Firstly, the Black Watch was a famous British kilted regiment, and the British were certainly not involved in this action; and secondly, the battle group of two units, each only of reinforced company strength, was not even of battalion size and was nowhere near that of a brigade in number, composition or structure. A brigade would have been anything between 3,000 and 5,000 men. In fact, the total number of SADF members employed in Pondoland at the height of Operation SWIVEL in December 1960 was 37 officers and 410 other ranks, including headquarters staff and logistic personnel. The actual number carrying out the infantry work on the ground comprised 10 officers and 312 other ranks from the two Mobile Watches.⁷⁴ This means that the total number of security force personnel deployed in Pondoland during the emergency was less than 900, including both policemen and soldiers. At a push, if the airmen are also included, it is possible that the numbers may have reached 1,000, only about half of which would have been military personnel (the rest were policemen). While Turok’s lack of military background and knowledge could excuse this error on his part, his standing as a leader in the ANC and a politician of some integrity means that the wrong perception he created carried considerable weight. His simplistic statement: “The revolt was ultimately crushed by a massive military intervention by the crack Black Watch Brigade, which surrounded the region, cut off all roads and then went in to smash all opposition,” serves to strengthen the questionable perception that this was a callous, heavy-handed military

72. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 322, File KG/GPW/1/5/4 Vol. 1 “Pondoland Onluste (Bizana) (Operasie SWIVEL)”, Confidential “Kort Oorsig van Militêre Operasies Gelei Deur Gevegsgroep Alfa” Period 12 to 31 Desember 1960”, Appendix A to letter from Col J.H. Burger to Gen P.H. Grobbelaar, 2 January 1961.

73. B. Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, (Johannesburg, Jacana Media, 2010) p. 77.

74. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 322, File KG/GPW/1/5/4 Vol. 1 “Pondoland Onluste (Bizana) (Operasie SWIVEL)”, Confidential “Kort Oorsig van Militêre Operasies Gelei deur Gevegsgroep Alfa”, Period 12 to 31 Desember 1960, Appendix A to letter from Col J.H. Burger to Gen P.H. Grobbelaar, 2 January 1961.

operation of vast proportions in which unacceptable and violent excesses were perpetrated on innocent peasants.

Without any doubt, the military intervention contributed substantially to the stabilising of the region and the ultimate end of the revolt; but it would have required a force of several divisions (in excess of 20,000 men) to “surround” the area in question, and words like “crush” and “smash” are hardly at one with the fact that there was not a single death caused by Burger’s battle group during the two-month duration of the military operation. This is not to say that there were no acts of violence carried out by the security forces, nor can it be denied that the presence and actions of the military in Eastern Pondoland caused severe stress, disruption and suffering to the local population. But nevertheless the statement creates a perception that cannot be substantiated. His description of the part played by the military in countering the insurrection ignores the fact that guidelines and restrictions were placed on Burger by his superiors; nor does it acknowledge Burger’s enforcement of disciplined action by his subordinates. In a personal communication to the Commandant General of the SADF, Burger explained that one soldier had shot a “Bantu” man in the arm during a cordon and search operation on 27 December 1960 and that another soldier (who was on guard at a local power station) had fired a warning shot when an insurgent had inflicted a light wound on his forearm with a knife.⁷⁵ As it was a military requirement to account for every round of ammunition issued, the reporting of these incidents can be regarded as credible. If there were actions in which loss of life had occurred, Burger would most certainly have had to submit a detailed report on such incidents. The gross inaccuracy of Turok’s statements undermines the moral high ground of the liberation struggle that he is championing. He creates a false impression coloured by political rhetoric – one that is couched in simplistic terms to convey a message of brutal oppression and heroic resistance rather than focusing on the facts.

Nor was it necessary to deploy a larger force in Eastern Pondoland than the relatively miniscule Battle Group Alpha, because at no stage did the Mpondo uprising reach proportions which could seriously be called a threat to the state and there were no clashes of arms or belligerent encounters that can even be classified as skirmishes. Seen in perspective against other insurgent campaigns, the military and police force levels that were employed were very small, the extent and lasting impact of violent actions on the part of the insurgents was insignificant and the uprising was quickly relegated to obscurity on the

75. Ibid., Encl. 62, Letter from Col J.H. Burger to Gen P.H. Grobbelaar, 2 January 1961.

periphery of the greater southern African struggle. The insurgents had no outside support and their arms were pathetically primitive and limited. The very presence of the Army had a severe dampening effect on the ardour of the rebels and the mobility afforded the security forces by the helicopters quickly awed most of the dissidents. The *Intaba* committees disintegrated in the face of the constant raids by police, backed up by the military who also patrolled the area extensively. The swift movement of troops by air across what had previously been inaccessible or impassable terrain left the insurgents with no place to hide, so large numbers were captured and arrested. Bereft of its leaders, who had either been captured or had fled the country, the iKongo movement quickly collapsed and lost its ability to function as an alternative to the hated Bantu Authorities. Though the insurgency did limp on for more than a year, the impetus of the resistance had been effectively halted.

So successful was the military operation that 1 Mobile Watch was soon withdrawn, effectively leaving only half the number of troops to continue supporting the police. The Army elements in Pondoland were thinned out as unobtrusively as possible, so as not to give the impression that there was a sudden decrease in the military presence, which could have resulted in a resurgence of the insurrection.⁷⁶ By 17 February 1961, just over two months after they had been deployed, a decision was taken to withdraw the Battle Group HQ and 2 Mobile Watch; on 22 February the last SA Army elements had departed from Pondoland.⁷⁷ The Air Force continued to provide air support to the police for a time, but the insurgency's back had been broken. Most of the leaders appear to have fled to Lesotho (then still the Basutoland Protectorate), from where a few went into exile abroad and continued to try unsuccessfully to obtain international support for an independent Pondoland.⁷⁸ There were mass arrests by the police, following up the various murders and assassinations that took place during the insurrection, and a significant number of those tried and found guilty were executed over the next few years.⁷⁹ The United Nations made no response at all to the original petition of the iKongo movement, possibly due to the influence of the mainstream liberation movements. Events had overtaken the "rural cosmopolitanism" of the iKongo revolutionaries and the PAC's Poqo took their place in the Transkei for a while before the ANC eventually extended its own structures and influence

76. DOD, Secretary for Defence, DC Gp 1, Box 78, Top Secret File DC/17850/447/1 "Military Operations East Pondoland", Encl. 6, Commandant General to Director of Planning and Operations, 24 January 1961.

77. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 323, File KG/GPW/1/5/4 Vol. 2 "Pondoland (Bizana) Onluste (Operasie SWIVEL)", Encl. 170, HQ Battle Gp Alpha Operational Order No. 3, 17 February 1961.

78. "Erger Onrus Beoog, sê Pondo Oorsee", *Die Transvaler*, 21 August 1961.

79. Matoti and Ntsebeza, "Rural Resistance", pp. 199–200.

into the territory once the Transkei had received so-called “independence” from South Africa. Poqo, the forerunner of the PAC’s armed wing, the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA), which commenced its acts of terror two years after the Mpondo insurrection, is outlined by Kondlo as showing a marked resemblance to the iKongo insurgent movement of Pondoland in terms of its membership, methods, ancestral worship and certain of its objectives.⁸⁰

Strangely, the SADET histories, in their account of the Mpondo uprising, make no mention of the Defence Force deployment.⁸¹ Yet the TRC’s unfounded assertion that a parachute operation may have taken place and that a helicopter assault operation did indeed take place during the counter-insurgency campaign, makes it imperative that any study of airborne operations in southern Africa should include an analysis of Operation SWIVEL. This, together with it having included the first operational employment by the SAAF of helicopters in support of the Army, warrants its inclusion in this thesis.

5.4. ASSESSMENT OF THE EVENTS IN PONDOLAND

The Mpondo Revolt, although neglected or forgotten by most military analysts and military historians, remains of considerable significance in the annals of insurgency and counter-insurgency in southern Africa. Significant to insurgency, because iKongo achieved more success than any other insurgent movement in the region by becoming a *de facto* government within their area of operations and accomplishing this in a very brief a space of time (although it was equally short-lived). Despite having received no schooling in the principles of insurgency or training in the tactics used in insurgency war as elucidated in the writings of successful proponents such as Mao Tze-dong, the iKongo leaders managed to establish a strategic base area in which they exercised military and political control with a view to “preserving and expanding themselves and destroying and driving out the enemy”.⁸² In this they inadvertently applied Mao’s principles. The iKongo insurgents have never been acknowledged for their unschooled yet almost instinctive application of the principles of insurgency, possibly because they accomplished this outside the formal framework, guidance and strategy of the ANC. In recent years the uprising has been lauded in political terms and has been incorporated into the liberation narrative (though carefully avoiding the actual political agenda of Intaba); but it is in the tactics of rural insurgency that it really

80. Kondlo, *The Exile History of the PAC*, pp. 291–292.

81. Matoti and Ntsebeza, “Rural Resistance”, pp. 177–208.

82. Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Military Writings* (Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1963), p. 165.

stands out as an African accomplishment, however short-lived. This is a point that appears to have been missed in the SADET histories, where the “parochial” nature of the revolt is emphasised in an almost patronising manner.⁸³

From the side of the security forces, the revolt was significant to counter-insurgency because it saw the genesis of helicopter warfare by the SADF. It is important to bear in mind that the use of rotary wing aircraft as a tactical tool was at that stage still in its infancy internationally. But an operationally minded and experienced officer, a qualified paratrooper trained by the Americans in the concept of vertical envelopment long before South Africa disposed of an airborne unit, had immediately grasped the potential of the helicopter. Colonel Jan Burger succinctly listed the lessons learned from Operation SWIVEL, from an airborne perspective, in a report drawn up during the operation.

Firstly, he pointed out that exercising command and control of an operation from a helicopter enabled the ground commander to overcome the limitations of radio contact in such mountainous, forested and broken terrain. It also gave him the ability to re-orientate his troops on the ground and issue fresh orders to them for the changing tactical situation. Secondly, he stressed how topographical reconnaissance by helicopter enabled commanders to overcome shortcomings in available maps and to devise new plans very rapidly. This speeded up the movement of infantry on the ground by guiding them along the quickest and most negotiable route. Thirdly, Burger described how the transportation of troops by helicopter proved to be a tremendous advantage to Battle Group Alpha, despite only having three helicopters of very limited capacity at its disposal. The modern turbo-engine Alouette II, although fast and manoeuvrable, could only lift three soldiers with their equipment at a time, while the more cumbersome S-55 could handle four. However, being an old technology piston-engine aircraft, the S-55 was not only slower, but also less reliable and had a significantly poorer performance. The positioning of troops therefore had to be carried out in relays. In the fourth place, the battle group commander was enthusiastic about the evacuation of casualties by helicopter, which he claimed had lent a whole new perspective to the military operation. Though there were no battle casualties per se, the rough nature of the terrain that troops were traversing inevitably led to injuries and there were the usual instances of illness while on patrol. Prior to the advent of helicopters, casualty evacuation in such terrain was always a major problem, particularly in the case of a foot patrol in isolated and trackless areas. Time, of vital importance in the evacuation of

83. Matoti and Ntsebeza, “Rural Resistance”, p. 208.

high priority casualties, was massively reduced with the use of helicopters. In the words of Burger, “the helicopters in the present operation have proved quite invaluable for this.” Finally, he explained how the directing of strikes by fixed-wing aircraft such as the Harvards dropping teargas was effectively controlled from a helicopter.⁸⁴

What is remarkable about these points is how accurately they foreshadowed the subsequent use of helicopters and the accompanying refinement of heliborne tactics in the war that lay ahead in southern Africa. The helicopter tactics of the Portuguese in Angola and Mozambique, of the Rhodesians both inside Rhodesia and in Mozambique and Zambia, and of the South Africans in what was then known as South West Africa (Namibia) as well as in Angola, all showed elements of the pioneering tactics of Jannie Burger as well as of the airborne lessons he listed from the actions in Pondoland. Operation SWIVEL can therefore be seen as the embryogenesis of what became known as fire force – the acme of tactical airborne operations during the Thirty Year War in southern Africa (fire force is dealt with in detail in subsequent chapters). It could be said that Colonel Jannie Burger with his Battle Group Alpha in Pondoland in 1960 and 1961 was the first to conceive and apply the airborne tactics of fire force in southern Africa.

At a meeting of the General Staff in January 1961, the Commandant General noted two lessons learnt from Operation SWIVEL, given the difficult, mountainous terrain and poor radio communications that characterised the action. These were firstly, that a far greater number of troops was necessary for such operations; and secondly, that more helicopters would be needed. He indicated that at least 20 of these aircraft would be required for any similar operation in the future.⁸⁵ These points were addressed within a short time. The extension of conscription from an initial period of three months to nine was barely a year away, and the order for the delivery of the first 24 Alouette III helicopters had already been placed with the French. But the concept that was evolving was purely tactical and it seemed there was still no thought about the strategic application of the emerging airborne capability.

Willem Louw was wrenched away after less than three weeks of commanding his unit in the field. In the middle of January 1961 he had to hand over command to Major T.J. Renfree, the airborne veteran who had parachuted into Albania on clandestine missions

84. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 397, File KG/KV/20 Vol. 3, “Instandhouding van Vliegtuie en Helikopters”, Report on Employment of Helicopters in Pondoland from HQ Battle Gp Alpha (Appendix “A” to DGAF/S/501/1/20/ENG), January 1961.

85. DOD, DC Gp 4, Box 121, File DC 17850/436 Vol. 2 (S), “General Staff Conferences”, Minutes of General Staff Meeting, 10–13 January 1961.

during the Second World War.⁸⁶ Louw had to serve on the Board of Officers convened by the Chief of Army Staff for the purpose of examining and reporting on all aspects affecting the conversion of 2 Mobile Watch into a parachute unit.⁸⁷

5.5. THE DECISION BY THE LIBERATION MOVEMENTS TO RESORT TO ARMED STRUGGLE

The momentous events that took place in 1960 made this a watershed year. It was the year in which the lines were drawn for South Africa's part in the Thirty Year War. What happened during that year and in the next few years of the sixties prompted the government to move towards a more deliberate programme of militarisation. It also prompted the liberation movements to turn to armed resistance. This coincided with the establishment of a parachute battalion by the SADF. Although the decision had preceded the violence that erupted in 1960, the motive for forming a parachute battalion was closely linked to the growing upheavals in Africa and their effect on South Africa. The paratroopers were seldom to be used against the South African liberation movements, but the role that they played in creating the climate that gave impetus to the creation of an airborne capability is important, and therefore the decision by these movements to resort to armed struggle is briefly examined.

Sharpeville, unheard of before 1960, became a word that echoed through the annals of South African history thereafter. But a few months earlier, in January 1960 the tensions created by more than a decade of enforced apartheid by the state boiled over in a confrontation at Cato Manor in Natal. Nine policemen, five of them black and four white, were murdered and their bodies mutilated during rioting by local blacks.⁸⁸ In the wake of this attack, on 21 March 1960, the infamous Sharpeville massacre took place near Vereeniging. Nervous policemen over-reacted to an anti-pass law demonstration by the PAC and opened fire on the crowd. Sixty-nine unarmed protestors were shot dead and 179 were wounded.⁸⁹ Nine days later the government declared a state of emergency which remained

86. Interview with Col Tommy Renfree (ret'd), Umhlanga Rocks, 28 July 1990.

87. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 297, File No KG/GPT/2/2/1/4 Vol. 1, Report by Board of Officers: Parachute Training, Mobile Watch, 21 January 1961.

88. SAPS Museum and Archives, File 667-29/2/1B – 6/14-1, "Cato Manor"; "Nine Police Massacred at Durban", *Cape Times*, 25 January 1960; T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History* (London, Macmillan, 1992), p. 285.

89. A. Jeffery, *People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2009), p. 1. G.M. Carter, "South Africa: Growing Black-White Confrontation", in G.M. Carter and P. O'Meara (eds), *Southern Africa: The Continuing Crisis* (London, Macmillan, 1979), p. 105, gives 67 dead and 186 wounded.

in force until August that year. On 8 April both the ANC and the PAC were banned.⁹⁰ There were protest marches involving tens of thousands of black people, some 20,000 demonstrators were detained and the Citizen Force was mobilised and deployed in various towns. Between 21 March and 19 April 1960, according to Horrell, 83 civilians and three policemen lost their lives and 365 civilians and 59 policemen were injured.⁹¹ These figures do not take into account the nine policemen killed at Cato Manor in January. Sharpeville was a catalytic event for both sides in the looming conflict.

To many whites in South Africa there was a sense that the simmering pot that was their country was beginning to boil as a growing spirit of fear began to grip the governing elite. The outcome of the referendum held that year, ostensibly to gauge the white voters' opinion on whether South Africa should become a republic was doubtless influenced to some extent by the rising spectre of black resistance and the rejection of South Africa's racial policies by Britain, the Commonwealth and the rest of the world.⁹²

For black South Africans and particularly the liberation movements, "after Sharpeville and the State of Emergency ... all hope of a non-violent solution collapsed".⁹³ In his book, *Strategic Problems of South Africa's Liberation Struggle* (1974), Ben Turok maintains that "In South Africa, since there are no mediating political institutions between the authority of the ruling class and the mass of the oppressed, sharp conflict is inescapable."⁹⁴ In 1960, with its stark and polarising landmark events, the country was lurching terrifyingly towards this sharp conflict.

The intensity, sophistication and scope of the Mpondo uprising had a profound effect on both the security forces and the liberation movements of South Africa. According to Pieterse, several writers, including Callinicos and Turok, have stated that the revolt had a direct bearing on the ANC decision to resort to the armed struggle.⁹⁵ The military operation that was initiated to quell the uprising was the first SADF experience of modern counter-insurgency operations.

90. H. Barrell, *MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle* (London, Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 2–3; Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, p. 79.

91. Horrell, *Action, Reaction and Counter-Action*, p. 32. Barrell, *MK: ANC's Armed Struggle* gives the number detained or arrested as 11, 000, p. 3.

92. G.H.L. le May, *Black and White in South Africa: The Politics of Survival* (London, The Book Service, 1971), pp. 109 and 114.

93. Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, p. 14.

94. B. Turok, *Strategic Problems of South Africa's Liberation Struggle: A Critical Analysis* (Richmond: Canada, LSM Press, 1974), p. 7.

95. Pieterse, "Traditionalists, Traitors and Sell-outs", p. 3.

The expedition to Pondoland by the SADF served only to reinforce white thinking that the mutinies in the newly-independent Congo, the bloody attempted secession of Katanga, the civil war and the massacre of whites in that country were a foretaste of what lay ahead for South Africa unless black people were prevented from ever gaining control of the government.⁹⁶ In different parts of Africa, violence appeared to be on the increase and the perception of whites in South Africa was that it was they who were being targeted in this violence. The murder and mutilation of black people by blacks received far less publicity, but where it was reported it was usually to reinforce the inevitability of a descent into savagery should a majority government come to power. There were almost constant examples in the news to back white fears: the struggle for Algeria and the flight of the *pieds noirs*, the largest white population in Africa other than South Africa, to France;⁹⁷ the continued political upheaval, slaughter of whites and genocide in the Congo⁹⁸ and elsewhere; and the anti-white rhetoric which accompanied independence in many other former colonies.⁹⁹ All these developments added to the feeling of insecurity and alarmism among many of the white people in South Africa, hardening their resolve to resist majority rule.¹⁰⁰ The uncompromising stand on the maintenance of white control adopted by H.F. Verwoerd, South Africa's new prime minister, struck an appealing chord in the anxious hearts of his white fellow-countrymen, particularly his NP supporters.

Closer to home the news seemed to fortify these sentiments. Portugal's refusal to countenance any notion of independence for its African colonies (euphemistically termed "provinces" by the Portuguese) was diametrically opposed to the trend among other European colonial powers. The attitude of the right-wing, totalitarian government of Salazar in Lisbon encouraged active insurgency in these vast territories in the early 1960s.¹⁰¹ Of greater import to white South Africa, however, were developments in Southern Rhodesia. There were bonds of deep kinship between many English-speaking South Africans and the Rhodesians. Many Rhodesians had fought under command of the UDF during the Second

96. A. Mockler, *Mercenaries* (London, Macdonald, 1969), p. 157, substantiated by Fage, *A History of Africa* (London, Routledge, 1995), pp. 484–485; and K. Smith and F.J. Nöthling, *Africa North of the Limpopo: The Imperial Experience since 1800* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 1993), pp. 407–408.

97. Fage, *A History of Africa*, p. 471.

98. Mockler, *Mercenaries*, pp. 155–193; see also H. Germani, *White Soldiers in Black Africa* (Cape Town, Nasionale Boekhandel, 1967).

99. B. Potter, *The Fault, Black Man ...* (Cape Town, Nasionale Boekhandel, 1967), pp. 130–134.

100. G. L'Ange, *The White Africans: From Colonisation to Liberation* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2005), p.265.

101. A.J. Venter, *Portugal se Oorlog* (Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 1972), pp. 18–32; L'Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 267.

World War¹⁰² and there were strong ties of imperial and colonial heritage between those of British descent in both countries. They shared a common culture, a common language and a closely linked history. As many as 20% of white Rhodesians were of Afrikaner stock with family ties in South Africa. Crucially, the economy of land-locked Rhodesia was heavily dependent on that of South Africa, with most Rhodesian imports and exports passing through South African harbours.¹⁰³ Furthermore, there were intertwined sporting links, with Rhodesians participating in South African inter-provincial competitions and being eligible for selection for some South African national teams.¹⁰⁴ The Rhodesian Rugby Union was also affiliated to the South African Rugby Board.¹⁰⁵

South Africans were able to join the Rhodesian Armed Forces, including the British South Africa Police, without any difficulty or even a change in citizenship.¹⁰⁶ Many English-speaking South Africans (and a number of Afrikaners) with a desire to follow a military career did in fact do this.¹⁰⁷ Any war in Rhodesia therefore had a direct effect on South Africa and South Africans – and the murmurings of the coming Rhodesian bush war were already being heard by 1957. This was the year that Joshua Nkomo revived the moribund African National Congress (not to be confused with the South African ANC) to oppose the tribal chiefs of Rhodesia who were seen as pliable in the hands of the colonial masters.¹⁰⁸ Though it was almost ten years before armed struggle commenced in Rhodesia, the basis for such action was being formed.

For the black Africans in these white-ruled countries, on the other hand, a different perception emerged from the events of the 1950s. They did not necessarily see the slaughter of whites in a negative light. In the words of L'Ange,

the images of whites on the run from the blacks they had long ruled were deeply imprinted in the minds of Africans across the continent, adding to the

102. N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy: South African Forces in World War II, Volume 5* (Cape Town, Purnell, 1975), pp. 6 and 16. General Smuts, prime minister of the Union, was commander-in-chief of both South African and Rhodesian forces during the war.

103. A.J. Cottrell, "The Geo-Strategic Importance of Southern Africa", in C. de Villiers (ed.) *Southern Africa: the Politics of Raw Materials* (Pretoria, Foreign Affairs Association, 1977), p. 12.

104. P. Matthiassen (ed.), *Sports Record RSA, 1990* (Randburg, Resource Dynamics, 1990). This applied in rugby, cricket, hockey, boxing and bowls.

105. H. Steytler, "Rugby", *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa, Vol. 9*, p. 425.

106. Letter from Rhodesia Army Headquarters to E.G.M. Alexander, 18 November 1964.

107. R. Reid Daly, *Selous Scouts: Top Secret War* (Alberton, Galago, 1982), pp. 222–223 and 303–304; Discussions with Col B. Sachse, and Maj S. Hornby, both South Africans who served with the Rhodesian Special Forces and later joined the SADF after the independence of Zimbabwe..

108. P. O'Meara, "Rhodesia/Zimbabwe: Guerrilla Warfare or Political Settlement?", in Carter and O'Meara (eds), *Southern Africa: The Continuing Crisis*, p. 25. Also L'Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 283.

perceptions that had emerged from Kenya and Algeria of whites being on the defensive.¹⁰⁹

To many, these stark images reflected hope and the promise of freedom. The march to independence in Africa to the north served as an inspiration to the subjugated black majority in the south; but it was the intransigence of the white regime in South Africa that finally caused the decision to resort to violence. Turok summed it up as follows:

The reason for the abandonment of non-violent action, including strike action, was the qualitatively different character assumed by the state apparatus. Not only was it not conceivably open to conversion, but coercion had to be maximised if there was even to be a possibility of success. The transfer to violence was not due to impatience or petulance. A new stage had been reached in confrontation and this meant raising the level of attack to a much sharper form.¹¹⁰

The theory of revolutionary democracy as articulated by Turok and gradually accepted by the ANC in the period between the Second World War and the beginning of the armed struggle focused on the need to seize power by insurrection by means of direct confrontation with the white minority-ruled state.¹¹¹

In his autobiography, Mandela makes a clear claim that he initiated the move to armed resistance,¹¹² although some on the ANC Executive Committee apparently had misgivings about resorting to violence (including ANC president, Chief Albert Luthuli) and there was a degree of accommodation that had to be considered.¹¹³ This is likely one of the prime reasons why a campaign of sabotage was embarked upon by Umkhonto weSizwe (literally the Spear of the Nation), the armed wing of the ANC, known widely by the acronym MK. Rather than embarking on an openly violent course of action the ANC made it known it would avoid the loss of human life and be morally less offensive.¹¹⁴ The leadership was aware that there were no trained guerrillas or freedom fighters in the liberation movement and there was no manual for conducting this type of activity in a country as complex as South Africa. South Africa was unique in several ways in terms of waging a guerrilla war against the government, and this made it difficult to apply the theories developed in other countries where revolutions had taken place. Neither the lessons of China nor those of Cuba or Indo-China could be implemented directly in South Africa. The highly developed

109. L'Ange, *The White Africans*, p.265.

110. Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, p. 83.

111. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

112. N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Randburg, Macdonald Purnell, 1994), pp. 259–260.

113. Barrell, *MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle*, pp. 4–6.

114. Barrell, *MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle*, p. 7

infrastructure, the unsuitability of the terrain for traditional guerrilla activity, the absence of friendly borders for the insurgents, the indigenous character and permanent residence of the ruling whites, the rigid residential segregation, the tight control whites held over the black majority and the fact that the army in South Africa was recruited not from the working class or peasantry, but from the privileged white workers and farmers, all made it difficult to find a basis to commence an effective armed struggle.¹¹⁵

For the South African Communist Party (SACP), the prominent ally of the ANC, there was no equivocation on the issue of resorting to armed struggle. Shortly after the lifting of the post-Sharpeville state of emergency in August 1960, the SACP leadership made a decision to create an armed force.¹¹⁶ They were thus ready to share in the building of an army of resistance. The formation of MK in 1961 led to several acts of sabotage as the armed struggle commenced. These incidents merely served to harden white resolve to resist black efforts to gain control of the country. This was reflected in the military by an increase in the initial period of full-time training for conscripts from two months to nine months as from 1962¹¹⁷ and by 1963, according to Horrell, the annual intake of conscripts had risen to 16,000.¹¹⁸ The police crackdown on the ANC and other organisations was heavy-handed: Mandela described the reaction from the authorities as “a vicious and unrelenting government counter-offensive on a scale that we had never seen before”.¹¹⁹

Although the wave of sabotage attacks did cause considerable consternation in both the government and among the white population as a whole, “it failed to ignite the prairie fire as many had hoped”.¹²⁰ Mandela is less critical than Turok, claiming that “the explosions shocked white South Africans into the realisation that they were sitting on top of a volcano”.¹²¹ His expansive description is understandable because he was the commander of MK, but in retrospect, Turok’s more sober analysis is more credible. The campaign was, by the ANC’s own admission, abortive and failed on the main count – that of mobilising the masses.¹²² Yet Slovo, well-versed in the communist dialectic, claimed that nobody in the MK

115. Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, pp. 86 and 101–106; Barrell, *MK: The ANC’s Armed Struggle*, p. 9.

116. Barrell, *MK: The ANC’s Armed Struggle*, p. 6.

117. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 231, File KG/GPO/3/2/1 Vol. 2, “Organisasie SA Leër”, Confidential Document, Slagorde: SA Weermag, Appendix A, 13 June 1961; “50 Skymen get their Wings”, *Friend*, 29 January 1962.

118. M. Horrell (ed.), *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1963* (Johannesburg, SAIRR, 1964), p. 34.

119. Mandela: *Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 275.

120. Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, pp. 90–92.

121. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 275.

122. Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, p. 93.

high command believed that sabotage as such could effect revolutionary change.¹²³ In fact, it seemed to have exactly the opposite outcome. Turok states that “The sabotage campaign had the effect of polarising black and white loyalties and sharply increasing repression”.¹²⁴ The Central Committee of the SACP, however, in a policy statement issued in April 1963, saw the sabotage campaign as developing “into a full-scale war, beginning with guerrilla operations in various parts of the countryside and culminating in an armed insurrection of the whole oppressed people throughout the country”.¹²⁵

It would seem that the SACP influence soon prevailed within MK, and the failure of the sabotage option led to the adoption of the guerrilla warfare alternative. But Operation MAYIBUYE, an MK plan to institute “organised and well-prepared guerrilla operations during the course of which the masses of the people will be drawn in and armed” was over-ambitious and ill conceived, leading to the decimation of the liberation movement.¹²⁶ With the arrest of the main leaders at Rivonia in 1963, the plan collapsed. By the end of 1965 MK had been smashed inside South Africa, other Congress Alliance organisations had been destroyed and although the ANC was still operating in exile, its internal underground structures had been shattered.¹²⁷

But MK was not the only subversive organisation that was active over this time. The PAC had also founded a military wing in 1961.¹²⁸ Known as Poqo (“Pure” – often translated as “We stand alone”), this was from the outset primarily a terrorist organisation. Critical of MK for diluting African nationalism by admitting whites into its ranks, Poqo undertook a series of actions, which, by their gruesome nature, were to create far more fear in the hearts of white South Africans than did any of the acts of sabotage carried out by MK. Coming as they did over the same period as the sabotage campaign, these actions were probably not seen by most whites as being perpetrated by different organisations – rather that they were simply perceived as a general attempt on the part of the black population to target whites, despite government efforts to apportion blame to only a small element of radicals and Communists.¹²⁹

123. J. Slovo, “The Sabotage Campaign”, *Dawn*, Souvenir Issue (c. 1986), p. 24.

124. Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, p. 96.

125. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

126. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

127. Barrell, *MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle*, p. 16.

128. Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, p. 91.

129. Potter, *The Fault, Black Man . . .*, p. 140. Potter's book reflects a general mass fear of black nationalism and a sense of threat, regardless of ideology.

Although there is some literature available on MK and its origins, there appears to be very little about Poqo. Most of what has been published was written by those opposed to the liberation movements, so, unlike the case of MK, there is a bias in the literature that is difficult to balance in doing research into their activities. There are some academic works, however, which do redress the balance, specifically the theses by Lodge and Kondlo, which do add valuable insights.¹³⁰ Kondlo confirms that it was Sharpeville and the government's repressive reaction to the shootings that resulted in an adoption of violence as part of the struggle by the PAC, but points out that for the PAC this was simply a continuation of the colonial wars that were deemed unfinished.¹³¹

Poqo evidenced none of the scruples of MK's sabotage campaign. Lodge indicates that not only was any infrastructure associated with the government targeted, but also the white civilian population.¹³² But whites were not the only focus of this campaign of terror. Poqo identified and murdered black people suspected of being police informants, or who were considered government stooges. Ultimately Poqo killed more blacks than whites. However, it was the gruesome attacks on whites that struck a note of terror for the ruling minority during the insurrectionists attempt to instigate a general uprising. Their plan centred on the Eastern and Western Cape.¹³³ There were murders, mutilations and attacks ascribed to the organisation, the most shocking of which became known as the Bashee Bridge murders.¹³⁴

It has been claimed that there was little revolutionary theory behind Poqo's actions and that most of these activists were young and inexperienced, driven by a vague idea that mass killing of whites would bring white supremacy to an end.¹³⁵ In their hefty Volume 5 of the series *From Protest to Challenge*, Karis and Gerhart describe Poqo as "a genuinely terrorist network of small groups".¹³⁶ The appalling murders of five black policemen, three coloured women and a young white couple by a frenzied mob wreaking havoc in Paarl in the

130. T. Lodge, *Insurrection in South Africa: The Pan Africanist Congress and the Poqo Movement, 1959–1965*, PhD thesis, University of York, 1985; and Kondlo, *The Exile History of the PAC*, pp. 284–299.

131. Kondlo, *The Exile History of the PAC*, pp. 122 and 284–285.

132. T. Lodge, *Resistance and Ideology in Settler Societies: The Pan Africanist Congress and the Poqo Movement, 1959–1965* (West Yorkshire, Wetherby, 1984), p. 192.

133. P. O'Malley, "Poqo", O'Malley Archive, Mayibuye Centre, University of the Western Cape.

134. M. Morris, *Terrorism: The First Full Account in Detail of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southern Africa* (Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1971), p. 10; Shay and Vermaak, *The Silent War: The Fight for Southern Africa* (Salisbury, Galaxie Press, 1971), pp. 85–87.

135. H. Giliomee and B. Mbenga (eds) "Resistance, Repression and Censorship", in *New History of South Africa*, online at <http://newhistory.co.za/>

136. T. G. Karis and G. M. Gerhart (eds) *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1990, Vol. 5, Nadir and Resurgence, 1964–1979* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 1997), p. 47.

early morning of 21 November 1962 sent shock waves throughout white South Africa. Turok is cautious about placing the blame on Poqo, but all subsequent evidence points to the organisation being responsible. However, he admits that evidence in court showed Poqo to have killed three black policemen and a white man between March 1962 and February 1963.¹³⁷

Police reaction was swift and unrelenting. Some 2,169 people were arrested under tough security legislation during 1963 (not all were Poqo activists – many were members of the underground ANC and other organisations). On 10 June 1964 the Minister of Justice revealed in parliament that 202 members of Poqo had been found guilty of murder; 395 of sabotage; 126 of leaving the country illegally; and 820 of lesser crimes.¹³⁸ Poqo, despite its grandiose aims, was poorly organised and the government succeeded in stamping it out and almost annihilating the PAC,¹³⁹ which limped into exile to consolidate and ultimately establish the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) to replace the defeated Poqo.

There was a fundamental difference in the approaches of MK and Poqo to the armed struggle, with Poqo evidencing clear Maoist tendencies. This is succinctly set out by Kondlo:

Poqo was founded . . . on the idea that the armed struggle was a necessity in order to mobilise the rural poor whom the PAC regarded as the peasantry, into a conscious political force which can not only overthrow the government but also seize and mould the country's political economy to meet their own ends. This strategy was different from that of the ANC's Umkhonto we Sizwe. To the latter, the armed struggle was a tactical bargaining stance and was thrust upon the organisation by the firm intransigence of the National Party Government. Otherwise a peacefully negotiated political solution remained the preferred route.¹⁴⁰

All these internal rumblings in the country served only to increase the growing nervousness of the white population. The simplistic solution for the minority bent on retaining its privileged position was to increase the degree of force and repression against the perpetrators. The privileged, in such a charged atmosphere, were ripe for a programme of militarisation. This impacted on the establishment of an airborne capability within the SADF. Though the armed activities of the ANC and the PAC had little direct effect on the concept of airborne operations, they did contribute to an overall increase in the willingness

137. Shay and Vermaak, *The Silent War*, pp. 79–81; Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, p. 91; Giliomee and Mbenga, "Resistance, Repression and Censorship".

138. Horrell, *Action, Reaction and Counter-Action*, p. 83.

139. O'Malley, "Poqo", *The O'Malley Archive*; Karis and Gerhart, *Volume 5*, p. 47.

140. Kondlo, *Exile History of the PAC*, p. 289.

of young South Africans to undergo military training and even volunteer for specialist training such as that offered by the paratroops.

The irony is that the SADF rarely came into contact with either MK or APLA, the successor of Poqo. What confrontations there were usually involved the police rather than the military. This was particularly so during the early decades of belligerence. The airborne capability that was instigated in response to the threats posed by the ANC and the PAC came to be used mainly against SWAPO, the South West African People's Organisation, not against those whose actions lent weight to its creation and early development. And SWAPO, with little fanfare, was formed in that same momentous year of 1960. Its decision to launch an armed struggle was taken in 1962.¹⁴¹ Motivated by the same resistance to the heavy-handed imposition of apartheid and violent excesses that had swayed the South African liberation movements, the SWAPO decision took longer to implement. As will be seen, it therefore played no direct role in influencing the paratroopers and their development until 1966.

5.6. THE BOARD OF OFFICERS: DELIBERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Final cabinet approval to convert a Mobile Watch into a parachute battalion was only given in mid-December 1960, while the 15 selected men were already nearing the end of their training in the UK.¹⁴² A Board of Officers was convened after their return to work out the details. The president of the Board was Commandant P.S.I. Jay from Army Headquarters, while the members, including three recently qualified paratroopers, were Commandant W.P. Louw of 2 Mobile Watch; Major J.J. Malan of the Institute of Aviation Medicine; Major G.C.H. Freeman of Air Force Headquarters; and Lieutenant D. du P. Lombard, of 28 Squadron, SAAF. Commencing its proceedings on 11 January 1961, the Board examined the selection and training of personnel, casualty evacuation during an airborne operation, unit organisation, vehicles, weapons, other equipment and aircraft requirements.¹⁴³

The Board recommended that recruits be selected from any branch of the service, provided that they had completed their basic military training; that they volunteered for parachute training; were prepared to sign a contract to serve for three years as a

141. L. Doubell, *Swapo's Struggle for Namibia, 1960–1991: War by Other Means* (Basel, P. Schlettwein, 1998), pp. 31 and 34.

142. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 297, File KG/GPT/2/2/1/5 Vol. 1 "Opleiding en Aanwending van Mobiele Wagte", Encl. 20, Ref. KG/GPW/16, "Parachute Training: Mobile Watch", 17 December 1960.

143. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 1 "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Secret Document "Board of Officers: Parachute Training, Mobile Watch", 21 January 1961 and Encl. 37 "Ondersoek na Stigting van Valskermeenheid", 16 February 1961.

parachutist; had at least a Standard VIII education (ie, ten years of schooling); weighed no more than 170 lbs (76.5kg) and were no taller than 5 feet 11 inches (1.8m). In addition the age limit was set at 25 years and only Permanent Force recruits would be considered. Medical requirements were set out as including all standards laid down for Permanent Force infantry recruits, but in addition these recruits had to have 6/12 vision in both eyes, uncorrected; defective colour vision was acceptable, provided it was “safe”; hearing had to be capable of understanding a “hoarse whisper” at 20 feet (6.2m); and specific examinations had to be carried out to assess orthopaedic conditions, hernias, neuroses, thyrotoxicosis and ear, nose and throat conditions. A selection board was to look into specific characteristics when making its final decision, such as discipline, aggressiveness, mental and physical toughness, determination and team spirit. Selection requirements for parachute instructors were also recommended, and these were marginally more stringent, necessitating that such volunteers had to have completed a basic parachute course, have 6/6 vision and normal colour vision, be qualified infantry corporals and be prepared to sign a contract to serve as a parachute jumping instructor for a period of three years after qualifying. Volunteers for training as parachute instructors could be no older than 30 years of age.¹⁴⁴

It would appear that it was taken for granted that there would be no shortage of volunteers for the unit, because three parachute courses, each comprising 60 soldiers, were envisaged as part of the conversion training. This implies that it was anticipated that most of the soldiers currently serving in the Mobile Watch units would volunteer for the parachute course. The Board of Officers devised a training programme for new recruits. Casualty evacuation, it was assumed, would be by helicopter, and the new unit was seen as operating in elements as small as an independent platoon (about 30 men). The Board’s assumption that casualty evacuation would be done by helicopter indicated an envisaged employment of the new parachute unit over relatively short distances, within the range of helicopters. This would certainly limit its strategic application. The unit, it was recommended, should henceforth form part of the South African Infantry Corps and no longer be considered a unit of the South African Engineer Corps, so all engineer training would cease.¹⁴⁵

Organisationally, the Board recommended that the unit be no more than a company size, with three platoons, each with three eight-man sections. There would also be an air

144. Ibid., “Record of Proceedings of a Board of Officers convened by Army Chief of Staff” to examine and report on all aspects of the conversion of one Mobile Watch Unit to an Airborne Unit, 21 January 1961.

145. Ibid.

supply platoon and a parachute maintenance and packing section. With all its attached specialists such as the parachute packers, medics, signallers, technical personnel, messing staff, air suppliers and the headquarters, it would have a total strength of only 192.¹⁴⁶ It is curious that such a small unit would be commanded by a commandant rather than just a major, and even stranger that the Board should have recommended that its name be “1 Parachute Regiment” (in Afrikaans, 1 Valskermregiment). A regiment would normally consist of several battalions, but this miniscule organisation was not even a battalion in size.

The Board listed surprisingly few requirements for specialised equipment and weapons. The standard infantry weapons in use at the time were accepted as being perfectly suitable. There was, however, a need identified for specific radios that could be used for ground-to-air communication, for special transmitters that aircraft could home in on and for an increased reserve of radios because of possible damage during dropping. Specialist personal equipment requirements listed by the board included steel jumping helmets, camouflaged jumping smocks, jumping boots, sleeping bags, personal weapons and equipment containers for jumping and, significantly, red berets. Until then, no mention had been made of the red beret as headgear for the paratroopers, but it was clear that Louw was anxious to incorporate this originally British (but subsequently international) symbol of airborne forces into the new unit. There were a number of items to be procured for the air supply and parachute packing tasks, and field equipment such as carriers, stretchers, tents and trolleys, as well as small air-droppable vehicles. Most importantly for the conversion of a unit to an airborne role, the parachute training apparatus had to be built. This would have to be done from scratch, because under the prevailing political situation the British could not be asked to bring out the required apparatus and assist in its assembly and erection.¹⁴⁷

The only aircraft in service with the SAAF at the time that was suitable for dropping paratroopers was the Second World War vintage Douglas C-47 Dakota (known commercially as the DC-3). There was a considerable number of them in service (according to Wessels, in 1966 the SAAF had 80 Dakota aircraft in service,¹⁴⁸ so approximately the same number were probably available in 1961). However, the Dakota was already approaching obsolescence and the Board pointed out its limitations in terms of payload and range, recommending that

146. Ibid.

147. Ibid.

148. A. Wessels, “The South African Air Force, 1920–2012: A Review of its History and an Indication of its Cultural Heritage”, *Scientia Militaria*, 40, 3 (2012), p. 233.

they should all undergo the minor modifications necessary to equip them for paratrooping and that aircrews be trained for the task. It also discussed the acquisition of a more suitable type of aircraft for parachuting with the Air Chief of Staff.¹⁴⁹

The new parachute unit was to be located alongside an airfield and three were considered. These were Swartkops, just south of Pretoria, Potchefstroom and Tempe, just outside Bloemfontein. The recommendation was that the most suitable location would be Swartkops, with Potchefstroom as the second choice and Tempe deemed the least suitable.¹⁵⁰ Based on the Board's report, including cost implications, the Chief of Army Staff recommended that 2 Mobile Watch be converted to a parachute role and that it be based at Swartkop. Construction of a camp for the new unit was to be undertaken immediately.¹⁵¹ However, this was found unacceptable at the political level. The Minister of Defence, Jim Fouché, was the Member of Parliament for Bloemfontein (West),¹⁵² the constituency in which the military base of Tempe fell. Although no documentary evidence could be found to confirm that Fouché had influenced the matter, less than two weeks after the Board of Officers had submitted its recommendations, a priority signal was sent to the Army Chief of Staff from the Commandant General in Cape Town (where he was attending the opening of parliament). The Army Chief of Staff was instructed that the unit would be stationed in Bloemfontein.¹⁵³

Making suitable accommodation available for the new unit in Tempe, Bloemfontein, was a significant challenge. The existing location of 2 Mobile Watch in Tempe was totally unsuitable for the new parachute unit, and the only existing camp that could offer something was the one next door, which housed 1 SSB Training Regiment. It had sufficient office, storage and mess facilities; sufficient sleeping accommodation; a parade ground; an aircraft hangar that could be converted into a parachute training centre; and it had enough open space for the erection of a 30 foot (9m) exit trainer and for constructing covered vehicle parking.¹⁵⁴

149. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 1 "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Secret "Record of Proceedings", 21 January 1961, and Encl. 34, Confidential letter, Deputy Commandant General to Army Chief of Staff, 16 February. 1961.

150. Ibid.

151. Ibid., Secret Signal from Army Chief of Staff to Commandant General SADF, 30 January 1961.

152. "Members of House of Assembly, 1910–1970", *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*, Vol. 5, p. 623.

153. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 1 "Organisation 1 Parachute Battalion", Encl. 30, Secret Signal Commandant General to Army Chief of Staff, 3 February 1961.

154. Ibid.

This was the camp eventually selected. It had originally been used from 1934 as a training depot for Active Citizen Force regiments in the Orange Free State and was a training camp for radio operators, radio technicians and electricians of the SAAF's 64 Air School during the Second World War. It was in this period that the aircraft hangar had been erected.¹⁵⁵ Effectively, this now meant moving the greater part of 1 SSB Training Regiment out of the best facilities in the Tempe Military Garrison to make room for the paratroopers – something that would not endear the paratroopers to the Army's most senior full-time unit. One of the most important criteria for selecting a location for the new parachute unit was that it had to be adjacent to a military airfield. In the case of Tempe, there was only a civilian airfield about a kilometre distant, with an unpaved and very short runway. The nearest military air base was at Bloemspruit, about 20km away on the other side of the city – where the runways were shared with the civilian airport. This was hardly ideal.

The role of the new unit was given as carrying out a parachute assault on an objective area with a company HQ and three platoons, each of which comprised three eight-man sections. Thereafter, the company had to be capable of operating for a period of three days without any ground support; it would receive air supply until other methods of sustainment could be made available. Regarding IS, the unit was seen as providing military support to the civilian authorities with the aim of maintaining or restoring law and order in the Union. This included operations in urban areas (the clearing of built-up areas; defence of vulnerable points; dispersal of unlawful gatherings; establishing controlled areas; cordons and searches; providing mobile columns, guards, picquets and patrols; and maintaining authorised curfews). In rural areas, operations would include searching for and destroying armed gangs making use of unconventional tactics, often in very difficult terrain.¹⁵⁶

None of this, however, addressed the specific doctrine for the employment of an airborne unit in an airborne role. Attacking an objective was vague and applied equally to any infantry unit. Was the new airborne unit being seen as a special forces organisation along the same lines as the SAS being established in Rhodesia? If not, the tiny organisation envisaged would certainly not have the ability to conduct conventional airborne operations. Other than a very general idea that the unit could be used to help suppress internal dissent at short notice, it appears that no serious thought was given to its specific purpose or

155. A.J. Groenewald, "Die Geskiedenis van Tempe as Militêre Basis tot 1960", MA dissertation, University of the Orange Free State, 1984, pp. 129, 131–133 and 147.

156. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 1 "Organisasie 1 Valskermbataljon/ Organisation 1 Parachute Battalion", Sub-File "Ondersoek na Stigting van Valskermeenheid", Encl. 38, "Raad van Offisiere".

operational employment. There was no indication of the doctrine that would be followed to employ the unit. In point of fact, the report was remarkable in its failure to address the operational purpose of the parachute unit.

In its efforts to save on costs, the Board of Officers also recommended that no specific posts be created for parachute instructors, but that all NCOs in the new unit be qualified to provide parachute training when necessary. Finally, the Board now made certain recommendations regarding the possible acquisition of a suitable aircraft type for airborne operations: it should be able to carry at least 35 paratroopers over an action radius of 700 nautical miles (1,300km); have two side doors to speed up the exit of troops and allow them to land on a smaller dropping zone so as to regroup more rapidly; have a rear door for loading and dropping light and heavy cargo; and be able to transport if not drop any of the vehicles to be used by the unit.¹⁵⁷

Nowhere in its final recommendations did the Board make any suggestion that a selection phase be introduced for the training of volunteers. The Army Chief of Staff vetoed the suggestion that the unit might be split up into independent platoons for operations.¹⁵⁸ This effectively signalled a clear departure by the South Africans from the thinking of the Rhodesians with regard to the employment of a parachute unit. While the two countries were establishing parachute units at approximately the same time, of approximately the same size and for similar reasons, the Rhodesians were going the way of special forces, while the South Africans were opting for a conventional approach. But the South Africans had not specifically spelt out the actual role of the new unit, and this led to internal disagreements once hostilities commenced in the insurgent war.

Engelbrecht (the Chief of Army Staff) addressed the matter of the red beret in a letter to the Commandant General:

The red beret is an entirely new item of clothing suggested for introduction into the SADF. It would appear that this is the form and colour of headdress associated with practically all parachutists in EUROPE. The sample shown to me is actually a dull cherry colour. It is recommended that the beret for our parachutists should be of that colour and NOT red. If accepted, it is further recommended that only members actually serving with the parachute unit be permitted to wear this form of headdress.¹⁵⁹

157.Ibid.

158.Ibid., Encl. 36, Secret letter A/LEG/9, Army Chief of Staff to Commandant General, 13 March 1961.

159.Ibid.

On 29 March 1961 Army Headquarters advised all concerned that the recommendations of the Board of Officers, with amendments proposed by Engelbrecht, had been approved by the Minister of Defence and that the new unit would be designated as 1 Valskermbataljon (1 Valsk Bn) in Afrikaans and 1 Parachute Battalion (1 Para Bn) in English. It would be a unit of the South African Infantry Corps.¹⁶⁰

5.7. BUILDING OF THE FIRST BATTALION

The name of 2 Mobile Watch was changed officially to 1 Parachute Battalion (1 Para Bn) on 1 April 1961,¹⁶¹ which was subsequently celebrated as the birthday of 1 Parachute Battalion. But the day went by unnoticed in the new unit, where everyone was by then earnestly involved in a frenzy of administrative, organisational and constructional tasks under the leadership of Willem Louw.¹⁶² Their priority was to build the parachute training apparatus and obtain the equipment needed to commence with the training of the first recruits for the new parachute unit.

The Defence Advisor at the SA High Commission in London had been sent details of the technical equipment requirements as early as September 1960 and had forwarded these to South Africa.¹⁶³ Manuals, pamphlets and posters on parachute training were also obtained from the British, as were copies of the British training films used by RAF Abingdon. Blueprints and photographs of the British parachute training hangar layout as well as of the various types of apparatus used were also obtained. Nevertheless, all the items that were needed had to be built from scratch by the South Africans without any advice or assistance from the British. While they were busy, the Air Force renovated a building at the Bloemspruit Air Station to be used as a parachute packing facility. The Air Force had recommended that the packing of parachutes be an Air Force responsibility and that existing facilities at Air Force Station Bloemspruit outside Bloemfontein be upgraded and modified so that this task could be carried out there.¹⁶⁴ Besides the single Army officer and the handful of NCOs that had already trained in the UK, Louw's unit, 2 Mobile Watch, at that

160. DOD, KG (5), Box 239, Secret KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: No. 1 Parachute Battalion", Encl. 1, G/SD/3/1/4 over A/LEG/9, Army Chief of Staff to Adjutant General and QMG, 29 March 1961.

161. Ibid., Encl. 2, Letter AG/560/6/7/32 from Adjutant General, 7 April 1961. This was formally confirmed in SADF Order 74/61 of 12 May 1961, available in DOD, AG/HWA, Gp 3, Box 213, AG 560/6/7/32, "Organisation and Establishment Tables: Army, Infantry, 1 Parachute Battalion".

162. Interview with Lt Col Johnny Kieser, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

163. DOD, AG Gp 9, Box 290, File AG 213/5/43 (SM), Part 1, "SAPF Strength: 2 Mobile Watch", Encl. 47, 15 September 1960.

164. DOD, KG (5), Box 238, Secret KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 1, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion" and Box 239, Secret KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Correspondence Air Chief of Staff and CG.

time comprised just 44 sappers, of whom only 20 were prepared to volunteer for parachute training.¹⁶⁵ They were all, however, pulled in to help with constructing the training apparatus, with the 35-foot Outdoor Exit Trainer requiring the greatest effort (see Appendix 40). The Air Force, in the meantime, was requested to acquire different types of parachutes so that these could be tested before a decision was taken on which type was most suitable to meet the requirements of the South Africans. Orders were placed for the acquisition of five British GQ parachutes, five American T-10 parachutes and two British Irvin parachutes.¹⁶⁶

While all this activity was under way, the Deputy Commandant General, Combat General Rudolph Hiemstra of the Air Force, a listed member of the secretive Broederbond organisation,¹⁶⁷ raised his objection to the paratroopers adopting the red beret, an item of uniform that would, as of old, be following the British lead. Hiemstra was a man of high political connections (he later became the Commandant General), and the compromise that was eventually reached was that a Burgundy maroon colour, much darker than that of the beret used by the British airborne forces, would be worn instead.¹⁶⁸ This colour was then used for the beret of 1 Parachute Battalion and was adopted by all airborne units subsequently established in the SADF, including the special forces.

The apparatus required for training paratroopers gradually took shape at the designated camp in Tempe, with a fascinated local press reporting on the progress.¹⁶⁹ Although faced with difficulties and delays, Willem Louw had the undeniable advantage of backing from high places.¹⁷⁰ The recently appointed new head of the SADF, Commandant General Piet Grobbelaar, took a personal interest in the development of the new unit and demanded a monthly progress report, insisting that any unnecessary delays be reported to

165. DOD, 1 Para Bn Gp 1, Box 5, File G/SD/3/1 Vol. 1, Encl. 1, 28 February 1961.

166. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Army Chief of Staff to Commandant General 3 May 1961; Third Monthly Progress Report, 4 July 1961. There are discrepancies on how many parachutes were finally received.

167. I. Wilkens and H. Strydom, *The Super Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1980), p. A105; R. Warwick, *White South Africa and Defence, 1960–1968: Militarization, Threat Perceptions and Counter Strategies*, PhD thesis, UCT, 2009, pp. 84–89 gives a detailed exposition, with references, to Hiemstra's political connections and sympathies. I. Uys, *South African Military Who's Who, 1452–1992* (Germiston, Fortress Publishers, 1992), p. 106 describes him as being appointed liaison officer of the Minister of Defence (Frans Erasmus) when the NP came to power in 1948.

168. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Encls 6, 7 and 10, dated 4 May and 18 May 1961.

169. "Top Parachute Unit for City", *Friend*, 5 April 1961; and "For Parachutists", *Friend*, 4 August 1961.

170. DOD, DC Gp 4, Box 121, Secret File DC 17850/436 Vol. 2, "General Staff Conferences", Minutes of the meeting of 6 March 1961, point 10, "Valskermeenheid".

him personally.¹⁷¹ Costs remained a critical issue. The unplanned for and unbudgeted expenses of establishing the new unit, although relatively small, were motivated to the Treasury by emphasising (albeit somewhat vaguely) the instability that South Africa was faced with:

Bearing in mind the turbulence that is currently taking place in the military field and that it is difficult to determine what its effect will be both internally and abroad, it is essential that that there is no delay in the proper establishment of the unit.¹⁷²

This gives some indication of the direct link between the political unrest in the country and the establishment of an airborne capability. It also implies that the capability in its embryonic stage was already seen as playing a role both in internal suppression of unrest and countering a threat from outside the country's borders.

The payment of a parachute allowance was approved for all 15 South Africans who had qualified in the UK, backdated to the day on which they had commenced their basic parachute course.¹⁷³ However, the Commandant General personally turned down a request that they be allowed to wear the British red berets and parachute wings that had been awarded to them until the South African insignia became available.¹⁷⁴ It seems that under Erasmus the wearing of all British insignia had been forbidden. Van Noorden confirmed that as a Permanent Force officer he was not permitted to wear his Second World War parachute insignia after 1948.¹⁷⁵ However, this instruction does appear to have been ignored to some extent by Louw and his men. Having sewn the hard-earned British insignia onto their tunics as soon as they were awarded them in England in 1960, the South Africans were understandably reluctant to remove them. Certainly, Commandant Louw, in the official portrait photograph of him as the battalion commander, is proudly displaying both the British Army paratrooper wings and the RAF parachute instructor half-wing brevet on his uniform (see Appendix 41).

171. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1, Vol. 1, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Encl. dated 25 April 1961.

172. Own translation. See DOD, DC Gp 1, Box 78, Confidential File DC/17850/445, "Paratroop Training", Encl. 35, Secretary for Defence to Secretary for the Treasury, 2 May 1961.

173. *Ibid*, Encl. KG/AP/SM/6/2, CG to Secretary, 17 May 1961; Encl. 39, Secretary to Treasury, 7 June 1961 and Encl. 41, Secretary to CG, 8 June 1961.

174. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 238, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 1, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", QMG to CG, 27 April 1961 and CG to QMG, 17 May 1961.

175. Interview with Maj Gen Pik Van Noorden (retired), Pretoria, 12 February 1990.

The initial medical selection of Permanent Force volunteers for training as paratroopers commenced during that founding month of April 1961.¹⁷⁶ The Mobile Watches, however, were unable to provide sufficient volunteers for parachute training. They were after all small units and for any parachute unit in the world it is difficult to find volunteers. It is therefore hardly surprising that a total of only 36 medically suitable volunteers were drawn from the two Mobile Watches. Accordingly, the next step was to ask for volunteers from the rest of the Army's Permanent Force. By the end of May 1961 a further 68 volunteers had been identified from the military bases in Pretoria and Potchefstroom. But the total was still far below what was required to fill even the small unit that had been approved. The selection committee was instructed to draw volunteers from the Army Gymnasium, among the young trainees who had volunteered to undergo a year's military training. If successful, they would have to sign a contract to serve for a further three years in the parachute battalion. The Air Force and the Navy were also approached to allow similar recruiting to take place at their gymnasia.¹⁷⁷

5.8. RAIN CHECK WITH THE RHODESIANS

In the meantime, the head of the SA Air Force, Combat General Viljoen, was concerned about the dropping of paratroopers, particularly as Lieutenant Lombard had been unable to gain any experience in this technique during his time in the UK because he had broken a leg. Aware that the Rhodesians intended using C-47 Dakota aircraft for their SAS unit, Viljoen made contact, through diplomatic channels, with his counterpart north of the Limpopo, Air Vice Marshal E.W.S. Jacklin. It was confirmed that the Rhodesians had several pilots who were experienced in the dropping of paratroopers from the Dakota aircraft, one of whom had carried out operational drops in Malaya. A visit to the Royal Rhodesian Air Force (RRAF) was therefore quickly arranged at Jacklin's suggestion.¹⁷⁸

The visit, which took place from 3 to 5 July 1961, had the threefold aim of studying the flying technique for the Dakota aircraft in the parachuting role, obtaining information on

176. DOD, KG (5), Box 239, Secret KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Encl. 5 G/SD/3/1/5 over A/LEG/9, "Aanstelling van Komitee: Keuring van Valskermspringers en Valskerminstrukteurs, Indeling by Valskermbataljon", 8 April 1961; Box 297, File KG/GPT/2/2/1/5, Vol. 1, "Opleiding en Aanwending van Mobiele Wagte", Encls 27 and 28, of 18 and 21 November 1960; Box 238, Secret KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 1, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Eerste Maandelikse Vorderingsverslag, 2 May 1961.

177. Ibid., Volume 1, Tweede Maandelikse Vorderingsverslag, 6 June 1961; DOD, AG/HWA Gp 3, Box 213, File AG 560/6/7/32, "Organisation and Establishment Tables: Army, Infantry, 1 Parachute Battalion", Encl. 8, 22 April 1961. See also "Valskermsoldate vir Suid-Afrika", *Commando*, May 1961, p. 21.

178. DOD, KG (5), Box 306, KG/GPT/3/1/6 Vol. 1, "Parachute Training", Confidential DGAF/S/204/212/TR, Air CoS to CG, 29 May 1961.

parachute training aids, and studying the “masking” of door protrusions necessary on the Dakota to avoid the snagging of static lines during parachuting. Commandant Louw and Field Cornet Van den Berg augmented the nine-man SAAF team (which included Lieutenant Lombard).¹⁷⁹

It was clear to the South Africans that the Rhodesians were relying heavily on the British to provide them with most of the training apparatus that they would need, or to assist them in the manufacture of such apparatus locally. The masking of protrusions was confirmed and the Rhodesians undertook to assist with the training of SAAF pilots in the dropping of paratroopers once they were ready to do so.¹⁸⁰ The Rhodesians were adamant that parachute training was an Air Force responsibility and that it should not be done by the Army. The South Africans maintained a very different approach, with Louw feeling very strongly that all aspects of parachute training should fall within the ambit of the Army. In their report on the visit, the South Africans were very critical of the Rhodesian decision to use the 28-foot parachute that was standard in the British airborne forces. It was felt that this contributed substantially to the high injury rate experienced by the Rhodesian PED the previous year. The South Africans were convinced that they needed one that was bigger and that would provide a slower rate of descent.¹⁸¹ In fact, during discussions at RAF Abingdon in December 1960, when they had undergone their training, it was suggested by the British that a 32-foot parachute would be far more suitable for use at the high altitudes of the southern African plateau than the current 28-foot canopy in use by the British.¹⁸² In a comparison of the equipment and apparatus being produced, the Rhodesians were found to be planning approximately the same equipment types and amount as the South Africans, all of them similar to what the RAF used in the UK.¹⁸³

While the visit to the Rhodesians served mainly as a benchmark for the South Africans, confirming that they were on the right track and enabling them to remedy the shortcoming in pilot training, its greatest value lay in the contacts that had been made. These contacts were destined to increase with the growing international isolation of South

179. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box No 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, “Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion”, Encl. 14A, Confidential Report, “Besoek aan RRAF Salisbury”, 14 July 1961.

180. Ibid.

181. Ibid.

182. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 136, Top Secret File KG/EXT/1/1/3/1 Vol. 1, Encl. 34C, “Maandverslae en Ander, MA Londen”.

183. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, Encl. 14A, Confidential Report: “Besoek aan RRAF Salisbury”, 14 July 1961.

Africa, and especially after the Rhodesian UDI in 1965. South African and Rhodesian airborne forces came to co-operate closely in both training and operations.

5.9. TESTING AND ACQUISITION OF PARACHUTES AND OTHER EQUIPMENT

By then, Major Tommy Renfree had been appointed as second-in-command at 1 Parachute Battalion.¹⁸⁴ Though he had not jumped since the Second World War, he had the necessary airborne qualifications and credibility. His arrival would have relieved Willem Louw of his administrative load and was a much-needed boon to the fledgling unit.

The parachutes that had been ordered for testing arrived sometime in July 1961. According to Leibbrandt, one of the parachute packers who also jumped during the tests, a total of 10 parachutes were used in the test jumps: two Irvin, two GQ and six T-10 assemblies.¹⁸⁵ Kieser, one of the parachute instructors who also jumped, indicates that there may have been four GQ parachutes,¹⁸⁶ but it appears that five of them were ordered from the UK and that they were 22-foot diameter canopies¹⁸⁷ (some sources give the diameter as 714cm, or about 23 feet and six inches¹⁸⁸). The 28-foot Irvin parachutes were also British, but the 32-foot T-10 parachutes were the standard American military static line parachutes. Kieser was probably correct in his numbers, as there were later 12 parachutes used during the first two parachute courses held in South Africa.

The first test jumps, according to press reports, took place on 4 August 1961 in a strong wind at Air Force Station Swartkop. The tests were exploited to become something of a propaganda exercise and were given wide publicity, no doubt due to the recruiting campaign that was in full swing at the time. Further test jumps were conducted at Swartkop on 7 August as well as during the following week.¹⁸⁹ These were conducted at Tempe between 21 and 24 August 1961.¹⁹⁰ With the limited number of parachutes available, the two packers repacking them as soon as possible to use again, two instructors needed to do the dispatching, one to act as the fitchute NCO at the airfield and an officer on the DZ to act

184. Interview with Col Tom Renfree (retired), Umhlanga Rocks, 28 July 1990.

185. Personal recollections, written by Maj Gerhard Johan Leibbrandt in 1991 for OC 1 Para Bn.

186. Memorandum by Maj J.H. Kieser, 31 July 1990.

187. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Fourth Monthly Progress Report, 7 August 1961.

188. "GQ X-Type Parachute", see <http://www.paradata.org.uk/content/gq-x-type-parachute>.

189. Copy of W.P. Louw's Parachutist Log Book, entries for 1961; "Proefsprong in Sterk Wind", *Volksblad*, 5 August 1961; Memo. by Maj J.H. Kieser, 31 July 1990; Interview with Col Harry Gilliland (retired), Pretoria 5 July 1995; "First Jumps for new SA Paratroops", *Sunday Times*, July 1961 (day unknown); "SA Parachute Men in Action", *Pretoria News*, 8 August 1961; "Kry die Wind van Voor", *Transvaler*, 8 August 1961.

190. "Valskermsprong in die OVS", *Commando*, October 1961; "Eerste Sprong by Stad Uitgevoer", *Volksblad*, 21 August 1961; "Ses Manne Maak Grappe voor Groot Sprong", *Volksblad*, 22 August 1961; "Die Ontstaan en Groei van 1 Valskermbataljon", A/ADM/6/1 over G/SD/3/6, 1975.

as DZSO, the “sticks” that jumped from the Dakota consisted of only six men for each lift, or take-off by the aircraft.¹⁹¹

It remained to test the parachutes at sea level, and on 8 September 1961 jumps were conducted at Air Force Base Ysterplaat in Cape Town.¹⁹² Photographs taken during the tests appear in Appendix 42. Ultimately, the choice fell on the larger, US designed and manufactured T-10 parachute. South Africa’s drier internal climatic conditions and the thinner air on the Highveld plateau resulted in faster descents than was the case in Britain, and this distinctly favoured the American parachute.¹⁹³

By some accounts there was another, intensely practical consideration: the American parachutes could be delivered within a few months, while it would be a year before the British could deliver the consignment of parachutes required by the South Africans.¹⁹⁴ Whatever the case, the decision was made to equip South Africa’s new paratroopers with the American parachutes, which would be purchased by the South African Air Force. An order for 500 American T-10 parachutes was placed with the Pioneer Parachute Company in Mississippi, USA. Due to the time it would take to manufacture this considerable number of parachutes, a request was made for the firm to provide an initial 40 parachutes in time for the first parachute course, which had been scheduled to start in December 1961.¹⁹⁵ However, processing the application for an export licence for the parachutes in the USA encountered constant delays, apparently caused by the US State Department. Already, the effect of early sanctions was being felt in South Africa. Ultimately, the application was turned down, and the South Africans had to turn to a German subsidiary of the Pioneer Parachute Company, Brügemann and Brandt, to acquire the 500 T-10 parachutes they needed. Even then, however, there was a considerable delay before the required number became available.¹⁹⁶

An attempt was made to obtain certain specialist items of equipment from the British, because the small number required did not warrant producing the items in South

191. “Parachute Troopers’ First Plunge”, *Friend*, 22 August 1961.

192. “Valskermbataljon Spring die Land Vol”, *Commando*, December 1961; “Parachute Jump Tests Held up”, *Cape Argus*, 7 September 1961; “A Snatch of Song: Then the Big Drop”, *Cape Argus*, 8 September 1961; *Burger*, 8 September 1961. Also “Die Ontstaan en Groei van 1 Valskermbataljon”, A/ADM/6/1 over G/SD/3/6, 1975.

193. Discussions with Maj Gerrie Leibbrandt, Bloemfontein, 1990.

194. Memo. by Maj J.H. Kieser, 31 July 1990.

195. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 260, Secret File KG/GPP/2/2/9 Vol. 1, “Procurement of Parachute Equipment SA Army”, Encl. 3, Air Chief of Staff to Commandant General, 18 October 1961, and Encls 9 and 10, SA Armed Forces Attache in Washington, DC to Air Chief of Staff, 27 October 1961 and 2 November 1961.

196. *Ibid.*, Correspondence between SA Armed Forces Attaché in Washington and Air Chief of Staff in period 27 October 1961 to 8 March 1962. See also correspondence with SA Embassy in Paris, 15 March 1962.

Africa. These included personal equipment containers, steel jumping helmets, sleeping bags, wicker baskets for air supply, folding trolleys for moving heavier equipment after it had been air supplied and folding stretchers. However, the delay in obtaining a response from the British War Office appeared suspiciously deliberate, and the South Africans were forced to approach local manufacturers in Johannesburg to satisfy certain of their requirements.¹⁹⁷

The local manufacturers of the South African Army boot agreed to design and produce a special jumping boot in a short space of time. Evaluated during both parachuting and on a 20-mile (32km) route march, the boots were adopted by the unit in November 1961.¹⁹⁸ Despite a few less important equipment shortages, it was then only the jumping jackets (parachute smocks) and steel jumping helmets that were still outstanding – except for the parachutes. It was the delay in the delivery of the selected parachutes that prevented the first South African parachute course from commencing as planned.¹⁹⁹

5.10. RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF PARATROOPERS

The response to the recruitment drive was not encouraging. The authorised strength of 1 Parachute Battalion was 10 officers and 185 other ranks. From the 15 people trained in the UK, there were two officers and nine other ranks (excluding the Air Force and medical personnel). By the beginning of November 1961 a further 16 officers but only 91 other ranks had been selected as suitable for parachute training from the volunteers who came forward. Even if everyone selected made the course, the unit would still be short of 85 paratroopers.²⁰⁰

Effectively, the ceiling had been reached. There was no pool that had not been fished for Permanent Force (PF) volunteers. It was becoming clear that only using regular soldiers would not fill the new parachute unit. But at that stage the small number of conscripts were only undergoing a period of two months of full-time training – certainly not enough to produce soldiers who were trained paratroopers.²⁰¹ However, a decision had already been taken to increase the period of initial full-time military training of young white

197. *Ibid.*, Encl. 2, ORD 95/464, Quartermaster General to Commandant-General, 18 October 1961.

198. "SA Boots Pass the Test", *Pretoria News*, 28 November 1961.

199. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Fifth Monthly Progress Report, 15 September 1961.

200. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1, Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Encl. 16, Army Chief of Staff to Commandant General, 8 November 1961.

201. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 132, Confidential File KG/DP/6, Vol. 1, "Newspapers, Books and Journals", Encl. 166B, Memo on the SADF Compiled for SA diplomatic representatives abroad. The period of full-time training was reduced from 3 to 2 months in order to save the money needed to finance the Mobile Watch units.

males who were balloted from two months to nine months, beginning on 1 January 1962.²⁰² There can be little doubt that this decision was motivated by the broader events of 1960 and 1961, including Sharpeville, the Mpondo Revolt and South Africa's imminent withdrawal from the Commonwealth. Furthermore there was ongoing unrest within the country and international isolation was being stepped up which meant that sanctions began to bite. But for the new airborne unit, these circumstances opened the opportunity to train CF conscripts as paratroopers. There was an intake of conscripts every three months, and a decision was made to train 50 volunteers from each intake once they had completed three months of basic training. But this meant that additional parachute instructors would have to be trained in time for the first CF course to be held in April of the following year.²⁰³ And in the meantime, the first PF volunteers had to be trained.

The preparatory physical training for the first parachute course commenced on Monday 27 November 1961 and lasted ten days (with a break on the Sunday), followed by a day of battle tests. This euphemistically-named "acclimatisation course" was tough and physically demanding, consisting of battle PT, manhandling a 6-pounder anti-tank gun, "milling" (a crude form of boxing), a 6-mile (10km) cross-country run in boots and field trousers, swimming, wrestling, "log races" (with 3 to 5-man teams carrying heavy logs) and two route marches carrying full packs, one of 10 miles (16km) and one of 20 miles (32km).²⁰⁴

Faced with a critical manpower shortage to make up the numbers for his new unit, Louw realised the importance of qualifying as many volunteers as possible. The physical training was therefore not seen as a selection to get rid of unsuitable candidates, but rather as a period of preparing volunteers for the physical demands that military parachuting would call for. They were placed under some of the psychological pressure that a paratrooper could expect to face in combat. In time, however, this became the selection course for all volunteers for the South African paratroops, and it became known as the "PT course". In later years this tough selection exercise served to weed out candidates who did not meet the required physical and psychological standard for a paratrooper. Although

202. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 231, File KG/GPO/3/2/1, Vol. 2, "Organisasie SA Leër", Confidential Document, Slagorde: SA Weermag, Appendix A, 13 June 1961. See also Van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern SA*, p. 241.

203. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 260, Secret File KG/GPP/2/2/9 Vol. 1, "Procurement of Parachute Equipment SA Army", Encl. 8, Army Chief of Staff to Quartermaster General, 26 October 1961.

204. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Sewende Maandelikse Vorderingsverslag, 19 December 1961; 1 Valskermbataljon Voorbereidingsprogram vir Valskerm opleiding, Liggaamlike Opleiding, 4 December 1961 – 9 December 1961, reproduced in P.J. Els, *We Conquer from Above: The History of 1 Parachute Battalion, 1961–1991* (Pretoria, Pelsa Books, 2010), p. 51.

there was always controversy on exactly how effective it was, it was largely responsible for the reputation of rugged toughness that South Africa's paratroopers acquired

On 11 December 1961 the first South African parachute course commenced in Tempe. The consignment of parachutes on order had still not arrived, neither had the steel jumping helmets or sufficient jumping boots. So the men used motorcycle crash helmets and standard army boots.²⁰⁵ There were five officers and 57 other ranks involved, this being about the number that could be trained on one course. Other volunteers would have to wait their turn.²⁰⁶ Louw had to present the course with only 12 parachutes at his disposal. These were of three different types that had been acquired for testing. With over 60 volunteers undergoing training, it required some innovative planning and long hours of extra work for those on the course to qualify. With the available parachute packers, it took approximately five hours to repack the 12 parachutes once they had been jumped. As a result, only between 24 and 36 jumps could be executed per day. Because of this, the course had to be extended.²⁰⁷

The first parachute descents by the course members, from a Sikorsky S-55 helicopter, were carried out on 4 January 1962.²⁰⁸ After two jumps each from the helicopter, the remainder of the jumps were done from a Dakota aircraft. Jumping took place at 06h00, 14h00 and 18h00 six days a week to allow all the men to complete the requisite eight jumps. The first night jumps to be carried out in South Africa were done by participants in this course on 12 January 1962, and on 29 January that year a wings parade was held, where those who had qualified became the first recipients of South African parachute wings.²⁰⁹ See Appendix 43. Louw's approach to work on qualifying the maximum possible number of people is apparent from the success rate on this first course. Of the 62 volunteers who commenced this so-called acclimatisation course, a total of 50 qualified as paratroopers. See Appendix 44. No one appears to have failed the battle tests.²¹⁰

205. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 260, Secret File KG/GPP/2/2/9 Vol. 1, "Procurement of Parachute Equipment SA Army", Encl. 11, Army Chief of Staff to Commandant General, 11 December 1961.

206. SANDF Archives, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Sewende Maandelikse Vorderingsverslag, 19 December 1961.

207. Ibid., Agste Maandelikse Vorderingsverslag, 12 January 1962.

208. "Ready for Jump", *Friend*, 5 January 1962; "Standaard baie Hoog van Valskermspringers: Kmdt Louw", *Volksblad*, 5 January 1962; J.C. Jordaan, "Valskerms Blom oor Bloemfontein", *Huisgenoot*, 26 January 1962.

209. "Vyftig van Eerste Valskermspringers Kry Vleuels", *Volksblad*, 29 January 1962; "Valskermmanne Kry Hul Vleuels", *Commando*, April 1962; *Friend*, 30 January 1962; Annual Historical Report for 1 Para Bn, 1962.

210. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Ninth Monthly Progress Report, 12 Feb. 1962.

In the meantime, an order had been placed for the delivery of an initial batch of 30 parachutes from Germany to precede the eventual total of 500. It had by then become apparent that the US State Department was not going to grant an export licence for South Africa to the Pioneer Parachute Company. This, according to the SA ambassador in Washington, was “apparently based on the fact that the parachutes in question could be used by parachute troops to deal with internal difficulties in South Africa”.²¹¹

All this naturally exacerbated the situation that Louw faced on the ground. However, he was not easily deflected by difficulties. Because of the urgent need for more parachute instructors for the envisaged first CF parachute course in April, several of those who had received their parachute wings on 29 January immediately commenced with an instructor’s course that same day. The anxiously awaited parachutes had still not arrived, and the now well-used 12 test parachutes again had to suffice.²¹² Military parachutes normally have to undergo stringent porosity tests after 100 jumps, and based on figures provided by Maj Gerrie Leibbrandt, who was one of the parachute packers at the time, these would have done at least 70 jumps each by then.²¹³ Fortunately, the first 30 parachutes from Germany arrived by UAT freight aircraft, together with a batch of Alouette III helicopters from Paris on 23 March 1962. Louw had the parachutes tested that same week, approved as suitable, and immediately used to speed up the qualifying of the second course.²¹⁴ The qualification of the eight successful parachute instructors (seven others were withdrawn as unsuitable) coincided with the passing out of the fresh batch of basic parachutists who formed the second South African parachute course.²¹⁵

The difficulties experienced in acquiring parachutes caused the South African General Staff to investigate the possibility of manufacturing parachutes in South Africa.²¹⁶ In the meantime, the respite gained by the arrival of the 30 German parachutes enabled the

211. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 260, Secret File KG/GPP/2/2/9 Vol. 1, “Procurement of Parachute Equipment SA Army”, Encl. 36b, SA ambassador, Washington, to Sect Foreign Affairs, 2 March 1962; Encl. 19, Army Chief of Staff to Comdt. General, undated; Encl. 32, Air Chief of Staff to Commandant General, 26 March 1962.

212. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol 2, “Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion”, Ninth Monthly Report, 12 February 1962.

213. Personal recollections, Maj G.J. Leibbrandt, 1991.

214. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 260, Secret File KG/GPP/2/2/9 Vol. 1, “Procurement of Parachute Equipment SA Army”, Encls 24, 25, 26, 27, 29 30 and 32, Signals between SA Embassy in Paris, Air Chief of Staff, Army Chief of Staff and Commandant General, 15 to 26 March 1962.

215. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, “Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion”, Ninth Monthly Report, 12 February 1962; “Die Ontstaan en Groei van 1 Valskermbataljon”, A/ADM/6/1 over G/SD/3/6, 1975; “The Parachute Men of Tempe Celebrate a Proud ‘Passing Out’ Parade Day of Wings and Trophy Presentations”, *Friend*, 5 March 1962.

216. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 260, Secret File KG/GPP/2/2/9 Vol. 1, “Procurement of Parachute Equipment SA Army”, Encl. 35, “Minutes of the Staff Conference No G1/62, 18, 19 and 20 January 1962.

third course to take place. It was the first course held for conscripts and 39 of them qualified as paratroopers out of the 43 who had volunteered and been accepted to start the parachute training. At the time, 1 Parachute Battalion was listed in the SA Army Order of Battle as a unit of the Permanent Force,²¹⁷ and its establishment tables made no provision for Citizen Force ballotees. This problem was overcome by placing D-Company of 5 SA Infantry Battalion (5 SAI) under command of 1 Parachute Battalion and posting all successfully trained CF conscripts onto the strength of this company. D-Company was now simply housed with 1 Parachute Battalion in Tempe instead of with 5 SAI in Ladysmith.²¹⁸ Henceforth, a selection board from 1 Parachute Battalion would visit the various training units to recruit fresh volunteers for this company once a quarter.²¹⁹ This catered for the demobilisation of an intake of conscripts at the end of each quarter.

By July 1962 the battalion had 66 main parachutes and 70 reserve parachutes and consignments of 32 British and 325 French steel parachutist helmets were on their way.²²⁰ By the end of that year a total of 110 main parachutes were in use and a further 200, plus 300 reserve parachutes had been delivered.²²¹ A locally produced wrap-around personal equipment container was being used as an interim measure and proper British versions were on order. A lightweight sleeping bag was under development and was being tested.²²²

The 50th anniversary of the establishment of South Africa's Defence Force in 1912 took place in 1962. During the celebrations, and as their début in front of the South African public, the paratroopers used two Dakota aircraft dropping a total of 34 men simultaneously over the Koeikamp, an open field in Tempe. It was the first time more than a single aircraft had been used for paratrooping. See Appendix 45. After that, such demonstrations became frequent at air shows and other festivals countrywide.²²³

217. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 231, File KG/GPO/3/2/1 Vol. 2, "Organisasie SA Leër", Confidential Document: Slagorde: SA Weermag, Appendix A, 13 June 1961.

218. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Thirteenth Monthly Report, 14 July 1962.

219. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 306, File KG/GPT/3/1/6 Vol. 1, "Parachute Training", Encl. 37, "Selection Board: Selection of PF and CF Personnel for Parachute Training", 31 December 1962.

220. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Thirteenth Monthly Report, 14 July 1962.

221. In his personal recollections (1991), Leibbrandt asserts that 500 T-10 parachutes were delivered in October 1962, but this does not correspond with the official documentation. It seems that the parachutes arrived in batches, as the West Germans were able to produce them.

222. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion", Fourteenth Monthly Report, 28 December 1962.

223. "Weermag Vier Fees", *Volksblad*, 13 June 1962; "South Africa's Armed Might Awes the City", *Friend*, 13 June 1962; "Lugdag op Langebaanweg", *Commando*, April 1963; "Die Krag van die SA Weermag", *Commando*, December 1964.

In November 1961 the Rhodesian connection was again apparent when the Army Chief of Staff received a copy of the Federal Army Headquarters' Training Directive for the new C-Squadron, Special Air Service Regiment from the office of the Commandant General. He was told to consider training the new 1 Parachute Battalion "in the same or similar skills in order to make it a flexible infantry unit to which any sort of task can be entrusted."²²⁴ This instruction from the top commander in the SADF was, unfortunately, another example of a nebulous guideline! The Rhodesian directive outlined the classical tasks of a Special Forces unit, including offensive and intelligence gathering operations by small teams as well as by a full squadron. These could be long term, long range operations deep into enemy held territory and they could include the training and assisting of friendly guerrilla bands. The soldiers of the SAS were to be capable of entering or withdrawing from a target area by land, sea or air and able to undertake operations in all phases of conventional war. In addition to parachuting and other means of delivery, the squadron was to be trained to operate as a highly mobile vehicle borne force either in an offensive or a reconnaissance role.²²⁵

In response to this, the existing infantry training curriculum for 1 Parachute Battalion was revised. It retained tasks such as IS operations (urban and rural), conventional operations, airborne operations (air-landed and parachute) within the ability of the unit to take and secure an airhead of a limited size within enemy territory, reinforcing troops that had been encircled or cut off and demonstrating a show of force, as well as (harking back to Erasmus's Mobile Watches) military support of a non-tactical nature to other state departments. But now, the unit was also to be trained to carry out parachute landings by smaller groups in enemy areas to collect intelligence, to help with the organisation of favourably disposed partisan elements and to destroy or neutralise certain objectives.²²⁶

This instruction reflected a failure on the part of those in authority to delineate the role of the unit clearly. Their requirement was for it to take on the roles of both a conventional parachute battalion and a special forces unit. This was not going to be possible because the training and the approach to selection of soldiers differed significantly for the two roles. Furthermore, with CF ballotees only available for six months once they had

224. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 306, File KG/GPT/3/1/6, Vol. 1, "Parachute Training", Encl. 14, Commandant General to Army Chief of Staff, 9 November 1961.

225. Ibid., Encl. 14A, Federal Army Training Directive No 17/61, 'C' Squadron, Rhodesian Special Air Service Regiment, 19 October 1961.

226. Ibid., Encl. 19, Commandant General, to Army Chief of Staff, 9 December 1961; and Army Chief of Staff to OC 1 Para Bn, 10 January 1962.

completed their basic training, there simply was not enough time to cover all aspects in the new curriculum. It was placing an impossible burden on the shoulders of Willem Louw. But in typical fashion, he did not question his orders and simply did his best to forge ahead, introducing all the required training for those who were not busy with their parachute course. One of his junior officers, Field Cornet Jan Breytenbach, was among the few who had done a considerable amount of reading on the subject and he strongly favoured the special forces approach.²²⁷ But Louw was a conventional soldier and the shape of the new parachute unit reflected a clear preference for the conventional rather than the special forces role. However, the polemical effect of the ambiguous instruction from Headquarters was being felt in the new unit, creating two different streams of thinking among the officers.

While efforts continued on recruiting more PF volunteers for parachute training, those who had already qualified as parachutists were put through advanced infantry and other military training, such as demolitions. But for the CF paratroopers, with at least five weeks of the available six months taken up by the parachute course, this was impossible. The PF paratroopers were also trained as Morse code operators and towards the end of 1962 a severe 12-day survival exercise with 60 of them was held in the harsh semi-desert Kalahari area of the northern Cape. It included an early morning parachute drop and a murderous route march of 120 miles (194km) over four days, each man carrying 60 pounds (27kg) of equipment in the soaring summer temperatures.²²⁸ See Appendix 46. This exercise set the tone and the standard for the new parachute unit.²²⁹

By the end of March 1963 a total of 21 officers and 293 other ranks had qualified as military parachutists, including eight CF officers and 154 CF other ranks.²³⁰ Given the manpower constraints that the system imposed on him, Louw's achievement in just two years was remarkable. The battalion now comprised two under-strength paratrooper companies, one of regular PF men and the other of CF ballotees who were replaced every three months by new volunteers as they completed their nine months of conscript duty.

227. J. Breytenbach, "A Recce Goes SAS", in J. Pittaway (ed.), *Special Air Service Rhodesia: The Men Speak* (Durban, Dandy Agencies, 2010), p. 361.

228. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 239, Secret File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1, Vol. 2, "Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion, 11th, 12th, 13th and 14th Monthly Reports, 10 April, 17 May, 14 July and 28 December 1962; "Unarmed Combat", *Friend*, 19 May 1962; W.P. Louw's Parachutist Log Book, entry for 3 December 1962; *The Sunday Express*, 18 October 1964.

229. Interviews with Col Jan Breytenbach (retired), Pretoria, 16 February 1993; and Lt Col Ronnie Claassen (retired), Centurion, 13 June 1995.

230. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 306, KG/GPT/3/1/6, Vol. 1, "Parachute Training", Encl. 42, Army Chief of Staff to Commandant General, 30 March 1963.

In the meantime, negotiations between military and civilian manufacturers continued in an effort to establish a South African parachute production capability. This would solve the issue of being dependent on sanction-prone foreign suppliers.²³¹

5.11. STRATEGIC REACH: ACQUISITION OF C-130 HERCULES AIRCRAFT

The South African Air Force had long realised the need for a better airlift capability than was afforded by the aging Dakota fleet. Though they still had many years of service left, the Dakotas had a limited payload and a limited range, thus severely restricting the air transport possibilities of the SADF. A decision had been taken in the early 1960s to augment the Dakotas with the acquisition of the American Lockheed C-130 Hercules tactical medium cargo transport aircraft. In January 1963 seven of the C-130B models were delivered to 28 Squadron, SAAF.²³² See Appendix 47.

The C-130B had four Allison T56-A-7 turboprop engines and made provision for carrying up to 92 troops with their personal equipment or up to 64 fully equipped paratroopers. It could take 74 stretchers carrying casualties and a maximum payload of 45,000 pounds (20,412 kg). With a hydraulically operated rear ramp for loading and a cavernous cargo hold, this translated to three Alouette III helicopters, or two three-ton Bedford trucks and a Land Rover. Such loads could be flown a distance of 2,420 miles (3,895 km) at speeds of over 300 knots (about 380 mph or nearly 600 km/h). Pressurised, it could fly at a ceiling of 30,000 feet (almost 10,000 metres) and the ramp and hold enabled it to take up to six pre-loaded pallets of freight which could be air-supplied if the correct system was fitted to the aircraft.²³³ The two side doors for paratrooping meant that 32 troops could be despatched from each door simultaneously, reducing the length of a dropping zone and concentrating the troops for re-grouping after landing. Tactically, this meant that each aircraft could drop two platoons and two of them would be able to drop a company. One Dakota, on the other hand, could barely drop half a platoon.

These aircraft brought the South African military into a new league. Their versatility provided the Armed Forces with hitherto undreamed of possibilities in terms of transporting both equipment (including vehicles) and personnel by air. For the paratroopers, they gave a

231. Ibid, Box 260, Secret File KG/GPP/2/2/9, Vol 1, "Procurement of Parachute Equipment", Encls 46, 49, 50, 55, 58B, 58 and 64, Correspondence, QMG., Army Chief of Staff, Air Chief of Staff and CG, 30 July 1962, 9 August 1962, 19 April 1963, 15 April 1963, 19 May 1963, 7 June 1963 and 23 July 1963.

232. H. Potgieter and W. Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force* (Cape Town, Struik, 1981), p. 91.

233. J.W.R. Taylor (ed.), *Jane's All The World's Aircraft, 1976-77* (London, Macdonald & Janes, 1976), p. 320; Green and Swanborough, *Basic Military Aircraft Directory*, p. 127; Potgieter and Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force*, pp. 90-91.

reach that immediately assumed strategic proportions. One C-130 could transport almost as many paratroopers as four Dakotas, and it could transport them almost eight times as far as the Dakotas could. If all seven aircraft were used, a total of 448 paratroopers could be dropped simultaneously.

The operations section at the office of the Commandant General lost no time in instructing the Army and Air Chiefs of Staff to familiarise the paratroopers of 1 Parachute Battalion with the new aircraft for parachuting.²³⁴ By then Commandant Louw had just held the first company-sized airborne exercise by his newly qualified CF paratroopers over 15 and 16 March 1963 at De Brug. It was the largest airborne exercise yet carried out by South Africa (see Appendix 48). Using four Dakota aircraft, flying in two lifts, about 120 men were dropped. However, had two C-130 aircraft been used, they could all have been dropped in one lift. This effectively illustrates the significance of the new aircraft acquisition.

The exercise proved a salutary lesson on how far the new unit still had to go before it could be considered operational. There were many equipment shortcomings and although the technical parachuting was of a high order, both the leadership of the company commander and the minor tactical capabilities of the soldiers were adjudged to be sadly lacking.²³⁵ But with less than four months available after completing their parachute course, there was insufficient time to train the CF paratroopers to the level required for the likely missions that were envisaged for 1 Parachute Battalion. With the Permanent Force element, this was certainly viable, but the numbers of PF volunteers did not even make up a full company and it was becoming apparent that they would never reach the total that had been hoped for.

The new Hercules aircraft was introduced to the paratroopers on 9 and 10 April 1963, when Louw's two-company battalion successfully carried out a total of 256 jumps from C-130B No. SAAF 405 in the Bloemfontein area (see Appendix 49). These jumps were made from both side doors as well as from the rear ramp.²³⁶ For the first time, the concept of "strategic reach" could be considered by the SADF.

Louw was able to illustrate this soon afterwards when, on 2 June 1963, he carried out an exercise at Louis Trichardt in the far Northern Transvaal during an air display. A total of 128 paratroopers, equipped with combat gear, took off in two C-130 aircraft from Tempe

234. DOD, KG Gp 5, Box 306, File KG/GPT/3/1/6 Vol. 1, "Parachute Training", Encl. 39, CG Ops to Army and Air Chiefs of Staff 18 March 1963.

235. Ibid., Encl. 44, OC 1 Para Bn to Army Chief of Staff, 23 April 1963; Encl. 38, Report on Exercise by 1 Para Bn from Col GS (Army) to D Plan and Ops, 18 March 1963.

236. Ibid, Encl. 46, 1 Para Bn to Army Chief of Staff 13 April 1963; Authorisation Logbook, 28 Squadron, SAAF.

Airfield, just a kilometre away from the 1 Parachute Battalion base, at 13h00. At 14h40 Commandant Louw and his men dropped close to the airfield at Louis Trichardt, 800 km away. No DZ Safety Officer was used and the aircrew utilised the built-in Computed Air Release Point (CARP) system of the aircraft. After landing, the troops immediately grouped on the ground and carried out a mock attack to capture the airfield. It was the biggest jump yet done by the paratroopers and having suitably impressed the spectators, they emplaned and flew back to Bloemfontein that same evening. But Louw allowed them no time to rest on their laurels, commencing the next day with a route march of 100 miles (161 km), which they completed three days later.²³⁷ The exercise with its drop on Louis Trichardt had demonstrated the potential to project force, but the paratroopers still did not have any proper logistic back-up in place, an air-supply system for the C-130 aircraft had not yet been acquired, command and control for airborne operations was not in place and, most importantly, there was no joint doctrine for the conduct of airborne operations.

Shortly after this exercise, the first consignment of Belgian Fabrique Nationale AS-24 air-droppable vehicles was delivered to 1 Parachute Battalion on 26 June 1963.²³⁸ They were small, three-wheeled vehicles with balloon-type tyres, a two-stroke engine and a single, hard, uncomfortable bench on which four paratroopers were meant to sit with their kit (see Appendix 50). Dubbed “tico cars” in honour of the battalion’s Transport NCO, Staff Sergeant “Tico” Brink, only six of the vehicles were purchased, although the requirement was for 32.²³⁹ The reason for this could not be ascertained, although it was conceivably due to the increasing pressure on Western countries to isolate South Africa and impose a restriction on the sale of arms to the new republic.

5.12. DEDUCTIONS

Operation SWIVEL, the military deployment to suppress the Mpondo Revolt, was to be germinal to both the liberation movements and the SADF. It showed how an insurgent group could apply the basic principles of revolutionary warfare in Africa and it highlighted mistakes made; it also enabled some fundamental lessons to be learnt in the employment of helicopters in a counter-insurgency role.

Sharpeville and the banning of the ANC and the PAC led to the decision by these organisations to embark on an armed struggle to overthrow white hegemony in South

237. “City Men Parachute in Big Air Show”, *The Friend*, 3 June 1963; “Oorsig oor die Jare 1960–1965”, 1 Parachute Battalion Historical Summary.

238. “Oorsig oor die Jare 1960–1965”, 1 Parachute Battalion Historical Summary.

239. DOD, 1 Para Bn Gp, Box 18, File Q/EQPT/61/1, Encl. 20, 1 Para Bn to Army Chief of Staff, 31 January 1964.

Africa. The establishment of MK by the ANC and Poqo by the PAC led respectively to the start of a sabotage campaign and a campaign of terror by each of these two organisations. This served as a major impetus to the establishment and development of 1 Parachute Battalion, because the sense of fear among many white people lent urgency to the acquisition of an airborne capability. Boulter describes the decision to establish a parachute unit in the Army as being made to expand the armoury of counter-insurgency techniques within the SADF.²⁴⁰ Certainly, the paratroopers formed a vital part of the modernisation of the Defence Force, so that during the 1960s the ANC, in the words of Ben Turok, had come to the realisation that “the government has armed forces of great mobility which can be fairly easily concentrated in one spot and overwhelm an armed group without difficulty.”²⁴¹

What was apparently a politically inspired choice of Tempe as the location for the new airborne unit was one that would haunt the paratroopers in the years ahead because it was not the military’s preference and the Bloemfontein site had significant shortcomings. Similarly, the decision to burden the operational airborne unit with parachute training subsequently proved problematic because instructors constantly had to be removed from their posts in operational companies, leaving their troops for up to nine weeks at a time so that they could present parachute training.

Yet despite these hitches, and although it could not yet be considered properly operational by the middle of 1963, 1 Parachute Battalion had come a long way in the two and a half years since it was established. Built up in the face of considerable adversity, it could, in a sense, be said that the new unit had been born into the vortex of the Thirty Year War through the participation of its Mobile Watch predecessor and the first paratroopers in the quelling of the Mpondo Revolt of 1960–1961.

The introduction of modern helicopters simultaneously with the establishment of the first parachute unit heralded a new capability in the SADF and came to define much thinking on tactical mobility during the coming struggle. But although Willem Louw was an extraordinary man of action with a phenomenal ability to get things done in the face of any obstacle, he was not a theorist. He did not conceptualise or grasp and propagate the theories of application for this new airborne capability. The technical problems were resolved and the physical hurdles overcome with commendable initiative and perseverance; but nowhere is there any evidence of anyone having made a study of airborne operations so

240. R.S. Boulter, “Afrikaner Nationalism in Action: F.C. Erasmus and South Africa’s Defence Forces, 1948–1959”, *Nations and Nationalism*, 6, Part 3 (July 2000), p. 88.

241. Turok, *The ANC and the Turn to Armed Struggle*, p. 120.

that the technical achievements could be translated into tactical doctrine, or of there being any understanding of the strategic potential of the new capability. In fact, the theory should be in place first and dictate the practice; the structure should follow the doctrine. But there was no doctrine. What was missing was a visionary on whose ideas the airborne capability could be built.

Louw was an implementer who got things done. He could easily have moulded the new unit into whatever shape he was instructed to make it. Unfortunately, he received confused, mixed guidelines with no clarity on the specific role of his unit, though he seemed to favour a conventional airborne role. With the arrival of the C-130 Hercules aircraft the potential of the paratroopers increased enormously – yet still, Louw was not given any clear and specific direction on what role he should prepare his paratroopers for, other than to jump from aircraft. The technical challenges for Louw were daunting, and a lesser man may have folded in the face of such odds. But Louw never hesitated and he rose to the occasion in an exceptional way. Louw thrived on the challenges and forged ahead despite the problems, succeeding in building a unit that quickly established a reputation for toughness and excellence; a unit that had the solid foundation and potential to play a significant role in the hostilities that lay ahead.

Would the attempts by the UK's Liberal Party to thwart the training of that very first group of paratroopers from South Africa at Abingdon have prevented the establishment of an airborne capability in the SADF, had they been successful? This seems unlikely. It is a little-known fact that as early as 1961 there were already tentative and surreptitious feelers being extended on defence matters between Portugal, the Central African Federation and South Africa. The Portuguese, with their well-established military parachute capability, had offered to assist South Africa with military parachute training at this time.²⁴² The next chapter will discuss how cooperation between the South African paratroopers and their Portuguese and Rhodesian neighbours increased over the next decade.

242. DOD, Sect for Defence, Gp 1, Box 179, Top Secret Sub-file DC 17850/450/1, Annexure: "Military Situation in Angola", SA ambassador, Lisbon to Sect Foreign Affairs, 28 November 1962; Top Secret File DC 17850/450/3 Vol. 1, "Proposed Military Cooperation, Angola/ RSA", Army and Air Attaché at Portuguese embassy, to CG, 2 October 1961, and reply via Sect for Defence, 22 December 1961.

CHAPTER 6

THE INSURGENT WAR BEGINS: TACTICAL AIRBORNE APPLICATION WITH STRATEGIC POTENTIAL

6.1. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of 1 Parachute Battalion in 1961 and the training of the first paratroopers in South Africa provided the country with a small airborne capability at the beginning of the 1960s. But it was still far from being a viable force. This chapter deals with the growth and development of the airborne capability and examines the continued efforts at defining the role of the paratroopers. The impact on the paratroopers of the decisions of the World Court and the United Nations resolutions on the territory of South West Africa (SWA, later Namibia) is discussed, and the first military operation in that territory (a helicopter assault in which members of 1 Parachute Battalion participated) is analysed for its tactical and strategic significance. The increasing contact with the Portuguese armed forces along the border between South West Africa and Angola is considered in the light of their airborne operations, as is the Rhodesian training of some SADF paratroopers in special forces techniques.

Participation by a small group of paratroopers in the Nigerian Civil War is shown to have had a direct bearing on the establishment of a special forces unit in the SADF, resulting in a clear differentiation of roles between them and 1 Parachute Battalion. The first deployments of SADF paratroopers in Rhodesia are touched upon and the development by the Rhodesian armed forces of a technique known as fire force – based on the concept of vertical envelopment – is examined. This was later adopted by the SADF and became a permanent feature of the employment of the South African paratroopers during the Thirty Year War. Subsequent chapters will show that it resulted in a tactical mindset that was detrimental to the development of a strategic airborne capability. The chapter concludes with reference to the first parachute operation by SADF elements, carried out by members of the newly established special forces unit attached to the Rhodesian SAS.

In this chapter, recently declassified archival sources have been used extensively. However, for certain aspects covered, no official material could be traced in the Department of Defence archival repository. This applied especially to some contact with the militaries of other countries, and more specifically, to the SADF involvement in the Nigerian Civil War.

Personal interviews and correspondence with participants have partly filled this void and some published secondary works have also been consulted.

6.2. GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE AIRBORNE CAPABILITY

On the technical level of war, a remarkable standard of military parachuting was achieved and the fitness of the paratroopers was exemplary, but on the tactical level much work was still needed. There was no airborne doctrine in place and on the operational level there appeared to be a complete absence of vision on exactly how the paratroopers would be employed. They had built up an enviable reputation for toughness and were rightly regarded as an elite group of soldiers,¹ but there remained an ambiguity on precisely how and for what they would be employed.

By the mid-1960s, 1 Parachute Battalion was beginning to take on the appearance of a conventional parachute battalion with an exclusively operational role. From 1 July 1963 until December 1967 it was relieved of its parachute training responsibility when a Parachute Training Centre was created as a separate unit to be responsible for the selection and training of paratroopers. However, the two units continued to share the same base and the training facility was heavily reliant on the battalion for instructors, so it was eventually decided to amalgamate them again.²

The facilities at the Parachute Training Centre could only provide training in parachuting for 50 men at a time. Initially conscripts who volunteered reverted to their CF infantry regiments at the end of their nine months' full-time commitment. They then completed their annual 21-day camps as ordinary infantrymen. But this was seen as a waste of highly trained personnel,³ and by the end of 1963 they were being retained and the organisation of 1 Parachute Battalion had grown to include three part-time CF companies in addition to its PF company and full-time CF company.⁴ The paratroopers of the full-time company were, however, still undergoing training for most of the six months they were at the battalion, so could barely be used for operations if the need arose.⁵

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1. "Jump to it . . . with South Africa's Skymen", *Sunday Express*, 18 October 1964; "Army Life Gets Just a Tiny Bit Easier . . .", *Star*, 20 January 1965.
 2. DOD, KG (5), Box 306, Confidential KG/GPT/ 316, Encl. 35, 3 November 1962; and Secret KG/GPT/3/1/6, Encl. 18 December 1962; R.J. Bouch (ed.), *Infantry in South Africa, 1652–1976* (Pretoria, Documentation Service, SADF, 1977), p. 190.
 3. DOD, KG (5), Box 306, KG/GPT/3/1/6, Vol. 1, "Parachute Training", Encl. 35, 3 November 1962.
 4. DOD, AG (3), Box 213, AG 560/6/7/32, "Org and Est Tables, Army, Inf: 1 Para Bn", G/SD/3/1 over G/TRG/1/18, Acting Army Chief of Staff to Commandant General and Adjutant General, 16 March 1964.
 5. *Ibid.*, AG 560/1 over AG 560/6/7/32, Adjutant General to Secretary for Defence, 9 July 1964.

The PF company rarely exceeded 35 per cent of its approved strength (making it effectively only one platoon), because it did not attract sufficient suitable recruits. In 1964 it was disbanded and a second full-time CF company as well as a fourth part-time CF company were established.⁶ The battalion had transformed from a regular to a conscript. By then the number of young white males annually undergoing training as conscripts was in excess of 10,000,⁷ providing a substantial pool from which to recruit potential paratroopers. Officers and senior NCOs for the part-time CF companies were recruited from established CF regiments to undergo parachute training. These volunteers were exempted from the selection phase known as the PT Course and only had to pass certain fitness tests.⁸ See Appendix 51.

The decision to expand the unit into a full battalion of 763 (all ranks) had to be implemented by July 1965.⁹ By October 1964, 1 Parachute Battalion consisted of six rifle companies (two full-time and four part-time) as well as a Headquarters (HQ) Company with mortar, medium machine-gun and anti-tank platoons.¹⁰ In actual fact, however, the battalion never succeeded in maintaining a full complement of the HQ Company.

Rudimentary air supply was initially done by 1 Parachute Battalion, largely because of the shortage of personal weapons containers (PWCs) that enabled each soldier to jump with his personal equipment. This meant that the equipment and weapons the men needed had to be dropped separately.¹¹ However, the training of personnel in air supply techniques eventually became the responsibility of the newly established Services School in Pretoria and the Air Force then designed and adopted a system of roller conveyors for the Dakota to assist in despatching a succession of panniers through the aircraft's side door.¹² In 1963, a CF unit, 101 Air Supply Platoon, was established in Pretoria as part of the Administrative Services Corps, to provide air supply services for the whole Defence Force¹³ (see Appendix 52). However, 1 Parachute Battalion was in Bloemfontein and had a requirement for air

6. Ibid., G/SD/3/1 over G/TRG/1/18, Acting Army Chief of Staff to Commandant General and Adjutant General, 16 March 1964.

7. DOD, KG (5), Box 84, Confidential KG/AP/BM/1/1, "Burgermag Registrasie en Loting: Beleid", AG6(A) BM/IND/1 over AG6(A) BM/LOT/7/1, Adjutant General to Commandant General, 19 March 1962.

8. Interview, Cmdt Nic Claassen (ret'd), Centurion, 22 June 1995.

9. DOD, KG (5), Box 306, KG/GPT/3/1/6, Vol. 1, "Parachute Training", Encl. 36, Letter from Commandant General, 18 December 1962.

10. DOD, AG (3), Box 213, AG 560/6/7/32, "Org and Est Tables: Army, Inf, 1 Para Bn", Encl. 40, 9 July 1964.

11. DOD, 1 Para Bn Gp, Box 18, Q/EQPT/61/1, Correspondence, OC 1 Para Bn and Director of Planning and Operations, 28 February to 8 March 1963.

12. Par 8 of Minutes of Meeting, Maintenance Group, SAAF, 16 May 1961 to Discuss Equipment Required by 1 Para Bn, Ref. 3GP/519/1/Eng over 3GP/519/2/10/Eng.

13. "Gesiedenis van Lugvoorsiening in RSA", Undated Document drawn up by Maj Tom Moodie for the OC 44 Para Bde, circa 1990.

supply on an almost weekly basis. It was simply not possible for 101 Air Supply Platoon to meet this need, so the battalion continued to conduct its own air supply activities. This was to remain the case for many years. Obtaining suitable radios for airborne operations was another issue that produced much bureaucratic wrangling and was not fully resolved.¹⁴

But there were other more positive developments aimed at enhancing the airborne capability of the unit during the 1960s. Personal equipment containers were acquired from the United Kingdom via France, despite the efforts of British politicians to prevent this.¹⁵ The parachute training apparatus for the Parachute Training Centre was doubled to increase the number of paratroopers who could be trained to a full company plus some extras (a total of 135 trainees).¹⁶ A mock-up, or dummy C-130 fuselage was built near the outdoor exit trainer in Tempe to train paratroopers in the drills required for jumping from this aircraft.¹⁷ The French EFA parachute (*Etudes et Fabrications Aeronautiques*) was tested and found very suitable,¹⁸ but was not acquired because sufficient stocks of T-10 parachutes had already been purchased and considerable progress had been made with producing South Africa's first locally made parachutes.¹⁹ Belgian FN folding stock paratrooper rifles were tested and found suitable for use by the paratroopers, because they were far safer to jump with.²⁰ Pathfinders were approved, and formed part of the Battalion HQ.²¹ Free-fall parachute training was approved and an application was made for the acquisition of free fall parachutes.²² A large, modern and custom-designed parachute packers' building was erected, based on a design obtained from the RRAF by Louw (yet another example of co-operation with the Rhodesians), and the responsibility for packing parachutes migrated from the Air Force to the Army.²³ A Parachute Replacement Pool of parachute-qualified PF

14. DOD, 1 Para Bn Gp, Box 18, Q/EQPT/61/1, OC 1 Para Bn to Director of Planning and Operations, 28 February 1963; Encl. 3, Chief Technical Officer, SADF, to OC 1 Para Bn 26 April 1963; Encl. 5, Undated Signal, 1 Para Bn to Chief Technical Officer, SADF.

15. DOD, DC (1), Box 78, Confidential DC/17850/445, "Paratroop Training", Encls 28 November 1962 to 25 January 1963.

16. DOD, Para Trg Centre Gp, Box 2, Q/EQPT/61/1, "Paratroop Equipment/Para Aux Eqpt" Vol. 1, Encl. 66, Para Trg Centre to Army Chief of Staff, 8 February 1965.

17. Ibid., Encl. 21, 1 Para Bn to Army Chief of Staff, 24 January 1964.

18. DOD, KG (5), Box 260, KG/GPP/2/2/9, Vol. 1, "Procurement of Parachute Equipment SA Army", Encls 2 April 1962 to 27 September 1963; Para Trg Centre, Box 2, Q/EQPT/61/1, Vol. 2, Encls 11 and 12, Statement by SSgt J.Kieser 20 January 1966.

19. DOD, CDC (KG) DGAA (1), Box 218, Secret File HVS/414/19, Vol. 1, Encl. 6, Parachute Industries of Southern Africa to Controller of Customs and Excise, 1 November 1967.

20. DOD, 1 Para Bn Gp, Box 18, Q/EQPT/61/1, Encl. 8, August 1963 and Encl. 11, 16 October 1963.

21. DOD, KG (5), Box 306, KG/GPT/3/1/6, Vol. 1, "Parachute Training", Encl. 35, 3 November 1962.

22. DOD, Para Trg Centre Gp, Box 2, Q/EQPT/61/1, "Paratroop Equipment/Para Aux Eqpt", Vol. 1, Encl. 34, Para Trg Centre to Army Chief of Staff, 15 May 1964.

23. DOD, Para Trg Centre Gp, Box 2, Q/WKS/1, Encl. 11, Para Trg Centre to OFS Comd, 27 July 1965.

personnel who were serving in non-airborne units was established to keep them current as parachutists and available for transfer to 1 Parachute Battalion if needed.²⁴ Neither was Louw lax in exercising his men in the field in an attempt to hone their tactical proficiency. Conventional exercises with the armour and artillery, and others of an IS nature were held near Potchefstroom, Maselspoort Holiday Resort complex and the De Brug training range outside of Bloemfontein.²⁵

In November 1964, during the first water jumps by the South African paratroopers (they jumped into the Rustfontein Dam to the east of Bloemfontein), several promotions were announced, including that of Willem Louw to colonel.²⁶ He then headed the South African Military College in Pretoria, so his remarkable pioneering role had come to an end. Louw had left a lasting impression on 1 Parachute Battalion. Never easy to get along with, he was frequently accused of being harsh, boorish, insensitive to others and autocratic. There can be no doubt that he was a martinet. But he had been selected to found South Africa's first parachute unit. The men he worked with were tough and hard. A softer man would have had difficulty handling them. Louw was single-minded and determined; no problem was insurmountable. In the face of considerable adversity he forged ahead to accomplish an admirable feat. By 1962 he had been awarded the Southern Cross Medal for outstanding devotion to duty in recognition of his achievements.²⁷ Also, despite having taken the "red oath" during the Second World War and having served under British and American command as part of the 6th SA Armoured Division, he had been admitted to the ranks of the Afrikaner Broederbond the same year,²⁸ so he was clearly identified for advancement.

After Louw's departure the exercises and field training continued, taking place in different parts of the country and focusing on IS and unconventional warfare techniques as well as conventional warfare.²⁹ Nor were the part-time companies of 1 Parachute Battalion neglected. Besides their annual 21-day company camps in Bloemfontein, regular refresher

24. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 242, Confidential G/Trg/1/18, "Training Policy Directives and Instructions: Paratroopers", Encl. 27, 1 Para Bn to Chief of the Army, 17 December 1969.

25. "Oorsig oor die Jare 1960–1965", 1 Parachute Battalion Historical Summary; Interview, Brig W.S. van der Waals, Pretoria, 28 November 1991; Annual Historical Report for 1 Para Bn, 1964.

26. "Men who Dropped in Dam Make S African History", *The Friend*, 9 November 1964; "Ons Manne Leer in die Water Spring", *Die Volksblad*, 13 November 1964; "Valskermataljon Kry Nuwe Bevelvoerder", *Die Volksblad*, 16 November 1964.

27. "Oorsig oor die Jare 1960–1965", 1 Parachute Battalion Historical Summary; Annual Historical Report for 1 Para Bn, 1962; *The Friend*, 14 June 1962.

28. I. Wilkens and H. Srydom, *The Super-Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1980), p. A147.

29. Annual Historical Reports for 1 Para Bn, 1965 and 1966.

training, including parachuting, was supervised over weekends by the Parachute Training Centre.³⁰

6.3. DEFINING THE OPERATIONAL ROLE OF THE PARATROOPERS

At this time the possible operational employment of the paratroopers was never far from the thoughts of the senior SADF officers. As early as 1963 Willem Louw had been warned by Colonel Jan Burger, by then the Director of Planning and Operations, to have his unit combat ready to undertake an operational task at all times.³¹ In March 1965, despite the deadline to have the unit fully staffed by the middle of that year, the new OC 1 Parachute Battalion, Commandant Jan Fourie, reported to Burger that he was able to mobilise only an incomplete battalion HQ, four rifle companies (of which two had barely 40 per cent of their full-time personnel and the other two consisted of part-time soldiers), incomplete and ineffective support weapon elements and a shortage of signals and technical personnel.³² This indicates that the nine-month period of conscription was not long enough to train paratroopers in the more specialised fields, and that the ballot system was providing too few volunteers to bring the battalion up to full strength.

In October 1965 a new Army Chief of Staff, Combat General P.J. Jacobs, issued a fresh command directive to the OC 1 Parachute Battalion. Fourie was instructed to train his unit to execute tasks that included conventional airborne operations as well as small group parachute infiltrations to gather intelligence or to destroy or neutralise certain objectives. Jacobs also provided certain principles on which the execution of these tasks was to be based. These included that the battalion would henceforth form part of Defence Headquarters' troops and as such would be deployed by the very highest level of military command, which meant that it was seen as a strategic asset. It would also be tasked to carry out specific missions as rapidly as possible and was to be relieved quickly to be available for further tasks. In addition, it was explicitly stated that employment of the battalion or any of its sub-units would in all likelihood involve a parachute drop and that close air support as well as air supply would form an integral part of such an operation. With this in mind, no provision would be made for a follow-up convoy of vehicles for the battalion.³³

30. DOD, Para Trg Centre Gp, Box 2, Q/EQPT/61/1, "Paratroop Equipment/Para Aux Eqpt", Vol. 2, Encl. 6, 1 Para Bn to Air Chief of Staff, 9 December 1965; Annual Historical Report for 1 Para Bn, 1965 and 1966.

31. DOD, 1 Para Bn Gp, Box 18, Q/EQPT/61/1, Letter from Col J.H. Burger to Cmdt W.P. Louw, 2 March 1963.

32. Ibid., Box 5, Secret G/PLANS/2/5, "Operational Preparedness: 1 Para Bn", Encl. 1, OC 1 Para Bn to Commander, 16 Combat Group, 22 March 1965.

33. DOD, KG Gp, File KG/OPL/2/4/1, Encl. 8, October 1965.

This was the clearest instruction yet regarding the envisaged role of the battalion. Yet, with no other unit to call on to conduct clandestine reconnaissance and sabotage with small groups, 1 Parachute Battalion was still seen as both a conventional parachute battalion and a special forces unit. But expertise for special forces did not exist in the SADF. Ultimately, this lack of focus led to a dissipation of effort and friction between the exponents within the unit of each of the respective approaches.³⁴

By September 1966, Fourie was obliged to admit that his battalion was not in a position to carry out the operational tasks envisaged for it without unnecessary loss of life. He needed to devote more time to training and appealed to be relieved of having to provide guards for the local Army territorial command and that his unit no longer be required to participate in sporting activities and ceremonial duties. He asked that they be allowed to concentrate exclusively on training and that an aircraft be stationed permanently in Bloemfontein so that the paratroopers could jump whenever the weather was suitable. He even went so far as to ask that his unit be moved to a different location, where more suitable training terrain would be available.³⁵ But Fourie's appeal fell on deaf ears.

By then, however, some members of 1 Parachute Battalion had already participated in the first armed clash by South Africa in the Thirty Year War. And it was South West Africa (SWA), not South Africa that was their initial battleground.

6.4. SOUTH WEST AFRICA AND THE WORLD COURT DECISION

South Africa's trusteeship of South West Africa in terms of the mandate that had been awarded at the end of the First World War by the League of Nations, was challenged in 1960. Ethiopia and Liberia had brought a charge to the International Court of Justice (the World Court) that South Africa had violated its mandate and should be compelled to relinquish its trusteeship. It was the same year that the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) was established – what became the major liberation movement in the struggle for Namibian independence. In 1966 the court finally ruled that the complainants had no legal right or interest in the matter, effectively torpedoing the attempt to eject South Africa from the territory.³⁶

34. Interviews, Maj Gen Eddie Webb (ret'd), Pretoria, 14 June 1995; and Maj Gen "Buddy" Ferreira (ret'd), Pretoria, 26 June 1995.

35. DOD, 1 Para Bn Gp, Box 5, Secret G/PLANS/2/5, "Operational Preparedness: 1 Para Bn", Encl. 5, OC 1 Para Bn to Chief of the Army, 30 September 1966.

36. G. L'Ange, *The White Africans: From Colonisation to Liberation* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2005), pp. 257 and 294.

By then SWAPO had already embarked on its armed struggle. According to SADF and South African Police (SAP) intelligence reports, the first six armed insurgents entered Ovamboland in July/August 1965.³⁷ SWAPO, however, claims that it had already infiltrated fighters into the territory in 1964,³⁸ but the year 1965 was subsequently confirmed by one of the insurgents who infiltrated the following year.³⁹ SWAPO had been making contingency plans should the World Court decision be unfavourable for them. The insurgents lay low inside South West Africa and did not resort to violence, but were in position to act if things “did not go well” at the Hague.⁴⁰ The first group established a base in a remote part of Ovamboland (often spelt Owamboland) at a spot called Ongulumbashe (also spelt Omgulumbashe and sometimes rendered as Omugulu gwOmbashe, Omugulu-gOmbashe or Omugulugwombashe). From this base, concealed in the sandy, sparsely forested plain and undetected by the thinly scattered SAP elements in the territory, they recruited a number of local youths whom they trained in the basic skills of guerrilla war.⁴¹ Their intention was to be ready to launch an armed struggle by targeting all whites, policemen and tribal chiefs who were working with the South African authorities, as soon as they were given the word. When the second group of ten insurgents was intercepted and nine of them arrested, taken to Pretoria and interrogated in March and April 1966, the South African authorities learnt that between 900 and 1,200 people had left SWA for military training as members of SWAPO. Many of those, according to the captured insurgents, were already on their way back to establish operational bases in various parts of northern SWA.⁴²

If Sam Nujoma, the president of SWAPO, had foreseen the outcome of the case being considered by the World Court, the South Africans had not. In terms of the League of Nations Mandate, South Africa was prevented from maintaining any military bases inside the territory of South West Africa.⁴³ It was for this reason that the only permanent military base was at the port of Walvis Bay, which was considered a part of the former Cape Colony.

37. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Interim Report: Operation “BLOUWILDEBEEES”, by Cmdt T.J. Renfree, GSO 1 (Int), Army HQ, 7 September 1966; R. Dale, *The Namibian War of Independence, 1966–1989: Diplomatic, Economic and Military Campaigns* (Jefferson NC, McFarland, 2014), p. 76 gives the month when SWAPO insurgents first entered Ovamboland as September 1965.

38. L. Dobell, *Swapo’s Struggle for Namibia: War by Other Means* (Basel, P. Schlettwein, 1998), p. 35.

39. H. Shityuwete, *Never Follow the Wolf* (London, Kliptown Books, 1990), p. 101.

40. S. Brown, “Diplomacy by Other Means: SWAPO’s Liberation War”, in C. Leys and J.S Saul (eds), *Namibia’s Liberation Struggle: The Two-Edged Sword* (London, James Currey, 1995), p. 20.

41. SADF, *Lesse en Foute in die Bekamping van Terrorisme in Suider Afrika*, Copy No. 114, Confidential SA Army Publication (Pretoria, SADF, late 1960s) p. 13.

42. DOD, Miscellaneous Docs, Top Secret Interim Report: Operation “BLOUWILDEBEEES”, 7 September 1966.

43. T. Molnar, *South West Africa: The Last Pioneer Country* (New York, Fleet Publishing, 1966), pp. 157–158, quoting Article 4 of the terms of the Mandate for German South West Africa.

Expecting the worst while they waited for the announcement to be made on 18 July 1966, the South African government placed various elements of the Defence Force on standby to be flown to SWA in the event of international military intervention. At 1 Parachute Battalion, A-Company had been placed on alert, but were stood down when the court's surprise ruling in their favour became known.⁴⁴

6.5. ONGULUMBASHE: THE FIRST HELICOPTER ASSAULT (OPERATION BLOUWILDEBEEES)

The band of insurgents at Ongulumbashe was well-advanced in their preparations to launch a campaign of violence. But the SAP Security Branch had "turned" the captured leader of the second band of insurgents and he had co-operated with them on a two-month long undercover operation in Ovamboland. They discovered the base at Ongulumbashe and clandestinely reconnoitred it, deciding that the base would have to be attacked and destroyed.⁴⁵ The situation must have been discussed at the highest level, and there can be no doubt that the Justice, Police and Prisons minister, Advocate B.J. Vorster, was directly involved in the decision to mount an operation. Els implies that the prime minister, Dr H.F. Verwoerd himself, gave certain guidelines⁴⁶ and an operation of that nature must have had his approval, particularly as the Defence Force came to be involved. South Africa did not want to be seen as transgressing the terms of the League of Nations Mandate she was claiming to still uphold. A military presence in SWA could be a major embarrassment, let alone a military action. Ultimately, therefore, Police Headquarters in Pretoria was tasked to carry out this mission.⁴⁷

6.5.1. The Operation: Paratroopers and Policemen

The SAP planned to utilise its Riot Unit (also known as the Mobile Unit) to carry out the operation. However, they were neither equipped nor trained for such an action. At a conference between SAP and SADF generals in Cape Town, the Commandant General decided that substantial assistance would be needed by the policemen in order for the operation to succeed.⁴⁸

44. Diary of Cpl P.C. Edwards, 22 July 1966.

45. SAPS Archives, Citation/Recommendation, Actions of Lt P.A. Ferreira and Const E. Johannes by Capt T.J. Swanepoel, 9 December 1966.

46. P.J. Els, *Ongulumbashe: Where the Bushwar Began* (Wandsbeck, Reach Publishers, 2007), pp. 150–151.

47. M. Morris, *Terrorism: The First Full Account in Detail of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southern Africa* (Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1971) pp. 90–93.

48. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Report on Operation "BLOUWILDEBEEES", 9 September 1966; Els, *Ongulumbashe*, pp. 128–149.

Accordingly, with political approval, it was agreed that the SADF would provide eight Alouette III helicopters and their crews, three C-130 Hercules transport aircraft and their crews, six three-ton Bedford 4x4 vehicles, three .303 Bren light machine guns, 19 Uzi 9mm sub-machine guns, binoculars, radios, maps, aerial photographs and eight paratroopers to train the policemen and accompany them into action. A medical officer (doctor) and medical orderly (both paratroopers) were also provided and a senior paratrooper officer, Commandant Tommy Renfree was appointed as the liaison officer between the Police and the Defence Force.⁴⁹ Renfree, at the time an Intelligence Officer at Army HQ, was the senior Army officer involved in the operation and the only one with experience in the use of helicopters during Operation SWIVEL in Pondoland. He had also seen action as a paratrooper in the Second World War. According to Breytenbach, it was Renfree's idea to use helicopters for the operation.⁵⁰

Renfree, another Army officer and an Air Force officer accompanied the senior police officers to SWA to conduct aerial reconnaissance and to collect more information. The other ten paratroopers, under command of Captain Jan Breytenbach, spent almost two weeks training the policemen from the Riot Unit at the SA Police College in Pretoria and at a training facility in nearby Elandsfontein. The paratroopers all had to attest as policemen for the duration of the operation.⁵¹ Even the helicopters of the SAAF had SAP badges painted on their fuselages, together with police serial numbers.⁵² The ten paratroopers and 35 riot policemen were then flown to Rooikop military airfield at Walvis Bay, together with three Bedford trucks, in the C-130 aircraft. There they waited with the eight helicopters and their crewmen, for the signal to move closer.⁵³ On 25 August the force was flown to the airstrip at Ruacana.⁵⁴

Final orders were issued and preparations were made, but despite the substantial and crucial military involvement, it remained a police action. This meant that suggestions and inputs from the paratroopers were frequently overridden or ignored by the strong personalities among the police commanders. But policemen were not trained to carry out military operations, and the paratroopers subsequently admitted to being very frustrated

49. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Interim Report: Operation "BLOUWILDEBEES", 7 September 1966; Top Secret Report on Operation "BLOUWILDEBEES", 9 September 1966.

50. J. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike! The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga, 1978* (Sandton, Manie Grové Publishing, 2008), p. 49.

51. Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgefield, 28 December 1990.

52. DOD, HVS Gp, Box 60, HVS/203/6/1 Vol. 1, "Ops: SAP Blouwildebees", August 1966.

53. Interview, Cmdt Wouter Hugo, Pretoria, during 1990.

54. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Report on Operation "BLOUWILDEBEES", 9 September 1966.

and unhappy with the unprofessional and slapdash way orders were given and preparations made, and particularly with certain aspects of the plan.⁵⁵ A map used during the operation is reproduced in Appendix 53.

Els, who has done considerable research into the operation, unfortunately produced a somewhat confusing account of what took place.⁵⁶ He appears not to have had access to the reports written by Renfree, which provide essential and comprehensive information. Instead Els seems to have relied heavily on the memories of some participants in their re-telling of events several decades after the operation. Similarly, Stiff's account is filled with inaccuracies and thus his work lacks credibility.⁵⁷

In overall command of the operation was a police officer, Colonel Pat Dillon, the Commander of the SAP Riot Unit. A heliborne force comprising 30 men to carry out the operation on the ground was divided into six sticks of five men each, with each stick in a helicopter. This was possible because the flight engineers were left behind at Ruacana to make room for an extra soldier or policeman in each aircraft. Two of these sticks were commanded by paratrooper officers: Captains Jan Breytenbach and Kaas van der Waals. A seventh stick, commanded by Renfree, remained airborne to act as "grabbers" should any of the SWAPO insurgents get away. The eighth helicopter was used for air control and carried the senior Air Force officer, Colonel Jan Blaauw, a Second World War and Korean War veteran. With him were the police officer who had run the undercover operation, Captain "Rooi Rus" Swanepoel and an observer from the Army, Major Hans Paetzold.⁵⁸

A reserve force of 14 policemen, four paratroopers (including the medical officer and medical orderly) and an Air Force radio operator travelled off-road in Bedford trucks to a position approximately eleven miles (17.5 km) east of the Ongulumbashe insurgent base. It seems that the initial plan was for this group to move on foot to the base and form a cordon around it before the helicopters arrived,⁵⁹ but this was certainly not done. Instead, three helicopters would position stop-groups to the east, south and west of the base, while another three would drop three sticks to the north, but very close to the base, to carry out

55. Interviews, Col Tommy Renfree (retd) at Umhlanga Rocks, 28 July 1990; and Brig Kaas van der Waals, Pretoria, 28 November 1991.

56. Els, *Ongulumbashe*, pp. 128–149.

57. P. Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969–1994* (Alberton, Galago, 1999), pp. 36–37.

58. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Report on Operation "BLOUWILDEBEE", 9 September 1966; Interviews, Col Jan Breytenbach (retd), Sedgfield, 28 December 1990; and Brig Kaas van der Waals, Pretoria, 28 November 1991.

59. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 60, HVS/203/6/1, Vol. 1, "Ops: SAP BLOUWILDEBEE", Encl. 3D, 23 August 1966.

the sweep through it.⁶⁰ Of these three, Dillon would command the centre stick, Breytenbach the one on the left flank and Van der Waals the one on the right. Each stick included a paratrooper Bren gunner, several people carrying 9mm sub-machine guns and at least one in each helicopter used an FN assault rifle.⁶¹ Breytenbach claims that the helicopters “put down three assault sticks of paratroopers and about four sticks of stoppers filled with cops”.⁶² This implies that the attack was carried out by the paratroopers under his command, and that the policemen were merely there to provide back-up. His account does not accord with the official documentation, including the passenger lists for the helicopters and the report written by Renfree, who was Breytenbach’s superior.⁶³ The reverse was true: the paratroopers provided back-up for the police.

It was reasoned by the policemen that the insurgents, realising that they were surrounded, would lay down their arms and surrender. The intention was to give each insurgent a formal warning and arrest him according to SAP procedure. For the policemen, this was simply another police raid on a gang of criminals and the extra hardware provided by the military merely served to cow the crooks into quicker surrender. The paratroopers, trained to deal with insurgents in a very different manner, were sceptical. Dillon reminded everyone that they were not to shoot at anyone without first warning them and that their priority was to arrest the insurgents so that they could be tried in court. This made no sense at all to the paratroopers, as such actions would be quite impossible during a fire-fight. The doctrinal differences between the police and the military were sharply evident.⁶⁴

According to available intelligence, there were about 16 insurgents in the base, seven of whom had been trained abroad and one of whom was a political commissar. In fact, those using the base at the time of the operation numbered 18, although close to another 30 had already been trained from among the youths of the local Ovambo population and had returned to their kraals to await further instructions. Two of the foreign-trained insurgents, however, had left Ongulumbashe to go to the town of Ondangwa for a meeting with Herman Ja-Toivo (also called Andimba Toivo ya Toivo) of SWAPO, who owned a shop there. So there were indeed 16 in the base, eleven of them locally recruited and trained.⁶⁵ It

60. Interview, Cmdt Wouter Hugo, Pretoria, during 1990.

61. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Report on Operation “BLOUWILDEBEEES” 9 September 1966; HVS Gp, Box 60, HVS/203/6/1 Vol. 1, “Ops: SAP Blouwildebees”, August 1966.

62. J. Breytenbach, “A Recce Goes SAS”, in J. Pittaway (ed.), *Special Air Service Rhodesia: The Men Speak* (Durban, Dandy Agencies, 2010), p. 361.

63. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Report on Operation “BLOUWILDEBEEES”, 9 September 1966.

64. Ibid. Also interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgfield, 28 December 1990.

65. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Report on Operation “BLOUWILDEBEEES”, 9 September 1966.

transpired that the insurgents had been warned by the local population that an attack was imminent, because the locals had become aware of the suspicious activities of the security policemen posing as civilians during the undercover operation. But an attack from the air using helicopters was completely unexpected and the insurgents were taken by surprise.⁶⁶

Almost inevitably, the operation did not go as planned. To start with, the insurgents immediately began firing on the helicopters with their PPSH sub-machine guns. These shots fired by SWAPO were literally the first in a conflict that was to last 23 years. On this occasion they immediately put an end to the police notion that they would simply walk in and arrest the insurgents. As the paratroopers had expected, the sweeper group turned into an assault group that encountered resistance even before it had disembarked from the helicopters. As there had been no rehearsal for this contingency, and because the policemen were not properly versed in military tactics such as fire and movement and lacked battle discipline, the whole operation quickly deteriorated into chaos. The helicopter pilots, nervous of the fire directed at them, placed all six groups down too far away from the base to be able to carry out an immediate attack, and made it impossible to throw an effective cordon around the base. Command and control disintegrated as Dillon became embroiled in the fighting rather than running the battle.⁶⁷ But the insurgents realised they had no chance against such a force, and their own confusion and disarray exceeded that of the South African security forces. The outcome was a foregone conclusion and the results are well documented in the SADF files, particularly the reports by Renfree.⁶⁸

One insurgent was killed (by a paratrooper), ten were captured (one of them seriously wounded) and five escaped.⁶⁹ In the meantime, the reserve force had been brought in by the helicopters, and in subsequent searches of the area by the helicopters another insurgent was shot dead from the air and one was captured. Three got away, all of them foreign trained, with their weapons. There were no casualties among the security forces. Those captured were mostly recruits. It would appear that one of those killed and

66. In a SWAPO account it is claimed there were 17 insurgents in the base. (See O.O. Namakalu, quoted by C. Sasman, "Namibia: Julius Shaambeni Shilongo Mnyika, the Guerilla Fighter [1938 to 2003]", online at <http://www.africancrisis.org/Article.php?ID=82093&>).

67. Interviews, Cmdt J.P. "Snakes" Snyman, Murrayhill, 18 May 1990; and Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgefield, 28 December 1990.

68. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Interim Report: Operation "BLOUWILDEBEEES" 7 September 1966; Top Secret Report on Operation "BLOUWILDEBEEES" 9 September 1966.

69. Interviews, Cmdt J.P. "Snakes" Snyman, Murrayhill, 18 May 1990; Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgefield, 28 December 1990; Brig Kaas van der Waals, Pretoria, 28 November 1991; and Col Tommy Renfree (ret'd), Umhlanga Rocks, 28 July 1990.

one who was captured were from the foreign-trained group that had infiltrated.⁷⁰ This would explain why only two sub-machine guns and two pistols were recovered. Only members of this group of six or seven would have had weapons, and three of them escaped, while two were at Ondangwa at the time of the attack. One of the insurgents, desperate and with nothing else at hand, had even shot at a helicopter with a bow and arrow!⁷¹ The report by Renfree lists an assortment of items collected in the base by the police, including a large number of documents, over a thousand rounds of ammunition, knives, assegais, bows and arrows, two cameras, a portable typewriter, 37 staves used for rifle drill, flattened poles used for excavating, a pick and spade, two axes, blankets, bags, food, eating utensils, and six bicycles. The base was carefully laid out, with deeply dug trenches and bunkers as well as defensive sand walls.⁷² See Appendix 54 for photos taken after the operation.

SWAPO responded to the attack by claiming that their forces had clashed with the SADF on 26 August 1966 and that the SADF had suffered 15 dead and numerous wounded.⁷³ This was the beginning of a propaganda war between SWAPO and South Africa that became a concurrent feature of the armed conflict, reflecting the essence of an insurgency, which revolves around the perceptions and support of the people. It was significant that SWAPO's propaganda focused on the SADF rather than the police. Though it is unlikely that they would have known of the SADF role, this was irrelevant in propaganda. A battle with the military afforded the insurgents far greater status than a skirmish with the police: it told the world that they really were at war. For the same reason, the South Africans preferred to conceal the military involvement; to admit it would indicate an escalation of the situation by SWAPO and desperation on the part of the occupying power.

On arrival back at Air Force Base Waterkloof in Pretoria, the South Africans who had participated in the operation were met by a senior Security Police officer, the sinister Major General "Lang Hendrik" van den Bergh, who later headed up the notorious Bureau of State

70. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Report on Operation "BLOUWILDEBEEES", 9 September 1966. Els, *Ongulumbashe*, pp. 147 and 150, provides slightly different casualty figures, but does not offer sources for his claims. His discussion is confused and one is left in doubt on the final tally. SWAPO sources state: "Some were killed in the battle, and eight were captured". See also online, Sasman, "Namibia".

71. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Report on Operation "BLOUWILDEBEEES", 9 September 1966. L. Dobell, *Swapo's Struggle for Namibia*, p. 36.

72. See also R. Shay and C. Vermaak, *The Silent War: The Fight for Southern Africa* (Salisbury, Galaxie Press, 1971), pp. 171–173.

73. *Namibia Today*, 1 September 1966.

Security (BOSS).⁷⁴ He greeted and congratulated every policeman, but pointedly and openly ignored the paratroopers.⁷⁵ Operation BLOUWILDEBEEES had been regarded as a police action, and henceforth the SAP went out of their way to play down and even ignore the role of the SADF, despite the fact that including all the aircrew from the C-130s, helicopters and light aircraft as well as the paratroopers and other individuals such as communications experts, there were about 50 SADF personnel involved – approximately the same number as there were policemen – and the operation would not have been possible without the SAAF aircraft, Army weapons and paratrooper training and leadership on the ground.

In fact, the scope of the operation was never made public by the South African government, and it was played down in press releases as a mere clash between policemen and a small group of men who were labelled “communist-inspired dissidents”, most of whom had been arrested. Details to the effect that the encounter had been a helicopter operation were not even released⁷⁶ and in fact the SADF went so far as to deny SAAF involvement when asked.⁷⁷ Yet the Army, although it could claim no credit for the operation in public, did a comprehensive analysis of what had gone wrong, and the paratroopers applied themselves to correcting the faults in their own training.⁷⁸

The report by Renfree also expressed the disillusionment of the paratroopers at the inability of the police to achieve the required level of battle proficiency. Their battle discipline was non-existent; they were unable to use maps, compasses or protractors, so could not navigate; they had not mastered helicopter drills during the two weeks of training; they had no knowledge of first aid; and they were unfit and overweight.⁷⁹ In short, they were not soldiers, and such operations were the job of soldiers.

The police, unfortunately, did not share the paratroopers’ zeal for self-examination and improvement. Instead, they apparently felt self-satisfied, even smug, with their performance in the operation. Captain Swanepoel went on to become recognised in police circles as a leading expert in guerrilla war and eight years later wrote a paper on the abilities

74. See “Obituary: Hendrik van den Bergh”, *The Independent* (UK), 22 October 2011; and A.D. Elsdon, *The Tall Assassin: The Darkest Political Murders of the Old South Africa* (Cape Town, Umuzi, 2009), for a fictionalised account of Van den Bergh’s alleged role as *éminence gris* in the apartheid state.

75. Interview, Brig Kaas van der Waals, Pretoria, 28 November 1991. This snub is also related in Els, *Ongulumbashe*, p. 156.

76. “Two Infiltrators Shot in Gunfight with Police”, *Friend*, 27 August 1966; “SWA Intruders Beaten off”, *Cape Argus*, 26 August 1966; “Tip-off on Guns: Local Ovambos Told Police in SW Africa”, *Cape Argus*, 27 August 1966; “Die Les uit Terrorisme”, *Vaderland*, 29 August 1966.

77. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 60, HVS/203/6/1, Vol. 1, “Op SAP BLOUWILDEBEEES”, Encl. 2, 26 August 1966.

78. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Report, Operation “BLOUWILDEBEEES” 9 September 1966; SADF, *Lesse en Foute in die Bekamping van Terrorisme in Suider Afrika*, pp. 13–27.

79. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Top Secret Report, Operation “BLOUWILDEBEEES”, 9 September 1966.

of the SAP as guerrilla fighters. In this essay he made a highly questionable case for policemen, praising their training and skills, which, he claimed, made them far better guerrilla fighters than soldiers.⁸⁰

6.5.2. Strategic Significance

The action at Ongulumbashe, though messy, confused and exposing the inexperience of both the South African security forces and the SWAPO insurgents, contained many of the elements that would, ten years later, be called a “fire force” operation. By its offensive nature, it was certainly an advancement on the employment of helicopters in Pondoland during Operation SWIVEL; but was its value merely tactical, or had there been a strategic side to the operation?

There can be no doubt that it played a major role in the early refinement of tactical thinking regarding airborne operations. Yet despite its shortcomings, its relatively small force levels and the diminutive size of the objective in terms of the numbers of insurgents it housed, the operation had a definite strategic importance. This was evidenced by the high level at which approval had to be granted and the establishment and maintenance of radio contact throughout the action with the political decision-makers in Pretoria and Cape Town.⁸¹

SWAPO had established a base inside SWA.⁸² This, in itself, was a strategic victory for the liberation movement, regardless of how small and apparently insignificant that base was. But it was not merely a symbolic achievement: local people were being recruited and trained from that base, and soon acts of insurrection would have been carried out from it. In terms of the tenets of revolutionary war as propagated by Mao and others, this was an advanced stage of insurgency. The presence of a SWAPO base in Ovamboland gave the movement credibility in the eyes of the local population and would lend status to its image internationally. It sent a signal to both the inhabitants of the territory and to the outside world that South Africa did not control South West Africa. And as with any insurgent war, it is the perceptions and sympathies of the population that determine ultimate victory or defeat. This made the primitive and rudimentary base at Ongulumbashe a strategic target. It thus became of vital strategic importance to the South African government that the base be

80. SAPS Archives, Highly Secret “Paper on Members of the SA Police as Guerrilla Fighters”, by Col T.J. Swanepoel, SOO, 21 October 1974.

81. Els, *Ongulumbashe*, pp. 133–134.

82. Dale, *The Namibian War of Independence, 1966–1989*, p. 77, states that there were five such bases, although he claimed the SWAPO insurgents only occupied one base at a time.

destroyed and the activities of the insurgents terminated.

In annihilating this threat, and mindful of ensuring security, the government had used C-130 Hercules aircraft to transport the force almost 2,000km via an isolated military airfield at Walvis Bay. The employment of helicopters to carry out a vertical envelopment manoeuvre achieved surprise. Had the attack had been carried out by ground forces, the chances are that the insurgents would have been warned by the local people of their approach and the insurgents might well have escaped before the attacking force arrived. Destroying an empty base would have been a hollow victory for the South African government and the insurgents could simply have regrouped and built another base. While it is true that those few men who escaped from Ongulumbashe did regroup with others, and one month later, on 27 September 1966, attacked the homes of administration officials at the border settlement of Oshikango, at no stage did SWAPO succeed in establishing another base inside the territory.⁸³ Throughout the remainder of the war, the insurgent movement was compelled to operate from bases in sympathetic neighbouring countries and could never in all honesty lay claim to having “liberated” areas of SWA/Namibia and setting up an alternative administration. This was in sharp contrast to the war in the Portuguese colonies, where there were parts, especially in Mozambique, that became “no go” areas for the security forces.⁸⁴ Even the Mpondo iKongo movement succeeded in replacing the government administration for a brief period in most of Eastern Pondoland in 1960, but there is no evidence that this was ever accomplished by SWAPO.

Nevertheless, for SWAPO, in one of the ironies so often apparent in insurgency wars, the tactical defeat became a strategic victory. Dobell regards the skirmish, small and one-sided as it was, as a decisive propaganda victory for SWAPO.⁸⁵ In October 1966, two months after the Ongulumbashe attack, the United Nations General Assembly voted by 114 to 2 (South Africa and Portugal) in favour of revoking the League of Nations Mandate and South Africa’s right to administer South West Africa. The UN thereby assumed sovereign responsibility for the territory, effectively negating the decision of the World Court. South Africa reacted by simply ignoring the Resolution (2145 [XXI]) which the UN were neither willing nor able to enforce. However, the Resolution did, by implication, absolve South Africa from having to adhere to the terms of the mandate. Six months later, on 19 May 1967, the

83. Dale, *The Namibian War of Independence, 1966–1989*, p. 78.

84. A.J. Venter (ed.), *Challenge: Southern Africa within the African Revolutionary Context* (Gibraltar, Ashanti, 1989), p. 266.

85. Dobell, *Swapo’s Struggle for Namibia*, p. 36.

General Assembly created the Council for South West Africa, mandated to administer the territory until it gained its independence.⁸⁶ In practical terms, this meant nothing because as before, South Africa simply ignored the resolution and continued to govern the territory; but the acrimonious debate raised SWAPO's case to prominence on the international stage.

This was a major diplomatic setback for Pretoria, because SWAPO gained considerable international status from the UN decision. That status was further enhanced on 12 June 1968, when the General Assembly passed Resolution 2372 (XXII), changing the territory's name to Namibia.⁸⁷ In 1971 the International Court of Justice ruled that the continued presence of South Africa in Namibia was illegal and that South Africa was under an obligation to withdraw from Namibia immediately. It also ruled that all member states of the United Nations should refuse to recognise as valid any act performed by South Africa on behalf of Namibia.⁸⁸

Predictably, South Africa ignored these decisions and the insurgency war that had been initiated by the attack on Ongulumbashe simply continued, albeit initially at a very low level of intensity. It was on the diplomatic level that SWAPO was able to drive its campaign most effectively because of the high profile that South Africa had inadvertently bestowed upon it by the clash at Ongulumbashe. With the image of a heroic, downtrodden people fighting against impossible odds,⁸⁹ SWAPO next scored a major diplomatic victory in 1972 when it was recognised as the "sole legitimate representative" of Namibia's people and granted UN observer status by the UN General Assembly.⁹⁰ Ongulumbashe, therefore, became for SWAPO an iconic turning point in the liberation war. The site of the action has been venerated by the post-independence Namibian government in an effort to perpetuate its strategic significance to SWAPO, with a monument commemorating "the opening engagement of the armed liberation struggle".⁹¹

After Ongulumbashe, there was a South African crackdown in northern SWA, with a marked expansion of police numbers and activities. SWAPO did carry out further infiltrations in 1966 and there were cases of attacks on civilians and intimidation of the local population, while politicisation and recruiting were ongoing. But the Security Police were ruthless in

86. *Ibid.*; see also Morris, *Terrorism*, p. 99.

87. W.W.Nyangoni, *Africa in the United Nations System* (London, Associated University Presses, 1985), p. 60.

88. J. Dugard, *The South West Africa/Namibia Dispute*, p. 453.

89. Dobell, *Swapo's Struggle for Namibia*, p. 36.

90. *UN Chronicle*, 13, 8, (1976), p. 27.

91. R. Kössler, "Public Memory, Reconciliation and the Aftermath of War", in H. Melber (ed.), *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2003), p. 109.

their actions and by April 1967 as many as 200 people, including the entire internal leadership of SWAPO, were in detention in Pretoria. These included Eliaser Tuhadeleni, the political commissar who had escaped at Ongulumbashe.⁹² In May 1967, Tobias Hainyeko, the Commander in Chief of PLAN (the People's Liberation Army of Namibia – the armed wing of SWAPO), was shot dead when police intercepted the boat in which he was crossing the Zambezi River from Zambia into the Caprivi Strip.⁹³ These setbacks led to a military retreat by SWAPO and a decrease and almost complete curtailment of insurgent activity for a number of years. Growing co-operation between the South Africans and the Portuguese made it impossible for PLAN guerrillas to continue crossing Angola from their safe haven in Zambia to reach the population of Ovamboland. Effectively, the attack on Ongulumbashe and its immediate results ended the war in Ovamboland for the next nine years. This alone, made Operation BLOUWILDEBEEES an action of strategic importance to South Africa. But it did not end the insurgency – it merely moved it away from the greatest concentration of people, thereby handicapping its progress. During those nine years the focus of SWAPO's insurgency shifted to the Caprivi.⁹⁴

There were also political changes taking place both inside South Africa and internationally, and these these impacted further on the war. Ten days after the attack on Ongulumbashe, the South African prime minister, H.F. Verwoerd, was assassinated in parliament by Dimitri Tsafendas, a man who was said to be mentally deranged. Fearing internal disturbances and upheaval might follow, the authorities placed 1 Parachute Battalion on one hour standby for deployment anywhere in the country, but the anticipated unrest did not take place.⁹⁵ Verwoerd was succeeded by John Vorster, the hard-line Police minister who had overseen Operation BLOUWILDEBEEES. Giving heed to the police generals, and particularly Hendrik van den Bergh, Vorster, who retained the Police portfolio, increased the role of the SAP in combating the growing insurgency. This included the deployment of police units to Rhodesia towards the end of 1967.⁹⁶

6.6. ALLIES IN WAR: THE *CORDON SANITAIRE*

For the South African government there were still at that time two valuable buffers against insurgency by either SWAPO or the South African liberation movements, the ANC and the

92. Els, *Ongulumbashe*, pp. 167–168.

93. Morris, *Terrorism* p. 94.

94. Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means", pp. 21–22.

95. Diary of Cpl P.C. Edwards, entries for 6 to 12 September 1966.

96. T. Eksteen, *The Statesmen* (Cape Town, Don Nelson, 1978), pp. 116–122.

PAC. These two buffer countries were Portugal and Rhodesia. No insurgency could take place without a firm base from which to operate; and without a base in a liberated area within the contested country, insurgents needed a host-country with a contiguous border that would enable infiltrations to take place. The quelling of the Mpondo Revolt and the attack on Ongulumbashe had illustrated the South African government's ability to deal with internal bases and had effectively ruled out the establishment of liberated areas. And white-ruled Angola, Rhodesia and Mozambique denied the liberation movements a viable contiguous host-country. Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland were in a geographic and economic stranglehold enforced by the white-ruled states, so were not options. Only Zambia, with its tiny stretch of border along the Caprivi Strip, offered a small window of opportunity for insurgency. But this was curtailed by the counter-insurgency activity of the Portuguese and the Rhodesians and the Caprivi was far from Ovamboland, where close to 80 per cent of the population of Namibia lived. For insurgency to flourish, the insurgents had to gain access to the population from their bases.⁹⁷

6.6.1. The SADF and Airborne Operations by the Portuguese

During the 13-year counter-insurgency campaigns fought by the Portuguese in Africa, operational parachute jumps, usually of company size or smaller, were carried out in both Angola and Mozambique, and possibly in Guinea-Bissau, but these were not generally parachute assaults. Rather, they were a means of reaching otherwise inaccessible terrain or they enabled sweep-lines to be positioned rapidly and without warning. Besides their parachute battalions, the Portuguese trained indigenous troops in their colonies to deploy by parachute in small groups against the insurgents. Known as *Grupos Especiais de Pára-Quedistas* or GEPs (Special Parachutist Groups) and *Flêchas* (Arrows) they were composed largely of former insurgents and were used for long range reconnaissance, ambushes and small-scale raids.⁹⁸

97. W. Laqueur, *Guerrilla: A Historical and Critical Study* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977), pp. 393–394. Most recognised writers on counter-insurgency deal with the relationship between bases, borders and the local people. See for example, R. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1972); J.J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: The Strategy of Counter-Insurgency* (Harrisburg, Stackpole Books, 1966); and F. Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency Peace-keeping* (London, Faber & Faber, 1971); D. Rooney, *Guerrilla: Insurgents, Patriots and Terrorists from Sun Tzu to Bin Laden* (London, Brassey's, 2004). See also SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2 (1970–1980)*, p. 54, referring to comments made by A. Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 300.

98. S.A. Emerson, *The Battle for Mozambique: The Frelimo-Renamo Struggle, 1977–1992* (Solihull, Helion, 2014), p. 33; J. Cann, *The Flechas: Insurgent Hunting in Eastern Angola, 1965–1974* (Solihull, Helion, 2013).

The Portuguese also played a pioneering role in the more sophisticated use of helicopters. Many Portuguese officers had been on attachment as observers to the French forces fighting in Algeria and had been exposed not only to the French approach to counter-insurgency, but also to their employment of helicopters against insurgents.⁹⁹ This exposure was reflected in the Portuguese colonial wars in the 1960s and early 1970s, and as will be seen, some of their experience in these wars rubbed off on the South Africans.

Portugal, Rhodesia and South Africa co-operated increasingly, often clandestinely, as the intensity of their respective wars increased. It was a delicate alliance.¹⁰⁰ Portugal was a member of NATO, with certain restrictions on her employment of specific armaments, with European defence commitments to NATO and political pressure from her European allies. Rhodesia was a colony in rebellion, not recognised as an independent country – not even by Portugal and South Africa. And South Africa was increasingly being seen as the polecat of the world. The political and diplomatic sensitivities of the situation prevented an open alliance, although some writers imply that there was indeed a formal agreement.¹⁰¹ The three white states of southern Africa therefore had to maintain an uneasy and largely undefined form of co-operation, exemplified by not wearing their own uniforms when soldiers or airmen operated in support of one another's armed forces.¹⁰²

Military co-operation between Rhodesia and Portugal in Mozambique was particularly strong.¹⁰³ South African cooperation with the Portuguese, on the other hand, was generally far more tentative and cautious in Angola. However, in the early 1960s the SADF placed a Major Ben de Wet Roos at the office of the South African Consulate General in Luanda, the capital of Angola. Given the title of Vice Consul, he did not wear military

99. J.P. Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa: The Portuguese Way of War, 1961–1974* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1997), p.57; S. Robbins, "Model Campaigns of Futility: The Portuguese in Africa, 1961–74", in G. Fremont-Barnes (ed.), *A History of Counterinsurgency, Volume. 2* (Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2015), p. 50; and W. van der Waals, *Portugal's War in Angola, 1961–1974* (Rivonia, Ashanti, 1993), p. 109.

100. DOD, Secretary for Defence, (1), Box 179, Top Secret DC 17850/450/1, Annexure "Military Situation in Angola", SA Ambassador in Lisbon to Secretary Foreign Affairs, Pretoria, 28 November 1962. From the earliest incursions into Angola, there were ongoing discussions between South African, Portuguese and Rhodesian authorities.

101. M. Junior (ed.), *Angola: The Failure of Operation Savannah, 1975* (Bloomington, Author House, 2015), p. 12.

102. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA Gp 1, Box 865, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 1 "Op BOMBAY", Copy 4 of "Minutes of Meeting held on Cooperation with SA Air Force in Angola", p. 3. See photos in M. Wilkins, *Chopper Pilot: The Adventures and Experiences of Monster Wilkins* (Durban, Just Done Publications, 2008).

103. A.J. Venter (ed.), *The Chopper Boys: Helicopter Warfare in Africa* (Halfway House, Southern Publishers, 1994), p. 66; and J.P. Cann, "The Portuguese Colonial Experience in Southern Africa, 1961–74", in P. Dennis and J. Grey (eds), *An Art in Itself: The Theory and Conduct of Small Wars and Insurgencies. Proceedings of the Chief of Army Military History Conference* (Canberra, Australian History Military Publications, 2006), p. 132.

uniform, but served as an unofficial military attaché, liaising with the Portuguese High Command in Angola on behalf of the SADF.¹⁰⁴ Superficial contact between the South African paratroopers and their Portuguese counterparts in Angola began to take place.¹⁰⁵ See Appendix 55.

The placement of a Vice Consul in Luanda, meant that regular meetings took place between the South African generals and the Portuguese High Command.¹⁰⁶ This was precipitated by the increased South African Police presence along the border with Angola, and the exchange of intelligence between them and the Portuguese secret police, particularly regarding insurgent activity in South East Angola, close to the Zambian border – the infiltration route for SWAPO’s PLAN guerrillas. On request from the SAP for air assistance, the SADF instituted Operation BOMBAY in 1968 and the SAAF seconded personnel to them, with a Cessna light aircraft and several Alouette helicopters. The aircrew and their aircraft were all considered part of the SAP for these deployments. The police had obtained permission from the Portuguese authorities to pursue SWAPO insurgents into Angola if necessary, and the helicopters were used to assist in such actions. On occasion, requests by the Portuguese to allow the helicopters to assist them were also acceded to.¹⁰⁷

By the middle of that year, an Air Force unit, 1 Air Component, was established at Rundu with a helicopter element based at Katima Mulilo. They were principally there to provide helicopter support to the police and to the Portuguese Army. From then on, the personnel reverted to their Air Force uniforms and were no longer regarded as seconded to the police. Eight Alouette III helicopters and four Cessna 185 aircraft with all their technical and logistic support were deployed, two helicopters at Katima Mulilo and all other aircraft at Rundu (see Appendix 56). All South African insignia and serial numbers were removed from the fuselages. The unit included an Air Liaison Officer (ALO), attached to the Portuguese Army in South East Angola.¹⁰⁸

On 3 June 1968, a meeting took place in Luanda between the Commander-in-Chief of the Portuguese Armed Forces in Angola, General João de Almeida Viana, and Lieutenant

104. J. Geldenhuys, *At the Front: : A General’s Account of South Africa’s Border War* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2009), pp. 39–40. Geldenhuys says little about the military role of the Vice Consul, preferring to discuss personalities; but there is information on this in DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 865, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 1 “Op BOMBAY”, Encl. 62c, 13 June 1968. See also Van der Waals, *Portugal’s War in Angola*, p. x.

105. Interview, Brig Kaas van der Waals, Pretoria, 28 November 1991.

106. F.J. du T. Spies, *Operasie Savannah Angola, 1975–1976* (Pretoria, SADF, 1989), p. 25.

107. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 865, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 1 “Op BOMBAY”, Encl. 33, 17 May 1968.

108. Ibid., Encls 29 and 38, 9 May and 21 May 1968; and Copy 4 of Top Secret “Minutes of Meeting on the cooperation with SA Air Force in Angola”.

General Charles “Pop” Fraser, the General Officer Commanding SADF Joint Combat Forces (GOC JCF). Fraser’s organisation had recently been established to exercise direct command over all SADF operations. Agreements were formalised regarding the employment of aircraft of 1 Air Component by the Portuguese. Boundaries were demarcated for the area in which they could be employed in south east Angola. If this area fell under the control of the Angolan liberation movements, SWAPO would gain easy access to a much longer section of the border with SWA/Namibia. It was stated that the aircraft would not be used offensively, although some of them might be armed with machine guns for protection. However, they would be used to land troops to carry out attacks. They would bear no insignia, but would employ Portuguese numbers and their crews would wear Portuguese camouflage uniforms. A combined Air Support Centre would be established at Cuito Cuanavale, manned by the Portuguese Army, Portuguese Air Force, PIDE and the SAAF, to consolidate and prioritise Portuguese air requests before forwarding them to 1 Air Component. A Portuguese Air Force officer would be located with 1 Air Component at Rundu, wearing SADF uniform.¹⁰⁹

This proved an uneasy arrangement. In one of the first combined operations on 21 July 1968, an alleged airborne assault by Portuguese troops transported by mainly SAAF Alouettes, the troops are alleged to have massacred some 200 civilian villagers who were in the objective area, between the Cuxixi and Cazuba Rivers. This led to an immediate suspension of SADF assistance to the Portuguese Armed Forces and a visit to Luanda by General Fraser to protest to the Portuguese military authorities at the highest level. The aid was resumed after assurances from the Portuguese that the matter was being investigated and that care would be taken to avoid a repeat of such actions. In the meantime, SA Army troops were being deployed to protect 1 Air Component at Rundu and Katima Mulilo, and 1 Parachute Battalion had to keep a company on standby for rapid deployment from Bloemfontein for a parachute drop should an attack take place. A Senior Liaison Officer (SENLO) was placed at the Portuguese Headquarters in Serpa Pinto (later renamed Menongue), the capital of the Cuando-Cubango Province, the part of Angola where South Africa was concerned about SWAPO infiltration routes.¹¹⁰

But the Portuguese *modus operandi* continued to cause friction. In a damning report written by Colonel Bob Rogers, the Air Task Force Commander who was directly responsible to the Chief of the Air Force for the conduct of air operations in support of the Portuguese in

109. Ibid., and Encl. 91, 1 August 1968.

110. Ibid., and Encl 33a, May 1968.

south east Angola, he accused the Portuguese Armed Forces of systematic atrocities. He expressed his revulsion at their methods, pointed out that they were contravening the basic principles of counter-insurgency, noted that the SAAF aircrew were complaining about their participation, and objected to the SAAF being associated with such actions that were producing enemies for South Africa on the border with Angola where there had possibly been none before. In the report Rogers (a highly decorated Second World War and Korean War fighter pilot who had completed the Army Staff Course in Pretoria and later became Chief of the SAAF) expressed his views on how the campaign should be fought by the Portuguese.¹¹¹

The growing disquiet among the South African senior and general officers on how the Portuguese were conducting their war was evident in a briefing given by General Fraser to the Chief of Staff of the Portuguese Armed Forces in February 1970. While attempting not to upset his allies, Fraser did not mince his words. He lectured his high-ranking guest on the basic principles of counter-insurgency.¹¹² Fraser had made an in-depth study of the subject, and had, after all, written the handbook on counter-insurgency for the SADF.¹¹³

But the Portuguese were not about to change their strategy and Fraser's attempts to point out the shortcomings in their military system and their approach to conscription and training left them unmoved. They knew that the South Africans needed them as much as they needed the South Africans.¹¹⁴ The containment of insurgency in the south eastern corner of Angola was crucial to South Africa at that juncture. By mid-1969, the inability of the Portuguese to stem the growing tide of insurgent activity in the region had necessitated an increase in the troop deployments by the SADF along the border.¹¹⁵

In July 1969, a separate military headquarters was established in Rundu to take over responsibility for military security from SWA Command in Windhoek throughout the three border magisterial districts of Ovamboland, Okavangoland and the Eastern Caprivi. It was a vast area, with some 1,400km of wild, inhospitable and mostly almost inaccessible border. Called No. 1 Military Area (1MA), it comprised a modest armed force of what amounted to a

111. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 866, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 2 "Op BOMBAY", Encl. 1, 1 August 1968.

112. Ibid., Box 868, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 6 "Op BOMBAY", "A Review of the Campaign in East and South East Angola: 1968 to end January 1970".

113. C.A.Fraser, *Lessons Learnt from Past Revolutionary Wars* (Restricted), (Pretoria, SADF, 1965); and *Revolutionary Warfare: Basic Principles of Counter-Insurgency* (Restricted), (Pretoria, 4 Survey and Printing Regiment, 1973). An Afrikaans translation was published in 1986.

114. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 865, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 1 "Op BOMBAY", shows numerous instances when the Portuguese requested SADF air support, armoured vehicles and other support.

115. Ibid, Encls 29 and 30, dated 9 May and 15 May 1968 respectively.

battalion group with air support: three rifle company groups (one each at Katima Mulilo, Rundu and Ondangwa) and in support there were nine Allouette III helicopters (one of them armed), six camouflaged and armed Harvards (two of them in reserve at Windhoek), five Cessna 185 light aircraft (one attached to the SENLO in Serpa Pinto) and one Dakota C-47. There were also two SAP companies, one at Katima Mulilo and the other at Rundu.¹¹⁶ The police retained primary responsibility for border protection and the soldiers were there to render assistance on request. In addition, the soldiers were responsible for the protection of all military bases and installations, and at the same time they had to conduct counter-insurgency training. It was the first permanent presence of the SA Army on the border. But conscripts were not permitted to deploy across international borders, and PF men entering Angola (such as the Air Force crews and the SENLO personnel) had to do so wearing Portuguese camouflage uniform.¹¹⁷

As if to justify the decision to place a permanent army presence on the border, during that same month, a large group of SWAPO insurgents was reported to be moving from Zambia through Angola towards Ovamboland. South Africa provided a Dakota and several Cessnas to transport 25 Portuguese Army Commandos and 25 *Flêchas* from Serpa Pinto and Cuito Cuanavale to an airfield ahead of the advancing insurgents while the Portuguese flew in 40 Paratroopers and 40 Marines to stand by as a reserve at Cuito Cuanavale.¹¹⁸ But the SWAPO guerrillas dispersed when they realised they were being blocked. It had been a small air transport operation, but it illustrated the growing combined cooperation between the South Africans and the Portuguese.

At about this time, three dynamic and contemporary Portuguese commanders-in-chief took over in each of the overseas provinces in Africa. They had a clear grasp of the value of airborne operations in counter-insurgency and they promoted the offensive use of helicopters in their respective theatres of war. These were Generals Antonio de Spínola in Guinea-Bissau, Francisco da Costa Gomes in Angola and Kaulza de Arriaga in Mozambique.¹¹⁹ With general officers who understood the concept of vertical envelopment, the meagre resources of the Portuguese armed forces were for the first time effectively optimised.

116. DOD, OD 1968 Gp, Box7, War Diaries 1 MA, Vol. 1, Appendix F, Top Secret G/OPS/9/3/0, Op Instr 1/69 (Copy No 2), 27 July 1969.

117. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 867, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 4 "Op BOMBAY", Encl. 57, 24 July 1969.

118. Ibid., Box 865, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 1 "SITREPS: Op BOMBAY", Encls 16 and 25, July 1969.

119. Van der Waals, *Portugal's War*, pp. 181–182. There is not, however, consensus on the capabilities of Kaulza de Arriaga. (See Venter (ed.), *Challenge*, p. 264).

General Spínola had spent time in America and had held discussions with General William Westmoreland, the former US field commander in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968. Spínola made a study of Westmoreland's helicopter tactics.¹²⁰ In Angola, Gomes launched a series of annual dry-season offensives against the insurgents, making use of helicopter-borne assaults and aerial bombardments on the infiltration routes and logistic infrastructure of the MPLA in eastern Angola.¹²¹ The success of these operations led to the Portuguese clearly gaining the initiative and, by the time of the *coup d'état* in Lisbon in 1974, they ironically had reversed all the gains made by the insurgents and held the upper hand in the war in Angola.¹²²

In Mozambique in 1970, by utilising every helicopter he could muster, General Kaulza de Arriaga launched a major offensive called Operation GORDIAN KNOT. It was a massive series of heliborne assaults, preceded by artillery and air bombardments on some 60 FRELIMO insurgent bases and many smaller camps, and it rolled on to the following year.¹²³ It yielded some of the greatest military successes of the war, but as is the nature of an insurgency, the setback for the insurgents was only temporary. With safe havens in neighbouring countries, before long the insurgents were able to resume infiltrations from Tanzania and Zambia.¹²⁴

The SADF was aware of these offensives by the Portuguese, particularly those in Angola. In June 1970 the code name BOMBAY for the South African operations in south east Angola and in 1MA was changed to BARUTA.¹²⁵ The cooperation between the SADF and the Portuguese Armed Forces continued, with an upsurge of insurgent activity along the northern SWA border in the next few years.¹²⁶ But the Portuguese Empire, rotten within and straining under an extended war in three theatres, was crumbling. There were also aircraft losses that Portugal could ill-afford: in 1972 three Alouette III and two Puma SA 330

120. A.J. Venter, *Portugal se Oorlog* (Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 1972), pp. 160–168; W.C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 87 and 282–283.

121. Van der Waals, *Portugal's War*, pp. 195–196.

122. Venter (ed.), *Challenge*, pp. 257–262; Van der Waals, *Portugal's War*, p. 234.

123. Shay and Vermaak, *The Silent War*, pp. 231–234.

124. The historiography of the Mozambican struggle is extensive, and includes J. Paul, *Mozambique: Memoirs of a Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1975); F.X. Maier, *Revolution and Terrorism in Mozambique* (New York, American African Affairs Association, 1974); J. Hanlon, *Beggar Your Neighbours: Apartheid Power in Southern Africa* (London, Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1986); S. Funada-Classen, *The Origins of War in Mozambique: A History of Unity and Division* (Somerset West, African Minds, 2013); and T.H. Henriksen, *Revolution and Counterrevolution: Mozambique's War of Independence, 1964–1974* (Westport and London, Greenwood Press, 1983).

125. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 868, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 6 "Op BOMBAY", Encl. 53, 24 June 1970.

126. Ibid., Box 866, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 2 "SITREPS: Op BARUTA".

helicopters were lost over a three-month period to both insurgent action and crashes.¹²⁷ The following year, two more helicopters were shot down by insurgents.¹²⁸ Such losses, however, were not restricted to the Portuguese Air Force: aircraft accidents during support to the Portuguese cost the SAAF two of its precious Allouettes.¹²⁹

In addition to the operational co-operation with the Portuguese in south east Angola, there were other contacts that influenced the SADF paratroopers. Jannie Geldenhuys (who later became Chief of the SADF) had replaced Ben de Wet Roos as the Vice Consul in Luanda, and he was in turn replaced by Willem “Kaas” van der Waals, a former company commander at 1 Parachute Battalion and one of those who had participated in the attack on Ongulumbashe. During his tenure as Vice Consul, he made a careful study of the war in Angola and cultivated particularly close ties with the *Batalhão de Caçadores Para-Quedistas No 21* (21st Hunter Parachutist Battalion), which was stationed in Luanda. Van der Waals became the first serving member of the South African Army since the Second World War to do an operational parachute jump when he accompanied the Portuguese paratroopers as an observer. He was dropped with them into the Dembos Forest to the north-east of Luanda in 1972. They established a base in the forest, in an area dominated by the FNLA liberation organisation, in order to limit the movement and freedom of action of the insurgents.¹³⁰

SADF officers were also sent on courses with the Portuguese in Angola to learn firsthand some of their techniques and to understand their approach to counter-insurgency. Several of those who attended such courses were from the ranks of the paratroopers. As early as November 1966, three SADF officers attended a Portuguese Army commando course of three months in Angola. They were Captains “Buddy” Ferreira and Eddie Webb (both paratroopers¹³¹) as well as a Field Cornet Ken Hornby.¹³²

The course was presented at a base north of Luanda, but the participants did much of their practical training further afield, in locations near Dondo and Vila Salazar, sometimes as far as 200km from the capital (in areas where the insurgents were active). The South Africans formed part of a scheduled course for the Portuguese Army, and were the only foreigners on the course. The Commando Course was tough and demanding, many of the

127. Ibid., Box 869, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 10 “Op BARUTA”, Encl. 14, 28 July 1972.

128. Ibid., Box 867, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 3 “SITREPS: Op BARUTA”, Encl. 12 January 1973.

129. Ibid., Box 868, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 6 “Op BOMBAY”, “A Review of the Campaign in East and South East Angola: 1968 to end of January 1970”, Appendix A.

130. Interview with Brig Kaas van der Waals, Pretoria, 28 November 1991.

131. DOD, 1 Para Bn Gp, Box 11, A/PERS/13/1/1, “Atts & Dets: Offs: PF”, Encl .7, 21 February 1967.

132. DOD, Secretary for Defence, (1), Box 5, DC 26/1/2, Vol. 3, “Courses: Overseas: PF: Dip Clearance”, Confidential Letter from Commandant-General, SADF to Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 26 October 1966.

instructors having completed the US Army Ranger Course as well as other special forces training with different NATO countries. The South Africans were taught the Portuguese approach to minor tactics, booby traps, field craft, ambushes, stalking and the handling of explosives, based on the lessons of the insurgency war that was being fought in Angola at the time. Particular attention was given to selective fire during fire-and-movement, rather than a heavy volume of fire. Importantly, they learnt how the Portuguese used their helicopters in combat. The psychological side of counter-insurgency also enjoyed prominence throughout the three months. For the South Africans, whose war was still of a very low intensity, it was excellent training and valuable exposure.¹³³

Two other South African soldiers were sent to Angola to learn the Portuguese way of airborne warfare. Second Lieutenant Johan Blaauw and Sergeant Johan Landman were chosen to attend the parachute course presented by the Portuguese Air Force.¹³⁴ They were sent to Luanda early in 1974 and completed the course shortly before the fall of the Caetano regime. The course, though not including the tough selection that preceded the South African version, did involve a demanding physical regimen before the start of each day's training. Based on the American techniques rather than those of the British which had been adopted by the South Africans, the Portuguese parachute course was geared towards the insurgency war that was being waged in Angola. On their return, both men were transferred to 1 Parachute Battalion, where they underwent conversion training before being awarded their South African parachute wings. Some of the Portuguese techniques from both the commando course and the parachute course were subsequently introduced into the South African paratrooper training and a physical training range, modelled on that of the Portuguese paratroopers, became known as "*Die Portugese Baan*".¹³⁵

The SA Army was not involved in the Portuguese war on the ground in Angola; it was the loan of light aircraft and helicopters, with their crews, that constituted the secret contribution by South Africa. When the SADF took over border protection from the SAP, Army patrols began to venture ever-deeper into Angola along the Zambian border to fill the vacuum left in the wake of the collapse of military activity by the Portuguese after the revolution and *coup* in Lisbon on 25 April 1974. The paratroopers, by then deploying a

133. Interviews, Maj Gen Eddie Webb (ret'd), Pretoria, 14 June 1995 and Maj Gen Buddy Ferreira (ret'd), Pretoria, 26 June 1995.

134. Interviews, Cmdt Johan Blaauw, Bloemfontein, 20 July 1990; and WO1 Johan Landman, 10 March 1992.

135. Interviews, Maj Gen Eddie Webb (ret'd), Pretoria, 14 June 1995; and Cmdt Johan Blaauw, Bloemfontein, 20 July 1990.

company at a time almost constantly in the Caprivi, actively conducted such patrols.¹³⁶ There was little SWAPO insurgent activity in this period of uncertainty for Angola; but it was the calm before the storm.

6.6.2. The SAS, Biafra and the Establishment of Special Forces

It is clear that by the mid-1960s there was an awareness among those on the General Staff that the services of a special forces unit would be required for the counter-insurgency war that was becoming imminent. It seems that they had also come to realise that 1 Parachute Battalion would not be able to provide those services, consisting as it did of conscript soldiers. Again, following on the contacts made during the visit to the Rhodesians by Willem Louw and others in 1961, eyes were cast north of the border. By 1965 the South African Navy was already training members of the Rhodesian SAS in underwater demolitions at their Diving School in Simon's Town,¹³⁷ and in 1966 the SA Army extended an invitation to Major Dudley Coventry, the commander of the SAS Squadron in Salisbury to visit South Africa with a view to advising them on the formation, organisation and training of a unit similar to the SAS.¹³⁸ Coventry, an experienced soldier who had served with the Commandos in the Second World War and the Parachute Regiment and SAS in Malaya during the early 1950s, spent 10 days in South Africa. Stiff indicates Coventry's visit took place in 1970 at Jan Breytenbach's invitation¹³⁹, but archival documentation clearly shows this to be incorrect. Breytenbach himself, in an article about the South African connection with the Rhodesian SAS, confirms that Coventry's visit took place before the Ongulumbashe operation.¹⁴⁰

Archival evidence also indicates that it was the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Fraser, who was the moving force behind this decision. It is quite obvious from the official correspondence that the SA Army, under Fraser, was already considering the establishment of such a unit in early 1966. This would certainly have been in line with the forward-thinking Fraser's study of and writings about revolutionary warfare. It would also explain why three SA Army officers were sent on the Portuguese Commando Course that year.¹⁴¹

136. Operational Diary of A Company, 1 Para Bn (January 1974 Intake), 22 August – 25 October 1974.

137. DOD, DC Gp 1, Box 179, Top Secret File DC/17859/450, "Proposed Military Co-operation between the Federation & the Republic of South Africa", Encl. 139, 16 July 1965.

138. Ibid., Encls 194, 9 June 1966; Encl. 202 undated; and Encl. 203, 24 June 1966.

139. Stiff, *The Silent War*, p. 34.

140. Breytenbach, "A Recce Goes SAS", p. 361.

141. DOD, Secretary for Defence, (1), Box 5, DC 26/1/2, Vol. 3, "Courses: Overseas: PF: Dip Clearance", Confidential Letter from Commandant General to Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 26 October 1966.

Later in 1966, both the Defence minister (P.W. Botha) and the Commandant General (Rudolph Hiemstra) approved the establishment of an experimental SAS-type unit. This was in the wake of Botha's appointment as minister and the assassination of Verwoerd and followed Vorster's accession to power as prime minister, a time of considerable uncertainty in South Africa. Because there was nobody in the SADF qualified to select and train personnel for the experimental unit, authority was granted for four officers and four NCOs to attend an SAS course in Rhodesia to acquire the necessary knowledge and expertise.¹⁴²

Fraser sought authority to increase the number of officers attending the course to seven and to extend the course by an additional four weeks for three of the officers and two of the other ranks to attend an extensive SAS Escape and Evasion Exercise. He also ensured that three officers who had done the Portuguese Commando Course would now also do the Rhodesian SAS Course.¹⁴³ The final list of those who attended the course could not be traced in the archives and interviews with some of the paratrooper officers who underwent the SAS training produced varying accounts on who actually attended.¹⁴⁴ What is known is that there were ultimately eleven, and these appear to have been Captains G.J. Viviers, J.D. Breytenbach, E. Webb and B.A. Ferreira (all from 1 Parachute Battalion) Field Cornets F.J. Bestbier from 1 Parachute Battalion, K.E. Hornby of the Army Gymnasium and Field Cornet B.F. Klaasen of 1 SA Infantry Training Battalion. The NCOs were apparently Sergeants P.P. "Pep" van Zyl, E.J. "Telly" Smit and M.J. "Yogi" Potgieter, all of 1 Parachute Battalion and Sergeant L.F. Slade, a parachute-qualified NCO from the Medical Corps.¹⁴⁵

The course was scheduled for 23 April to 17 June 1967, with some of the South Africans staying longer to undergo further specialised training. Stiff's account of the number who attended, how they were chosen, their ranks, the role of Willem Louw and the duration of the course, apparently based on an account by Breytenbach, does not stand up to scrutiny when measured against the archival evidence.¹⁴⁶

The course was clearly a tough ordeal for the South African soldiers. Training was given in the use of Rhodesian equipment and radio procedures, constructing booby traps, carrying out immediate action drills, camouflage techniques, demolitions, advanced first aid,

142. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 375, Secret HVS/208/4/1/1, Vol. 1, "Kursusse in Ander Lande: Rhodesië", Encl. 34, G/TRG/6/14/226, Chief of Army to Chief of Defence Staff, 22 November 1966.

143. Ibid., Encl. 51, G/SD/25/10 over G/TRG/6/14/226 Chief of Army to Chief of Defence Staff, 1 March 1967.

144. Interviews, Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgefield, 28 December 1990; Maj Gen Eddie Webb (ret'd), Pretoria, 14 June 1995; Maj Gen "Buddy" Ferreira (ret'd), Pretoria, 26 June 1995.

145. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 375, Secret HVS/208/4/1/1, Vol. 1, "Kursusse in Ander Lande: Rhodesië", Encl. 34, Letter G/TRG/6/14/226, Chief of Army to Chief of Defence Staff, 22 November 1966.

146. Stiff, *The Silent War*, p. 21.

rock climbing, abseiling and a great deal of PT, with some initial antagonism from the Rhodesians, but later there was weekend revelry in the pub¹⁴⁷ The dreaded selection was done in the Inyanga area of the Eastern Highlands together with 52 Rhodesian volunteers. The selection was based on that of the British SAS and everything was done to break candidates, both mentally and physically. Based on the assumption that the SAS would be used to operate in small groups behind enemy lines, carrying out reconnaissance and sabotage missions, the selection called for cunning, initiative, resourcefulness as well as endurance and stamina. It included physical agility and initiative tests, speed marches and a much-feared endurance march of 15 miles (24km) carrying a heavy pack filled with sharp rocks. See Appendix 57. For the final phase the South Africans found themselves climbing Mount Inyangani (also known as Nyangani), at 8,504 feet (2,592 m), the highest peak in Rhodesia.¹⁴⁸

Though there is disagreement on whether all the South Africans passed the selection, it appears that most of them did. According to Webb the Rhodesians were reluctantly impressed by their performance.¹⁴⁹ Ferreira ascribes their success to the fact that on average they were about five years older than the Rhodesian candidates and that there was a strong motivation among them as a team to prove themselves to the sceptical Rhodesians.¹⁵⁰ Certainly, those who were paratroopers did have the advantage of not only passing their own stringent selection in Bloemfontein, but they had also run selection courses themselves for several years. Unfortunately, no results of the course or a list of candidates and their final qualification could be traced in the DOD Archives. It has thus proved impossible to verify the results of South African participation in the SAS selection.

Immediately after the selection an escape and evasion exercise was held as part of the initial nine weeks. This was held in the area southwest of Bulawayo, near Plumtree, and involved being on the run and hunted by the 1st Battalion, Rhodesian African Rifles, as well as elements of the SAS. If captured, they were cruelly interrogated, subjected to physical abuse, humiliation and deprivation, allowed to escape and chased through the bush again.¹⁵¹

147. Interview, Maj Gen Eddie Webb (ret'd), Pretoria, 14 June 95; Breytenbach, "A Recce Goes SAS", p. 362.

148. Interviews, Maj Gen "Buddy" Ferreira, Pretoria, 26 June 1995; and Col Jan Breytenbach, Sedgefield, 28 December 1990; B. Cole, *The Elite: The Story of the Rhodesian Special Air Service* (Amanzimtoti, Three Knights Publishing, 1984), pp. 17–18; Breytenbach, "A Recce Goes SAS", pp. 362–363.

149. Interview, Maj Gen Eddie Webb (ret'd), Pretoria, 14 June 1995.

150. Interview, Maj Gen "Buddy" Ferreira, Pretoria, 26 June 1995.

151. Interviews, Maj Gen "Buddy" Ferreira (ret'd), Pretoria, 26 June 1995; Maj Gen Eddie Webb (ret'd), Pretoria, 14 June 1995.

The additional four weeks of training that some of the South Africans stayed on for appears to have been a tracking and short diving course. Webb, Breytenbach, Bestbier, and two NCOs, stayed behind.¹⁵² They underwent a tracking and survival course at Chewori, east of Mana Pools in the Zambezi Valley. Then the diving course was presented, initially at Lake Mcllwaine, but due to poor visibility it was moved to Lake Kariba. They also participated in an introduction to small boat work, particularly using the Klepper kayak.¹⁵³

After the SADF soldiers had all returned home they introduced much of what they had learned into the training at 1 Parachute Battalion, particularly the concept of escape and evasion. But the idea of forming a special forces unit seemed to flounder. Pop Fraser, the Chief of the Army under whose watch the exploratory Portuguese and Rhodesian training was initiated, was appointed to the newly created post of General Officer Commanding Joint Combat Forces from December 1967.¹⁵⁴ Willem Louw replaced him as Army chief, and the idea of a special forces unit seemed to die. The old uncertainty returned, with 1 Parachute Battalion seen as providing both conventional parachute troops and special forces. A training directive in 1968 refers to “the special tasks that have been allocated to 1 Para Bn (SAS tasks)” (own translation).¹⁵⁵

There was, however, great enthusiasm at the battalion for the concept of escape and evasion, and for several years after the Rhodesian course, exercises along these lines were run, largely making use of CF soldiers who were called up for the purpose.¹⁵⁶ Two more officers and two more NCOs from 1 Parachute Battalion attended an SAS Escape and Evasion Course in Rhodesia in 1968 (including the Officer Commanding the battalion, Commandant M.J .du Plessis)¹⁵⁷ and the enthusiasm for this type of training continued. In February 1967, Major Dion Mortimer became the new Second-in-Command of 1 Parachute Battalion. He had completed the US Army Ranger and Airborne Courses and he added ideas from the Americans into the mix of Portuguese, Rhodesian and South African training being presented at the battalion.¹⁵⁸

152. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 375, Secret HVS/208/4/1/1, Vol. 1, “Kursusse in Ander Lande: Rhodesië”, Encl. 62, Letter G/TRG/6/14/226, 7 June 1967.

153. Interviews, Maj Gen Eddie Webb (retd), Pretoria, 14 June 1995; and Col Jan Breytenbach (retd), Sedgefield, 28 December 1990.

154. C.J. Nöthling and E.M. Meyers, “Leiers deur die Jare (1912–1982)”, *Militaria*, 12, 2 (1982), p. 92.

155. DOD, C Army (1), Box 242, Confidential G/TRG/1/18, “Training Policy Directives and Instructions: Paratroopers”, Encl. “12 Maande Opl vir 1 Valsk Bn Nasionale Dienspligtiges”, 2 May 1968.

156. See Annual Historical Reports for 1 Para Bn, 1968, 1969 and 1970.

157. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 375, Secret HVS/208/4/1/1, Vol. 1, “Kursusse in Ander Lande: Rhodesië”, Encls 116-124, 13 June – 16 July 1968.

158. Interview, Maj Gen Dion Mortimer, Pretoria, 26 February 1991.

While there was no progress in setting up the experimental special forces unit, in 1969 the South African Military Intelligence became involved in events in Nigeria, where a civil war was raging because of the attempted secession of Biafra. One of the South Africans who participated in that conflict maintained that the reason for South Africa's involvement was a vain hope that this would secure landing rights for South African Airways in Biafra, or one of its supporting allies such as Gabon or Ivory Coast.¹⁵⁹ This would have been of inestimable value to the increasingly isolated white state on the southern tip of the continent for the long haul between South Africa and Europe. Stiff claims the involvement was designed to open ties with black African states that were supporting Biafra.¹⁶⁰ Whatever the reason, when General Willem Louw, as the Army chief, was approached by Military Intelligence to provide a small training team to assist the breakaway Biafrans, he immediately thought in terms of sending some of his paratroopers, and apparently decided that Jan Breytenbach should command them. This was hardly surprising, because the association between Louw and Breytenbach was a long and close one. When Breytenbach had been a young cadet officer at the SA Military College in the early 1950s, Louw had been the adjutant of the Commandant of the College. Breytenbach had passed out as the top cadet on his course and had been awarded the coveted Sword of Honour. Louw was therefore well aware of his abilities.¹⁶¹ When Louw, was in the process of setting up the new parachute battalion, he recruited Breytenbach, who became one of the first South African-trained parachute officers.¹⁶² Louw made Breytenbach his adjutant, and in the view of Du Plessis, one of the other officers in the unit at the time, together the two of them bullied and intimidated the new paratroopers, especially the officers, in their effort to turn the new parachute battalion into what Louw wanted it to be.¹⁶³

Breytenbach and three paratrooper NCOs (Staff Sergeants F.C. "Frans" van Zyl, M.J. "Yogi" Potgieter and Trevor Floyd), formed the so-called Zoe Team. In a bizarre and highly secret undertaking, known as Operation FLAMINGO, they spent about six months training members of the Biafra Organisation of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) to operate behind the lines of the Nigerian forces. Although the two surviving members of the Zoe Team were interviewed, no archival documentation on this military adventure could be traced, so it was

159. Interview with Warrant Officer Trevor Floyd (ret'd), Pretoria, 23 June 1995.

160. Stiff, *The Silent War*, p. 25.

161. E.G.M. Alexander, G.K.B. Barron and A.J. Bateman, *South African Orders, Decorations and Medals* (Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 1986), p.119.

162. Interview with Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgefield, 28 December 1990.

163. Interview with Maj Gen M.J. du Plessis (ret'd), Bloemfontein, 28 June 1995.

impossible to verify their stories. However, photographs provided by one of them (see Appendix 58) show the team as incontrovertibly part of the Biafran effort. In a war that was largely conventional in nature, Breytenbach claims personally to have led some of those who they trained in infiltrating through the Nigerian lines.¹⁶⁴ When the Federal Nigerian forces defeated the Biafrans and the attempt at secession collapsed, the Zoe Team was forced to withdraw. They arrived back in South Africa in March 1970, after Breytenbach had apparently spent time in France debriefing what had happened in Biafra with the French military.¹⁶⁵ The South African government decorated all four for the part they had played in the abortive Biafran rebellion, and the Republic of Gabon made Breytenbach a Knight of the Order of the Equatorial Star (see Appendix 59). Gabon was one of the countries that had supported Biafra and it was through secret intrigues with the Rhodesians, the French and the Gabonese that South Africa became involved in the conflict, using Gabon as a springboard for both the activities of the Zoe Team and supplying arms to the Biafrans.¹⁶⁶ At one stage of the Biafran adventure, in October 1969, while the Zoe Team was in Libreville, Gabon, they received a visit from Commandant General Hiemstra.¹⁶⁷ According to Floyd, he informed them then that plans were underway to establish a special forces unit.¹⁶⁸

On his return, Breytenbach claims that General Willem Louw authorised him to begin putting together a special forces unit.¹⁶⁹ Major General Fritz Loots of Military Intelligence could well have been the driving force that gave fresh momentum to the by then apparently moribund idea of creating a special forces capability, because he was, according to Stiff, involved in setting up the Biafran operation. But it is clear from archival records and the courses with the Portuguese and Rhodesians that the initiative preceded the Biafran adventure by several years and that from the outset the intention was to use paratroopers to form the nucleus.

164. Interview with Col Jan Breytenbach (retd), Sedgefield, 29 December 1990.

165. Stiff, *The Silent War*, p. 33. Breytenbach claimed in an interview (28 December 1990), that the novelist, Frederick Forsyth, had used him as the model for Maj "Cat" Shannon, the mercenary hero of his book *The Dogs of War* (1974), and that the opening scene of the story was an accurate portrayal of his dramatic departure from Oli airfield under Nigerian artillery fire.

166. R. Pfister, *Apartheid South Africa and African States: From Pariah to Middle Power, 1961–1994* (London, Taurus Academic, 2005), pp. 51–55. Only Gabon, Ivory Coast, Tanzania and Zambia recognised Biafra as a sovereign state. Pfister outlines some of the international political intrigues around the Biafran attempt at secession, but the part played by the SADF has never been fully revealed and the DOD Archives yielded nothing to throw light on this.

167. Pfister, *Apartheid South Africa and African States*, p. 54.

168. Interview with Warrant Officer Trevor Floyd (retd), Pretoria, 23 June 1995.

169. Breytenbach, "A Recce Goes SAS", p. 367.

Breytenbach was appointed commander of the first official special forces unit in the SADF, and as such he is often acclaimed as the founder. But perhaps Eddie Webb could lay a greater claim to conceptualising special forces in the late sixties. In mid-1969 he was a major and commanding a company from 1 Parachute Battalion. Trained by the Portuguese Commandos as well as the Rhodesian SAS, he was among the first groups of paratroopers to be deployed with his company in the Caprivi. As a result he was well-acquainted with the situation in south east Angola. For the South African forces in the Caprivi, the problem remained one of obtaining accurate intelligence on what was happening across the border. The reports received from the Portuguese were often inaccurate, incomplete, unintelligible or arrived too late to be of use. On 28 July 1969 Webb addressed this problem in a detailed memorandum directed to the GOC JCF, Lieutenant General Pop Fraser.¹⁷⁰

Webb's memo was entitled "The Collection of Operational Intelligence in SE Angola by Employment of Special Force Long Range Patrols". In it, he propagated the establishment of a unit of highly trained specialists to operate in small teams deep inside the remote bush of south east Angola to give the South Africans their own capability for obtaining tactical intelligence. He proposed a unit of a headquarters and six five-man reconnaissance groups composed of selected paratroopers.¹⁷¹ Fraser responded very favourably to the idea and decided to give it a trial period. So the general arranged for Webb, a Lieutenant D.J. Taljaard and Staff Sergeant E.J. "Tilly" Smit to go to Rhodesia in September that year to spend a week with the SAS.¹⁷² The purpose was to obtain course content and training curricula, as well as to hold discussions on likely requirements for the new initiative. For Webb and Smit, who had both completed SAS selection and training, it was a renewing of old contacts.

Afterwards, Webb was allowed to select a nucleus of officers and NCOs. He says that his involvement carried the approval of his commander, Commandant Gert "Boyttjie" Viviers, the Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion.¹⁷³ Fraser appointed Webb as Officer Commanding "The Special Group" on 7 October 1969.¹⁷⁴ From early October until mid-January 1970 (during which time Jan Breytenbach was involved in the Biafran debacle) Webb conducted a training course for 12 selected Permanent Force officers and NCOs in the

170. DOD, Fraser Gp, Top Secret 201/4/10/18, Vol. 1, "Op FOCUS: Specialist Ops", Encl. 3 "Collection of Op Int in SE Angola by Employment of Special Force Long Range Patrols", by Maj E. Webb, 28 July 1969. Also in GOC JCF Gp, Box 42, Top Secret 201/4/10, Vol. 1, Encl. 8.

171. Ibid.

172. SANDF Archives, Fraser Gp, Top Secret File 201/4/10/18, Vol. 1, "Op FOCUS: Specialist Ops", Encl. 5.

173. Interview with Maj Gen Eddie Webb (retd), Pretoria, 14 June 1995.

174. SANDF Archives, Fraser Gp, Top Secret File 201/4/10/18, Vol. 1, "Op FOCUS: Specialist Ops", Encl 10.

area near Katima Mulilo. Smit acted as the chief instructor, and the course, which was extremely intensive, included advanced shooting, first aid, survival, signals training, controlling fire support, tracking, patrolling, ambushes, temporary bases, demolitions, navigation, counter-interrogation, escape and evasion and various other exercises.¹⁷⁵

At the conclusion of their three-and-a-half months of training, the 12 were sent on leave, to return at the end of January for their first deployment to Angola. But while they were away, the Special Group was suddenly disbanded and they were all ordered to return to their units. The reason given was security leaks among some of those who had undergone training,¹⁷⁶ but Webb feels it was because of Breytenbach's return from Biafra and the decision to appoint him to command the first Special Forces unit.¹⁷⁷ There could hardly have been two parallel experiments of that nature taking place and it was the task of the Army, not Joint Combat Forces, to establish units and train them, so this sounds feasible. Doubtless, Breytenbach's experience in Biafra and his close relationship with Louw favoured him as the man selected to command the first special forces unit. However, it is worth noting that during the SAS course in Rhodesia, Major Coventry specifically requested that Webb be retained to undergo the advanced training because he had been so impressed by this officer.¹⁷⁸

Nevertheless, it was Major Jan Breytenbach who was promoted to commandant and tasked to conduct the Army experiment in special forces. Based in Oudtshoorn in the same base shared by the Infantry School and 1 SA Infantry Battalion, the experimental unit used the four Biafran veterans as its nucleus. Other than Breytenbach, not one of those trained by the Rhodesian SAS the Portuguese commandos or Webb's "Special Group" formed part of this new unit. It attempted to maintain secrecy and security by adopting a succession of vague and deliberately misleading names, including the "Research and Development Wing", the "Unconventional Warfare Wing", the "Alpha Group" and the "Operational Experimental Group".¹⁷⁹ Although part of the Army, operational control of the new unit, initially at least, was vested in Military Intelligence, which fell directly under the Commandant General.¹⁸⁰

175. Ibid., Encl. 9.

176. Ibid., Encl. 32.

177. Interview with Maj Gen Eddie Webb (ret'd), Pretoria, 14 June 1995.

178. DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 375, Secret HVS/208/4/1/1, Vol. 1, "Kursusse in Ander Lande: Rhodesië", Encl. 62, Letter G/TRG/6/14/226, 7 June 1967.

179. Interviews with Brig (later Maj Gen) Dan Lamprecht in Pretoria, 26 February 1991; Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgfield, 29 December 1990. Stiff, *The Silent War*, p. 34, also mentions several names.

180. Email letter from Brig Gen Malcolm Kinghorn (ret'd), 19 July 2013.

Recruiting took place, selection courses were conducted, equipment was acquired and during the next two years some low-key operations were carried out by the unit in Angola. Brigadier Jan Fourie, the the Army's Director of Planning, was crucial to the success of the unit. Although he and Breytenbach had clashed while Fourie was OC 1 Parachute Battalion, it is to his credit that he was now fully supportive of the concept,¹⁸¹ despite his annoyance with Breytenbach over his indifference to laid down channels of command and administrative procedures.¹⁸²

Breytenbach always maintained that Hiemstra was opposed to the establishment of special forces.¹⁸³ He may well have at least been reticent about it. Giving substance to the assertion was the action of the Defence Force's Director of Management Services, Brigadier Constand Viljoen.¹⁸⁴ When Hiemstra retired as Commandant General of the SADF on 31 March 1972, Viljoen almost immediately drew up a memorandum on the operational need for such a unit to be formally recognised and established.¹⁸⁵ Viljoen had previously been the Officer Commanding the South African Army College and had presided over a total revamping of the Command and General Staff training presented by that institution. The South African Army had moved away from the positional warfare approach which had been taught until then, and from then on embraced the concept of mobile warfare.¹⁸⁶ Viljoen had been instrumental in re-writing the new tactical manual and he was an ardent proponent of this manoeuvrist-approach in the war that lay ahead. He now pointed out that the new doctrine required utilising the spatial vastness of southern Africa to compel any opponent to fight on extended lines of communication, exposing these and making them vulnerable to attack. It also necessitated the acquisition of tactical intelligence, often hundreds of kilometres behind enemy lines. To meet this requirement, a specialist unit of highly trained soldiers was required. He recommended that the Operational Test Group in Oudtshoorn be used as this unit and that it be given the name "1 Reconnaissance Commando".

181. Ibid. Kinghorn was the SO2 Eqpt at D Plan under Brig Fourie at the time.

182. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 655, Secret G/OPS/2/1, Vol. 1 "1 Verk Komdo", Encls 17, 26 July 1972, and 19, 16 August 1972.

183. Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgefield, 29 December 1990.

184. Viljoen, who went on to become the Chief of the Army and ultimately Chief of the SADF, played a vital role in propagating the operational use of both special forces and paratroops in the coming conflict. He displayed a particular grasp of the concept of vertical envelopment. Though it says little about his manoeuvrist military mindset, a good biography has been written on him and his twin brother, a prominent liberal theologian and academic. See D. Cruywagen, *Brothers in War and Peace: Constand and Abraham Viljoen and the Birth of the New South Africa* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2014).

185. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 655, Secret G/OPS/2/1, Vol. 1 "1 Verk Komdo", Encl. 13, Memo., 27 April 1972.

186. M. Alexander, *SA Army Staff Training, 1927–1996* (Pretoria, SANDF, 1997), pp. 5–6.

The new Commandant General,¹⁸⁷ Admiral Hugo Bierman, and the Defence minister, P.W. Botha, supported Viljoen unconditionally and South Africa's first special forces unit was accordingly made official. Brigadier Jan Fourie tried to object to the name, recommending that for security reasons it be called "7 SA Infantry Battalion" or another name that did not reflect its role, but he was quickly overruled.¹⁸⁸

Viljoen showed the same propensity to integrate the airborne concept into mobile warfare doctrine as he did the special forces concept. As an organisation with an airborne capability, the special forces would carry out a large number of both parachute and helicopter operations of tactical and strategic significance. But for the paratroopers, the establishment of a special forces unit finally brought clarity regarding the role that they would need to prepare for. No longer would they need to concern themselves with training for "small group parachute infiltrations to gather intelligence or to destroy or neutralise certain objectives". This responsibility now fell away from the Command Directive of the Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion.¹⁸⁹ However, there was still no indication of whether the paratroopers were to prepare for independent operations of strategic import, so the emphasis remained on tactical employment in support of ground forces.

The establishment of special forces by the SADF is of only peripheral significance to this thesis, because their origins are so closely intertwined with the early years of the paratroopers. No attempt has therefore been made to research it in any detail. However, it is a fallow field awaiting a research plough that will dig deep, because much of what has been written on the subject is based on fading memories and second-hand accounts, while there must certainly be a great deal of material in the archives that can now be declassified and made available to researchers.

6.6.3. Rhodesia: Exposure to Airborne Counter-Insurgency

Although the organisations for conventional paratroopers and special forces had finally been separated in the SADF, neither had been exposed to serious operational activity and a great deal of ambiguous thinking prevailed on exactly how they were to be employed. But the

187. The designation "Commandant General SADF" was subsequently changed to "Chief of the SADF" because Bierman was an admiral, not a general. See Appendix 1: Terms and Abbreviations.

188. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 655, Secret G/OPS/2/1, Vol. 1 "1 Verk Komdo", Encl. 13, Memo. 27 April 1972, comments and decision by Commandant-General, SADF and Minister of Defence, 13 June 1972.

189. Secret Report, *Die Rasionalisering van die Samestelling en Bevel en Beheer van die SA Leër se Valskermmagte*, Ref. 1 VALSK BN/ 503/2/1, 22 October 1984; Flag H: "Bevelskrif: Bevelvoerder 1 Valsk Bn", Ref. KMDMT OVS/501/7, 14 December 1983; and Flag J: "Bevelsdirektief aan Bevelvoerder 1 Valskermbataljon", Ref. H LEËR/D OPL/501/5/2, 30 January 1984.

surge in hostilities in neighbouring Rhodesia provided some early indicators, and for the paratroopers these were mainly in the tactical application of an airborne capability, rather than strategic.

The SADF had never seen Rhodesia as a likely front for a war in the same way that Angola was. Yet there was a close, though informal, relationship between the military establishments of South Africa and Rhodesia.¹⁹⁰ Rhodesia had a good infrastructure, a high level of education among its indigenous population and appeared to be very much in control of the security situation. It did not have the vast tracts of remote and inaccessible jungle, swamps, bush and mountains that Angola and Mozambique did. Somehow, it did not seem as vulnerable to insurgency as the Portuguese territories.

And yet, the spectre of insurgency descended on the country. As in the rest of white-ruled southern Africa, resistance to demands for change in the *status quo* by the black majority was destined to lead to war. The dissolution of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1963 and the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) by the government of Ian Smith in 1965 proved to be the precursor to this war. When, in 1967, ANC guerrillas joined with those from Rhodesia's liberation movement, Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) to infiltrate through the Wankie Game Reserve (now known as Hwange) in an attempt to launch an insurgent campaign against South Africa,¹⁹¹ the Pretoria government responded by deploying police units into Rhodesia.¹⁹² What is not as well-known is that there were also SA Army soldiers, including paratroopers deployed with them, masquerading as policemen and wearing, like the first SAP men to deploy, Rhodesian camouflage uniform.¹⁹³

The task of the seconded Army personnel was to stiffen the police contingent for what was clearly a military role, because the SAP, despite continuous deployments along the northern SWA/Namibian border since Ongulumbashe, had little concept of how to conduct COINOPS. The first SAP company to deploy operationally in Rhodesia did so at the beginning

190. During the Second World War the South African prime minister, Field-Marshal J.C. Smuts had been Commander-in-Chief of both the South African and Rhodesian Forces and many of the Rhodesian soldiers had served under South African commanders. See <http://net.lib.byu.edu/estu/wwi/bio/s/smuts.html> , "Smuts, Field-Marshal, Jan Christian". In addition, the Rhodesian Army Commander from 1968 to 1973, Lt Gen Keith Coster, was a South African who had served in the UDF for 17 years before immigrating to Rhodesia. See M. Alexander, "The Militarisation of South African White Society, 1948-1990", *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies*, 30, 2 (2000), pp. 283–284.

191. H. Barrell, *MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle* (London, Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 20–21.

192. Morris, *Terrorism*, p. 42.

193. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 704, Top Secret G/OPS/7/1, Vol. 1, "CHINAMAN", Encl. 16, 7 September 1967. During their early deployments, the SAP did not have a camouflage uniform of its own, and therefore its members used the Rhodesian one.

of September 1967. In all, seven of the seconded 18 Army personnel that deployed with it were paratroopers.¹⁹⁴

Before the three-month secondment was over, Major M.J. du Plessis, the second-in-command of the company (and who, soon after this deployment, was appointed as the third Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion) wrote a strongly worded letter to his superior in the SADF's Joint Combat Forces back in Pretoria, reporting the recalcitrant attitude, poor discipline and operational incompetence of the police contingent.¹⁹⁵ The experiment was a dismal failure and it was clear that soldiers and policemen were not compatible under the same command in military operations. The SADF did not second combat soldiers to the SAP in Rhodesia again. The police presence there continued until 1975, by which time there were ten SAP companies deployed in the country.¹⁹⁶ The success rate of the SAP contingent, however, was poor, and the Rhodesian Army (under whose operational command it was deployed¹⁹⁷) was never happy with its performance, eventually requesting that it be replaced by units from the SA Army.¹⁹⁸ This, however, never materialised.

Nonetheless, there were numerous SA Army technicians and radio operators deployed in Rhodesia and there were also aircraft of the SAAF and their air and ground crews. Initially, Cessna 185 light aeroplanes and Alouette III helicopters were sent, with their crews also masquerading as policemen. The helicopter crews gained valuable experience in Rhodesia; experience that they would share with the South African paratroopers. The South African premier, John Vorster, used the availability of these forces, together with the economic stranglehold South Africa had on Rhodesia, as well as the withholding of armaments and ammunition, to pressurise Ian Smith into ultimately accepting the principle of majority rule during the diplomatic shuttling that took place during the mid-1970s.¹⁹⁹

With the steady escalation of the war, the Rhodesians had developed a technique they called fire force. Based to some extent on a study of British helicopter tactics in Borneo in the early 1960s, it drew extensively on the Portuguese employment of helicopters in

194. DOD, GOC JCF Gp, Box 101, BGG/301/15, Vol. 1, "Personeel Gesekondeer aan SAP 31 Aug 67 to 3 Jul 69", Encls 2 and 3, 31 August 1967. There seems to be some discrepancy in the names and numbers of Army personnel, as there are 21 listed in another file: C Army Gp, Box 704, Top Secret G/OPS/7/1, Vol. 1, "CHINAMAN", Encl. 16, 7 September 1967.

195. Ibid., File BGG/206/36/4, Encl. 35, Top Secret Letter GOC JCF to Chief of Defence Staff, 27 October 1967.

196. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 702, Secret File G/LIA/3/4, "Rhodesia", Encl. 58, 11 February 1975.

197. B. Hoffman, J.M. Taw and D. Arnold, *Lessons for Contemporary Counterinsurgencies: The Rhodesian Experience* (Santa Monica: California, RAND Publication Series, 1991), p. 17.

198. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 702, Secret File G/LIA/3/4, "Rhodesia", Encl. 21a, 25 June 1974.

199. P. Moorcraft, "Rhodesia's War of Independence", *History Today*, 40, 9 (1990). See also SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2 (1970–1980)*, pp. 56–57 and 60–61.

Mozambique. The Portuguese war was in Africa, they were using exactly the same helicopter-types as the Rhodesians and the Rhodesians had direct exposure to their operations. Though the Rhodesians rarely admitted to learning anything of military value from the Portuguese there can be no doubt that the employment of an Alouette gunship, fitted with a 20mm door cannon, was first developed and employed by the Portuguese, who called this configuration a *heli-canhão*. This was a highly effective concept that provided devastating supportive fire to ground troops. It was adopted by the Rhodesians and also by the South Africans.²⁰⁰ Similarly, the Portuguese adaptation of French helicopter tactics in Algeria and of the American Eagle Flights used in Vietnam contributed to the fire force technique that was ultimately employed so effectively by the Rhodesians. The distances and the fluid nature of guerrilla operations by an enemy with no spatial or time restrictions, resulted in a recourse to an airborne option. For this, in South East Asia the French had utilised paratroopers and the Americans had focused on helicopters; the Rhodesians combined both.

Much has been written about the Rhodesian fire force, and although Richard Wood has probably done the best in-depth study of this tactical technique,²⁰¹ there are other accounts, some of them by participants, that are of great value in understanding just why it proved so effective in killing insurgents.²⁰² Of course, ultimate success in an insurgency war is not measured in terms of a head count, as the Rhodesians were to discover. Seen from a purely tactical viewpoint, the fire force, in the words of Lieutenant Colonel Ron Reid Daly, enabled the Rhodesian security forces to bring the characteristics of “firepower, mobility

200. As early as 1968 the SAAF had already begun arming their Alouette helicopters along the lines of the Portuguese when they deployed in Caprivi and Angola (see DOD, HVS/KG/DGAA (1), Box 865, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 1, “OP BOMBAY”, Document from *Comando-Chefe das Forças Armadas de Angola, Gabinete do General Comandante-Chefe*: “Minutes of the Meeting held on the Cooperation with SAAF in Angola, 3 June 1968”. Also Vol. 4, Encl. 57, Joint Combat Forces Op Instruction 1/69, 24 July 1969.

201. J.R.T. Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky: The Rhodesian All-Arms Fireforce in the War in the Bush, 1974–1980* (Johannesburg, 30° South Publishers, 2009); J.R.T. Wood, “Fire Force: The Evolvement of Helicopter-Orientated Bush Operations”, in Venter (ed.), *The Chopper Boys*, pp. 93–122; and J.R.T. Wood, “Fire Force: Helicopter Warfare in Rhodesia, 1962–1980”, online at www.jrtwood.com/article_fireforce.asp.

202. See, for example, C. Cocks, *Fireforce: One Man’s War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Johannesburg, 30° South Publishers, 2006), pp. 32–33; D. Caute, *Under the Skin: The Death of White Rhodesia* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 185–186 and 331; P. Moorcraft and P. McLaughlin, *Chimurenga! The War in Rhodesia, 1965–1980* (Johannesburg, Sygma Books, 1982), pp. 132–133 and 144–150; Cole, *The Elite*, p. 85; R. Reid Daly, (as told to P. Stiff), *Selous Scouts: Top Secret War* (Alberton, Galago, 1982), pp. 252–254; D. Cowderoy and R.C. Nesbit, *War in the Air: The Rhodesian Air Force, 1935–1980* (Alberton, Galago Books, 1987), pp. 60–69; L. Barnard, “Die Suid-Afrikaanse Lugmag (SALM) se Optrede in die Teaters Angola en Rhodesië (circa 1966–1974) as Aanloop tot die Grensoorlog”, Special edition on the Grensoorlog/Border War, 1966–1989, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3 (December 2006); M. Adams and C. Cocks, *Africa’s Commandos: The Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Solihull and Rugby, Helion and GG Books, 2013).

and shock action to their bush battlefield".²⁰³ It was fire force that came to characterise the Rhodesian counter-insurgency campaign as an airborne war. The following explanation of a Rhodesian fire force (which was to form the basis of the SADF version) is based on the works cited above.

The helicopter component normally comprised four Alouette IIIs: one of them a "K-Car" with its formidable 20mm cannon, and three "G-Cars" with twin Browning Mk 2 .303-inch machine-guns mounted in the port side door.²⁰⁴ The K-Car transported the fire force Commander (the Army commander of the ground troops) and was normally flown by the Air Force commander of the helicopters. It therefore doubled as both a joint airborne command post (CP) and as an airborne fire support base. Each of the G-Cars could carry four armed and lightly equipped troops, forming a four-man stick. Each stick was commanded by a junior NCO (usually a corporal or lance-corporal) and included two riflemen armed with 7.62mm FN assault rifles and one machine-gunner carrying an FN MAG 7.62mm general purpose machine-gun. This meant that 12 men could be placed on the ground simultaneously, ready to fight, exactly where the commander wanted them. If more were required, the helicopters would have to return to collect another 12. The commander would then, from his airborne CP, manoeuvre his troops on the ground, including repositioning them by helicopter as the battle developed. To save time and to increase the flying time of the helicopters over the target area, a vehicle tail would often follow by road to get as close as possible to where the action was, bringing reinforcements and drums of aviation fuel.

To back up the troops on the ground, a Reims Cessna FTB-337G Lynx fixed wing piston engine aircraft formed part of the fire force. Although not designed for military use, the Rhodesians had adapted it so that it was able to carry out air strikes with 68mm SNEB rockets, shrapnel or napalm bombs and twin .303-inch Browning machine-guns. But the insurgent groups or bases that the fire forces were called on to attack were often too large for 12 men to tackle and it was imperative to find a way to place more troops on the ground with the initial landing. Given their shortage of helicopters, the Rhodesians almost inevitably resorted to parachuting to augment their numbers on the ground. By adding a C-47 Dakota to the fire force, an additional 16 troops could be dropped into the contact area (at times, if the distance was short, this could even be increased to 20, as less fuel would be required in

203. R.F. Reid-Daly, "Fire Forces: General Observations", in J.R.T. Wood (ed.), *The War Diaries of André Dennison* (Gibraltar, Ashanti, 1989), p. 373.

204. Wood, "Fire Force", p. 104.

the aircraft tanks). This more than doubled the number, bringing it up to 28 – almost a full platoon.

The Rhodesians did not use their fire forces simply as reaction forces. The concept was based on aggressively finding the insurgents, then fixing and destroying them with the fire force. It was not a matter of waiting for the insurgents to gain the initiative. For finding them, the Selous Scouts were often used.²⁰⁵ The targets of a fire force action were usually either an insurgent camp that had been set up inside Rhodesia or a group of insurgents moving through the country or resting during their march. The Selous Scouts, posing as insurgents, would sometimes infiltrate a group and call the fire force in at a suitable moment. But frequently soldiers manning an Observation Post (OP) on one of the many rocky *koppies* or *gommas* (hillocks) would report on insurgent movements and direct the fire force to where the insurgents were. The terrain, particularly on the eastern side of the country, was very conducive to deploying OPs along known or appreciated infiltration routes from Mozambique. Less frequently, the fire force would be called out to react to a contact between insurgents and patrolling soldiers.

The success of a fire force deployment was reliant on speed and accuracy: the force had to get to where it was needed in the shortest possible time, and once there, it had to be landed at exactly the correct position. This was ultimately dependent on two vital requirements: good intelligence and a good commander in the K-Car. Units, such as the highly trained Selous Scouts were able to provide excellent intelligence and the frequency and intensity of fire force operations produced many outstanding commanders in both the RLI and the RAR. Some commanders parachuted with their troops to allow the K-Car to fly to the objective area carrying less of a load and therefore increasing its flying time over the objective. The commander would then be picked up by the K-Car after he had jumped.²⁰⁶

The Rhodesians also maintained a mobile approach in their thinking regarding the location of their fire forces. Although some were in almost permanent locations in those areas where the war was most intense, they were prepared to move them to any place where there was a good enough airstrip for the Dakota and the Lynx to land. This meant that they could take the whole “system” of troops, aircraft, logistic back-up and their command

205. There is an extensive literature on the Selous Scouts. See, for example, Reid Daly, *Selous Scouts*; J. Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts: Inside Story of a Rhodesian Special Branch Officer* (Alberton, Galago, 2006); P. Baxter, *Selous Scouts: Rhodesian Counter-Insurgency Specialists* (Solihull and Pinetown, Helion and 30° South Publishers, 2011); and D. Croukamp, *The Bush War in Rhodesia: the Extraordinary Combat Memoir of a Rhodesian Reconnaissance Specialist* (Boulder CO, Paladin Press, 2007).

206. Interview, Lt Col Barry Gettliffe (ret'd) (formerly a company commander with 1 RAR), Irene, 22 June 1995.

element to wherever it was needed. As the war intensified in 1978, the Rhodesians, through their sanctions-busting contacts, acquired eleven Italian Agusta-Bell 205A helicopters. These were licence-built American Huey helicopters of the type that had gained fame in the Vietnam War. Although somewhat elderly, these helicopters (dubbed “Cheetahs” by the Rhodesians) were faster, had a longer range and were able to carry twice as many troops as the Alouette.²⁰⁷ This significantly increased the capability of the fire forces to which they were allocated.

The fire force concept was the epitome of the tactical application of vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre. Though such a technique could only be employed in a counter-insurgency war where the insurgents did not have sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles, it was extremely effective under the right conditions. It applied all the principles of war: surprise, security, flexibility, manoeuvre, co-operation, offensive action, logistic support, economy of force, unity of command, concentration of force, maintaining of reserves, maintenance of morale and the selection and maintenance of the aim.

But using paratroopers meant that soldiers now had to be trained in parachuting. Initially, the Rhodesian Light Infantry, already trained as a commando battalion, had been utilised for the fire forces, and it was they who were first trained for the parachute role.²⁰⁸ Unlike the SADF’s 1 Parachute Battalion, there was no tough selection phase that preceded the parachute training in Rhodesia. The operational need for paratroopers was simply too great, and the available pool of troops too small to limit the numbers to be trained by a stringent selection. This question of numbers versus selection, as will be seen in this thesis, was at one stage a quandary that faced the SADF too. The demand for paratroopers soon outstripped the ability of the Rhodesian Air Force’s Parachute School at New Sarum outside Salisbury (now Harare) to train them. The school had been built to train a handful of SAS soldiers each year, but now there was a need to keep more than three battalions trained, including a constant flow of conscripts. The problem was resolved by turning to South Africa. From 1977 to 1979, a regular flow of Rhodesian soldiers was sent to 1 Parachute Battalion in Tempe in groups, to be trained as paratroopers.²⁰⁹ This placed a heavy burden on 1 Parachute Battalion,²¹⁰ itself in the process of more than doubling in size because of the escalation of the conflict in Namibia and Angola and the doubling of the length of national

207. Wood, “Fire Force: Helicopter Warfare in Rhodesia”, p. 7.

208. “1 RLI Notes”, *Assegai*, April 1977, pp. 11–12. See also Cocks, *Fireforce*, p. 107.

209. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Box 47, Confidential 1 PARA BN/103/2/0574, “Courses 1 Para Bn (15 June 1977 – 11 June 1981)”, Encls 1, 3 and 6, 1 July 1977.

210. Interview with Lt Col Johnny Kieser, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

service in 1978 to two years. During some periods there were two parachute courses running simultaneously in two shifts at 1 Parachute Battalion: a Rhodesian course from early morning until early afternoon, and a South African course through the afternoon and into the night.²¹¹ At times, when there were fewer Rhodesians, they were integrated into a South African course.²¹² Only white Rhodesians were trained in Tempe – the black soldiers were trained at New Sarum.²¹³ The constant presence of a large number of often battle-hardened Rhodesians in the lines of 1 Parachute Battalion over a period of more than two years resulted in informal contact after hours and over weekends between both officers and other ranks from the two countries. This often produced intense discussion on the fire force technique.²¹⁴

South African soldiers were deployed for the first time with the Rhodesians in an airborne operation as early as January 1974, but it was a special forces operation, not a fire force action. By then, Rhodesian Army brigade commanders had been authorised to carry out hot pursuit operations across the borders.²¹⁵ The SADF's 1 Reconnaissance Commando participated with the SAS in a cross-border airborne action as part of Operation HURRICANE. Six South Africans under command of Commandant Jan Breytenbach were parachuted into Mozambique with about 35 Rhodesian SAS soldiers at dawn on 22 January 1974. This was the first operational jump ever by members of a South African airborne unit, and was done from two Dakota aircraft. They operated in Mozambique for five weeks and were involved in numerous contacts with both ZANLA and Frelimo insurgents and there were casualties on both sides, though none among the South Africans. When the South African special forces operators were withdrawn, they were replaced by another six men from 1 Reconnaissance Commando, under Major Nic Visser, deploying by helicopter.²¹⁶ There were many lessons learnt by the South Africans during this deployment, and there was a significant increase in

211. Interview with WO1 Johan Landman, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

212. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Box 47, Confidential 1 PARA BN/103/2/0574, "Courses 1 Para Bn (15 June 1977 – 11 Jun 1981)", Encl. 64, 31 July 1979.

213. An examination of the course photographs for this period, which are mounted on the walls of at the Parachute Training Wing in Tempe, show all the Rhodesians who were trained wearing their Rhodesian camouflage uniforms, and all of them are white.

214. Interviews, Cmdt David Blaauw, 19 February 1992 (telephonic); Col Leon Groenewald, Kimberley, 1 April 1993; and Col "Pale" van der Walt, Centurion, 5 July 1994.

215. DOD, HWS(KG)DGAA (1), Box 869, Top Secret HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 10, "BARUTA", Encl. 48, 22 January 1973.

216. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 655, Secret, G/Ops/2/1, Vol. 2, "1 Verkiningskommando", Encl. 11A, Reports on Operation Hurricane by Cmdt J.D. Breytenbach and Maj N.J. Visser, 30 April 1974. Also, Breytenbach, "A Recce Goes SAS", pp. 367–372; and in the same book, K. Moorcroft, "Enter the South Africans", in J. Pittaway (ed.), *Special Air Service Rhodesia: The Men Speak* (Durban, Dandy Agencies, 2010), pp. 377–378.

the level of participation by South Africa's special forces in operations with the Rhodesian SAS towards the end of that country's conflict.²¹⁷

6.7. DEDUCTIONS

From its miniscule initial organisation of no more than a company, 1 Parachute Battalion had grown into an airborne battalion capable of conventional parachute operations, though only where it could rely on support from ground forces. This was despite a lack of clear vision regarding its purpose. The unit had transformed from a regular to a conscript organisation, with mainly Permanent Force officers and senior NCOs.

The small scale involvement by the paratroopers the first armed clash of the Thirty Year War by the apartheid government's security forces was a vertical envelopment action employing helicopters. Although a small operation, it had been one of clearly strategic import. Surprise had been achieved and a meaningful blow had been dealt to the insurgent military strategy. The first and only insurgent base to be established inside SWA/Namibia during the 23-year conflict had been destroyed and within six months the insurgency in Ovamboland was effectively curtailed for another nine years. Despite an apparent defeat, SWAPO wrested a propaganda success from the event, claiming the action as their victory, raising their international profile, credibility and level of recognition.

On the purely tactical level it brought the paratroopers closer to the integrated air-land concept of small-scale airborne operations that were to reach their zenith in the fire force application. In the early years of the war, additional tactical lessons were learnt from the Portuguese in Angola, by both the SAAF and the paratroopers. Continued contact by the SADF with and exposure to the Portuguese and Rhodesian forces in the conflicts beyond the borders served to shape thinking on airborne operations during the lull before the storm that was destined to blow over into SWA/Namibia.

The commencement of hostilities in the looming conflict, albeit very low-key, crystallised this thinking for certain senior officers. A desire among the generals of the SADF to establish a special forces capability led to several paratroopers being sent on courses in Angola and Rhodesia and the introduction of much specialised training at 1 Parachute Battalion. Clandestine involvement by South African paratroopers in the Nigerian Civil War served to clarify their thinking. As the conflict escalated in Angola and in Rhodesia, and as the limitations of conscription became apparent in South Africa, Brigadier Constand Viljoen

217. P.L. Moorcraft and P. McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War: A Military History* (Mechanicsburg, PA, Stackpole Books, 2010), p. 52; Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp. 239–308.

showed a clear understanding of the need for special forces as a capability separate from the paratroopers and he backed their establishment. But although the founding of the SADF's first special forces unit finally removed the ambiguity that had existed on the function of 1 Parachute Battalion, there was still no clear concept of a strategic role for the paratroopers.

During the 1970s, the Rhodesian campaign was rapidly increasing in intensity. Constrained by a lack of resources, both human and material, the Rhodesians soon resorted to vertical envelopment as a means of conducting their counter-insurgency effectively and economically. Known as fire force, this had a profound effect on the South African paratroopers as their own campaign intensified in northern Namibia.

The fire force technique provided a basis for most of the airborne operations to be carried out by the SADF and would become a permanent feature of the employment of the South African paratroopers during the Thirty Year War. Indeed it resulted in a predominantly tactical approach to the application of the airborne concept. This meant a low priority would be afforded to providing the paratroopers with the capability of operating independently from ground forces. Subsequent chapters will show that this led to a tactical mindset that was detrimental to the development of a strategic airborne capability. The next chapter deals with this conundrum and shows how the strategic approach began to take hold as the airborne forces began to expand.

CHAPTER 7

THE AIRBORNE CONUNDRUM: STRATEGY OR TACTICS?

7.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes how the introduction of universal white male conscription impacted on the paratroopers and how, with the restructuring of the SA Army in the early 1970s, the parachute organisation was expanded to include two part-time CF parachute battalions. The establishment of a separate special forces unit ended the ambiguity surrounding the role of the paratroopers, who had now gained the status of a conventional airborne force,

The chapter goes on to show how conscripts with regular officers and senior NCOs, were used to carry out the first operational parachute drop conducted by the SADF. The drop illustrated the distinct strategic potential of an airborne capability, but also exposed certain shortcomings. One of these was manpower, and some of the unsuccessful efforts to address the shortage of paratroopers are examined. The chapter then discusses how a tactical emphasis predominated in SADF airborne thinking because of exposure to the Rhodesian fire force technique. The sudden involvement of the paratroopers in the war in Rhodesia, specifically to provide fire forces, served to reinforce this line of thought. The details of this highly secret deployment have remained shrouded in mystery, although it is often alluded to in the literature.¹ This chapter throws more light on the operation, making use of archival sources, war diaries maintained by some of the companies that were deployed and numerous interviews with participants.

The chapter closes by posing the question: Was the airborne capability developed by the SADF a strategic or a tactical asset?

7.2. NATIONAL SERVICE AND CITIZEN FORCE PARATROOPERS

In terms of the 1967 Defence Amendment Act, general conscription of all medically fit white males was introduced for the first time in South Africa in January 1968. The new system was known as national service (or *nasionale diensplig* in Afrikaans).² Replacing the random ballot system, where less than 50 per cent of young white men had been called up, the new system more than doubled the numbers undergoing military training. Over the next few

1. For example, P.L. Moorcraft and P. McLaughlin, *Chimurenga! The War in Rhodesia, 1965–1980* (Johannesburg, Sygma Books, 1982), pp. 222–223; I. Van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball, 2015), p. 267.

2. Defence Amendment Act No. 85 of 1967.

years the Army expanded significantly as more battalions were established and existing ones were enlarged to accommodate these conscripts. There was also an increase in the period of time that these men would be liable for service in the Citizen Force to a further nine years once they had completed their nine months of full-time service. This signalled an intensification of the militarisation of white South African society. There has been a growing literature on the subject in recent years, often coupled with the concept of “masculinities” (frequently linked to the paratroopers) and anti-conscription campaigns.³

The introduction of national service seems to have been prompted by three issues: a growing sense of threat due to South Africa’s increasing international isolation; the anger of Africa regarding Pretoria’s intransigence in the South West African/Namibian dispute; and the constant threat of renewed internal unrest. However, the extra burden this placed on the existing small Permanent Force was immense. The Permanent Force officers and NCOs had to train the national service conscripts and they were too thinly spread to do so. In addition, the intakes of conscripts were reduced from four to only two a year, resulting in enormous numbers for each intake. At 1 Parachute Battalion the situation was exacerbated, where an arrangement was introduced for those who volunteered for parachute training and qualified as paratroopers, to complete a full year of training rather than the nine months that other conscripts did. In return, they would be exempt from doing any further camps. Not only was this a big incentive for young conscripts to volunteer to become paratroopers, but the longer period of time available for training also provided 1 Parachute Battalion with better-trained soldiers who were available for operational service for a longer period than had been the case before. But the increased numbers meant it was no longer possible to administer and train the part-time CF companies as well, and in fact there would soon no longer be a need for these companies because the national servicemen no longer did camps.⁴

The training of the part-time CF companies thus came to a sudden halt. However, a small group of selected officers and NCOs, known as the CF Leader Element, remained on

3. For example, D. Conway, *Masculinities, Militarisation and the End Conscription Campaign* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2012); J. Rauch, “War and Resistance”, in G. Cawthra, G. Kraak and G. O’Sullivan (eds), *War and Resistance: Southern African Reports* (London, Macmillan, 1994); M. Alexander, “The Militarisation of South African White Society, 1948–1990”, *Scientia Militaria*, 30, 2 (2000)..

4. SANDF Archives (hereafter DOD), C Army Gp, Box 242, Confidential G/Trg/1/18, “Training Policy, Directives and Instructions: Paratroopers”, Encls 8 to 25, period 23 February–18 July 1968; “Vasbyt”, mimeographed newsletter, 1 Parachute Battalion, sent to paratroopers: Vol. 1, January–April 1971, p. 2; and Vol. 3, July–October 1971, pp. 1, 11 and 32.

the strength of 1 Parachute Battalion and attended annual 12-day camps.⁵ These camps were euphemistically termed Specialised Infantry Courses, but were modelled on the Rhodesian Escape and Evasion exercises. The exercises were preceded by a few days of intensive refresher training at the De Brug Military Area, followed by an insertion by parachute into a remote area of South Africa. A company of national service paratroopers would then begin chasing the hapless CF leader element. They were deemed to be “terrorists” for the purpose of the exercise and had to operate in groups of four.⁶

National service produced a considerable number of well trained paratroopers, yet the majority were not being put to use in the CF. Late in 1970, the Acting Chief of the Army, Major General Graham Dunbar-Moodie, made a submission to the Chief of Defence Staff in which he requested that a CF parachute battalion be established.⁷ The request was conveyed to Hiemstra, who immediately approved it.⁸ As a result, 2 Parachute Battalion was established with effect from 1 June 1971.⁹ The headquarters of the new unit was accommodated within the lines of 1 Parachute Battalion in Tempe and for the first few years of its existence the full-time parent unit helped to administer it.¹⁰ The first Officer Commanding 2 Parachute Battalion was Nic Claassen.¹¹ In 1972 the initial period of training for all conscripts was increased from 9 to 12 months.¹² This meant that the paratroopers were no longer doing an extra three months of service, but were now serving for the same period as all other conscripts. CF paratroopers therefore again became liable to do annual military camps after completion of their initial year of military service, so the new unit was assured of being fed a steady supply of trained paratroopers. The number of trained CF paratroopers available was in fact so great that 2 Parachute Battalion transferred most of those who had done only nine months of training and still had commitments, to normal infantry units.¹³

The new unit continued to grow so rapidly because of the numbers of paratroopers being produced by 1 Parachute Battalion and being fed to the CF at the end of their initial

5. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 242, Confidential G/Trg/1/18, “Training Policy, Directives and Instructions: Paratroopers”, Memo from OC 1 Para Bn, 9 May 1968, attached to Encl. 24, 16 May 1968.

6. Call-up instructions, Sgt N.O. Grobler, 2 October 1970; Interviews, Cmdt Nic Claassen (retd), 22 June 1995 and Maj Wesley de Beer, 29 June 1995.

7. DOD, CDS(KG)DGAA (1), Box 138, Conf. HVS/209/3/2/3 Vol. 1, “Organisasie: BM Valskermbataljon”, Encl. 1, 18 December 1970.

8. *Ibid.*, Encl. 4, 10 February 1971.

9. *Ibid.*, Encl 8, 14 May 1971.

10. Historical Summary attached to the Annual Historical Report for 1 Para Bn, 1978.

11. Interview with Cmdt Nic Claassen (retd) in Centurion on 22 June 1995.

12. Van der Waag, *Military History of SA*, p. 255.

13. Circular sent to members of 2 Para Bn, Ref. G/SD/3/6/2 Para Bn, 7 October 1971.

year of national service, that a third battalion, 3 Parachute Battalion, was formed to accommodate them. Officially, it was established on 1 August 1975, but it was only on 17 May 1977 that its first Officer Commanding, Commandant Lewis Gerber, was appointed and the unit began to function.¹⁴

By then, the SA Army had undergone a major reorganisation. This was not due solely to the introduction of national service. It followed the radical revision of Staff Duties training instigated by Colonel Constand Viljoen. This saw the profound shift in emphasis from the positional approach to warfare that had dominated SADF thinking until then, to one of mobile operations.¹⁵ With the increased CF numbers and obligations, new part-time units were formed to accommodate those conscripts who had completed their initial year of full-time training. In the new Army organisation, most of the CF units were allocated to what was termed the Conventional Force, which would give form to the mobile warfare approach. An army corps was established to accommodate the Conventional Force. This formation, 1 SA Corps, consisted of two divisions: 7 Infantry Division and 8 Armoured Division. Each of these had three brigades, either motorised, mechanised or armoured. The two parachute battalions were placed directly under the General Officer Commanding 1 SA Corps, as Corps Troops.¹⁶ But with no airborne logistic support and no overall airborne command and control capability, the parachute battalions could not operate independently and were limited to a purely tactical role, in support of the other units of 1 SA Corps.

7.3. THE FIRST OPERATIONAL JUMP: SOWING A STRATEGIC SEED

An important development for the paratroopers in 1969/1970 was the acquisition by South Africa of two modern aircraft types that significantly increased the SAAF's ability to deliver troops by air. During August 1969 the first of nine Franco-German C-160Z Transall aircraft arrived in South Africa. Like the C-130B Hercules, the Transall was able to carry 64 paratroopers, although it had a shorter range.¹⁷ See Appendix 60. This provided the paratroopers with a remarkable airlift capacity. In theory at least, the nine Transall and seven Hercules aircraft could together transport more than a thousand paratroopers a distance of several thousand kilometres. The second acquisition was of helicopters. The first

14. Historical Summary attached to the Annual Historical Report for 1 Para Bn, 1978.

15. M. Alexander, *SA Army Staff Training, 1927–1996* (Pretoria, SANDF, 1997), pp. 5–6.

16. DOD, Verslae Gp, Box 226, Report 87/43, DBB/235/74: "Verslag oor die Reorganisasie van die SA Leër se Konvensionele Taakmag: Stigting van Korps, Divisie en Brigade Hoofkwartiere", 31 July 1974.

17. B. Fitzsimonds (ed.), *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of the 20th Century Weapons and Warfare, Volume 5*, (New York, Phoebus Publishing, 1971), p. 494; Potgieter and Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Airforce* (Cape Town, Struik, 1981), pp. 96–97.

French Puma SA-330 helicopter was delivered to South Africa for assembly in December 1969,¹⁸ and by 1982 the SAAF was reported as having 48 of these versatile aircraft operational.¹⁹ Depending on the model (South Africa acquired both the H and the L models), the Puma could lift 12 or 16 troops with their equipment, and its twin side doors enabled them to disembark very quickly.²⁰ It was equipped with full blind and all-weather instrumentation, and had a far greater flying speed than the much smaller Alouette. The authoritative International Institute for Strategic Studies indicated that by the mid-1990s the SAAF Puma fleet had grown to over 70.²¹ See Appendix 61. Both the Transall and the Puma played a vital role in airborne operations by the SADF, and in a sense they, together with the Mirage fighters, showcased the reliance of South Africa on French military aviation technology during the years of supposed international sanctions and isolation.

The early 1970s saw an intensification of the insurgent war on the northern border of Namibia. Yet as long as the protection of the borders remained the responsibility of the police, the SADF was little more than a small, low profile presence in the area. The war was not, at that stage, making great demands on manpower. So much so that early in 1973 the Rhodesian Army was permitted to recruit South African national servicemen. They were even allowed to recruit from 1 Parachute Battalion.²² Ironically, barely a year later the SA Army was itself desperately looking for more soldiers. In April 1973, after a spate of successful SWAPO ambushes and mine incidents in the Caprivi, the SAP was compelled, albeit reluctantly, to relinquish responsibility for border protection to the SADF. This immediately led to a significant increase in the SADF presence along the northern border of Namibia.²³ The SADF officially took over this responsibility at the end of June 1973. At the end of July that year the Joint Combat Forces organisation was dissolved and the respective Chiefs of the Arms of Service assumed command of their forces deployed operationally in Namibia. The operational HQ of 1 Military Area (1 MA) now fell under command of the SA Army.²⁴

18. Potgieter and Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the SAAF*, p. 124.

19. Revista de las Armas y Servicios, *Balance Militar, 1983–84, Volume 44*, No. 526 (Madrid, Servicio de Publicaciones del Estado Mayor del Ejército, November 1985), p. 85.

20. Fitzsimonds (ed.), *Encyclopedia of 20th Century Weapons and Warfare, Volume 20*, pp. 2150–2154.

21. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 1996/97* (London, Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 265.

22. DOD, 1 Para Bn Gp 1, Box 13, Conf. A/PERS/38, Encl. 5, Special Command Order 27/73, “Rhodesiese Werwingspan”, 23 February 1973.

23. F.J du T. Spies, *Operasie Savannah, Angola, 1975–1976* (Pretoria, SADF, 1989), p. 22.

24. DOD, GOC JCF Gp, Box 42, Top Secret BGG/201/4/10, “Op BARUTA/FOCUS” Vol. 4; Van der Waag, *Military History of SA*, p. 254.

Coming less than a year before the revolution in Portugal, the assumption of responsibility for border protection placed the SADF in a good position to counter SWAPO's efforts to take advantage of the chaos that ensued in Angola. Portugal's war against the three Angolan resistance movements, the MPLA, FNLA and UNITA, quickly petered out as it became clear that the new government in Lisbon intended to decolonise. Negotiations began, and in southern Angola UNITA was able to enter the country with impunity, followed soon afterwards by the MPLA. Both these movements were sympathetic to SWAPO and provided assistance for increasing incursions into Namibia. The growing exodus of inhabitants to join SWAPO in exile from Ovamboland, Kavangoland and the Caprivi, spurred by the dramatic student and worker activism in Namibia and the consequent South African clampdown at the time, provided SWAPO with thousands of new recruits. Training bases for them were set up inside Angola at places like Mucusso, Dirico and Luiana.²⁵

The headquarters of 1 MA at Rundu had until then occasionally conducted operations inside south-east Angola. Some of these had been in indirect support of the Portuguese and others had merely required permission from the Portuguese. They were rarely of greater size than a platoon and they did not result in any contacts with the insurgents. In addition, special forces teams from 1 Reconnaissance Commando had begun conducting clandestine operations early in 1974, to search for and identify the locations of SWAPO elements in Angola.²⁶ But on 20 May 1974 the HQ of 1 MA was informed that all further movement by "foreign troops or aircraft" in south-east Angola had been forbidden by the new Portuguese government.²⁷

At the time, 1 Parachute Battalion had only one under-strength company (B-Company) fully trained and available for operational deployment. A second company (D-Company) was nearing the end of its training and would soon be available for deployment. A third (A-Company) still had several months of training to do, while the fourth company (C-Company) had only recently commenced its training. D-Company was scheduled to arrive in the Caprivi Strip on 4 June 1974 to complete its counter-insurgency training before being deployed, and would be based at Katima Mulilo. See Appendix 62 for a map of South East Angola, South West Zambia and the Caprivi.

25. Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, pp. 30–32 and 40–41; C. Leys and J.S. Saul (eds), *Namibia's Liberation Struggle: The Two-Edged Sword* (London, James Currey, 1995), pp. 16 and 22–23.

26. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 11, Secret File Army HQ/G/OPS/3/3 "FOCUS", Vol. 2, Encl. 47, 24 January 1974.

27. *Ibid.*, Vol 7, Encl 2, 10 May 1974.

Constand Viljoen, by then a brigadier and the Army's Director of Operations, had been trying in vain for some time to persuade the commander of 1 MA to drop paratroopers operationally inside Angola and had made B-Company available for this purpose.²⁸ Initially, he directed the arrival of D-Company to be effected by parachute as an appropriate show of force inside Angola and close to the Zambian border.²⁹ That opportunity was now gone with the Portuguese restriction on operating inside Angola, but Viljoen insisted that the drop should still take place, even if it was in the Caprivi. He therefore instructed that the company be dropped immediately east of the Kongola Bridge, still close to Zambia, though no longer near the identified SWAPO bases alongside the Angolan/Zambian border. It remained an exercise in sabre rattling, with 140 troops and 2,000kg of equipment to be dropped. The date was moved to 5 June 1974.³⁰ It was planned as a big public relations exercise to ensure that the local population was made fully aware of the military might of the SADF and of the ability to project force over long distances at speed. With this in mind, Army HQ suggested that the chiefs and headmen of the Eastern Caprivi be invited to watch the drop and the Portuguese were notified of the intention to carry it out so that they would not become alarmed when it happened.³¹

It was at this stage that the unexpected occurred. Despite the momentous changes that had taken place in Portugal, the authorities in south-east Angola, isolated from much of what was happening (the area was known by the Portuguese as the *Terras do fim do Mundo* – “Lands of the Ends of the Earth”), continued to maintain cordial relations with their South African counterparts. This was especially so regarding the exchange of intelligence. On 30 May 1974 reports were received from Portuguese sources that a group of 10 insurgents had been identified in the area between Dirico and Mucusso, and that they were a diversionary element for a large group of SWAPO insurgents that was moving from Zambia, having entered Angola north of Luiana across the south-eastern corner, moving towards Bwabwata. The destination of the larger group appeared to ultimately be Ovamboland, the most populated part of Namibia, either by moving through southern Angola or by crossing the Caprivi Strip into Botswana and then infiltrating across Kavangoland. These reports were confirmed by other sources. What alarmed the South African military authorities was that the main force was reported to consist of some 200 insurgents. This was a far bigger

28. Ibid., Vol. 6, Encls 16, 10 April 1974; 23, 13 April 1974; and 71, 9 May 1974.

29. Ibid., Vol. 7, Encls 30, 22 April 1974; and 18, 15 May 1974.

30. Ibid., Encl. 7, 13 May 1974.

31. Ibid., Vol. 8, Encl. 7, 30 May 1974.

infiltration than had ever been attempted before. They were being followed by Portuguese forces from Mapupa and Coutado do Mucusso, but the Portuguese were keeping a safe distance from them and had no intention of engaging them. The main group of insurgents was variously reported as moving in a large, single group or in two groups of approximately 100 each, and some reports indicated that they intended to attack Bwabwata, where there was a very small SADF element stationed. Bwabwata was right on the Angolan border, isolated and far from any reinforcements. It was located approximately halfway along the Caprivi Strip, about 18km north of Chetto, which was on the so-called “Golden Highway” – a road not yet tarred, through deep, often impassable drifts of sand. It would be almost impossible to reach the little garrison at Bwabwata with a force large enough to counter 200 aggressive insurgents.³² With only a company of infantry deployed by the SADF in the Western Caprivi, the insurgents posed a very real threat.

Brigadier Viljoen saw this as an ideal opportunity for a parachute operation. As Director of Operations, he realised that D-Company, scheduled to drop east of the Kongola Bridge on the morning of 5 June 1974, was not yet trained to carry out counter-insurgency operations, so they could not be used. He therefore signalled 1 Parachute Battalion early on the morning of 4 June to carry out a reinforcement drop that night at Bwabata with the under-strength B-Company. The company was busy with field training in the De Brug Military Area outside Bloemfontein when the message arrived. They were rushed back to the base in Tempe, where they drew ammunition and parachutes and spent the rest of the day preparing their equipment. The battalion commander, Commandant Hans Möller, called in the company commander, Major Joe Verster, briefed him and told him that he was reinforcing his tiny force.³³ An additional platoon made up of whichever paratroopers could be scraped together under command of Captain James Hills, who had been hurriedly withdrawn from his post as the Battalion Transport Officer, was therefore attached to B-Company. By nightfall B-Company was fitting parachutes at Air Force Base Bloemspruit and boarding the two C-130B Hercules aircraft that had been sent from Pretoria to fetch them.³⁴

Major “Jumbo” Human of 1 Parachute Battalion was in the Caprivi at Katima Mulilo to be DZSO for the show-of-force jump due to take place the next day. Trained as a pathfinder, Human was flown to Bwabata by helicopter to take DZ for the operational

32. DOD, C Army D Ops Gp, Box 15, Top Secret G/OPS/3/3, “FOCUS Sitreps”, Vol. 3, Encls 56 and 57, 4 June 1974; C Army Gp, Box 11, Secret Army HQ/G/OPS/3/3, “FOCUS”, Vol. 8, Encls 12, 1 June 1974; and 22, 4 June 1974.

33. Interview, Maj Gen J.P.M. Möller, Pretoria, 29 August 1990.

34. Interviews, Col J.R. Hills, Tempe, 24 April 1990; and Cmdt E.P.K. Ferreira, Pretoria, 19 April 1990.

drop.³⁵ The heavily-laden paratroopers, after flying for over two hours, jumped at their DZ some 1,500km away at 20h50 that night.³⁶ It had been the first operational parachute deployment by South Africa.³⁷ One paratrooper injured his back during the jump and was evacuated by helicopter. The remainder immediately moved out to the north, into Angola, and set up ambushes along the routes that had been appreciated as likely ones the insurgents would take. The restriction by the Portuguese on operations across the border had been deliberately ignored in the light of this new threat and it was fortuitous that a scheduled official visit to 1 MA by the Minister of Defence, the Chief of the SADF and the Chief of the Army was taking place at the time. According to the War Diary of 1 MA, the minister gave the OC (under whose operational command the paratroopers who had jumped now fell) verbal permission to enter Angola to search for and destroy the insurgents.³⁸

The next day at 10h00 D-Company carried out its show-of-force drop, as arranged. Under command of Major Dick McIntosh, 140 paratroopers jumped from three C-130B aircraft, and additional equipment, including several Tico Cars, was dropped with them. Human, who had been flown back to Mpacha airfield near Katima Mulilo, carried out a free-fall jump with two other pathfinders from a Cessna 185 light aircraft 30 minutes before the company arrived, all as part of the demonstration.³⁹ The Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion jumped with the men of D-Company.⁴⁰ Only some 40km away, while the local people were being impressed by this show of force, the paratroopers of B-Company were lying in the thick bush, awaiting the arrival of the largest group of SWAPO insurgents yet to attempt to cross into Namibia. However, Brigadier Viljoen, back at Army HQ in Pretoria, had made it clear that should the situation at Bwabwata escalate, he was prepared to re-route the company jumping at Kongola to reinforce those who had already jumped the night before, despite their incomplete training.⁴¹

But the insurgents appeared to have become aware of the South African plan and dispersed into smaller groups, avoiding the Bwabwata area. Two teams of special forces

35. Interview, Maj Gen J.P.M. Möller, Pretoria, 29 August 1990.

36. DOD, C Army D Ops Gp, Box 15, Top Secret G/OPS/3/3, "FOCUS Sitreps", Vol. 3, Encl. 58, 5 June 1974.

37. "Untried Troops have First 'Jump'", *Eastern Province Herald*, June 1974.

38. DOD, C Army D Ops Gp, Box 15, Top Secret G/OPS/3/3, "FOCUS Sitreps", Vol. 3, Encl. 56, 4 June 1974 and OD Gp, Box 11, Top Secret War Diary, 1 Military Area, Vol. 5, entry for 5 June 1974.

39. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 11, Top Secret G/OPS/3/3, "FOCUS", Vol. 8, Encl. 18, 3 June 1974 and C Army D Ops Gp, Box 15, Top Secret G/OPS/3/3, "FOCUS Sitreps", Vol. 3, Encl. 60, 6 June 1974.

40. Interview, Maj Gen J.P.M. Möller, Pretoria, 29 August 1990.

41. DOD, 1 MA Gp, Box 149, Top Secret G/OPS/3/3 Vol. 7, "Ops Onkonv (FOCUS)", Encl. 10, 4 June 1974.

from 1 Reconnaissance Commando were already trying to locate them inside Angola and a third team was requested by 1 MA. On 10 June 1974 Commandant Breytenbach and eight of his special forces operators arrived to assist in the search for the missing insurgents.⁴² The terrain was thickly forested with swamps in places, so it was easy for small groups of guerrillas to vanish in the vast, trackless area.

After four days, the ambushes were lifted and Bedford trucks, sandbagged for protection against mines, were sent through from Katima Mulilo to enable the paratroopers to penetrate deeper into Angola, helping the special forces hunt for the insurgents. More troops were brought into the Caprivi and the intensity of the counter-insurgency campaign reached an unprecedented height. The special forces and paratroopers searched for tracks and temporary bases, reconnoitred possible crossing places over the Luiana River and laid ambushes. But by then the dispersed insurgents appeared to have given up their plan to penetrate to Ovamboland and were attempting to return to Zambia. After more than two weeks of hunting through the bush, the special forces and paratroopers finally caught up with the insurgents and made contact.⁴³

On 23 June 1974, there were three contacts in an area approximately 100km north of Mucusso. In the first, the special forces surprised a group of ten SWAPO insurgents at a waterhole, killed two and wounded a third. Later in the day the paratroopers shot an armed insurgent dead, and in the early evening the special forces came up against a group of 30 insurgents. In the furious fire fight that ensued several insurgents were wounded and one South African was killed. Lieutenant Freddie Zeelie was the first SADF soldier to die in the Bush War. The insurgents withdrew towards Babangando, and in small groups they crossed the Luiana and then the Cuando Rivers, back into Zambia. By the end of June all the SADF troops had been withdrawn from Angola and the Portuguese forces commenced with a sweep operation south of the settlement of Luiana, with air support from the SAAF. From documents found on one of the insurgents who had been killed (and who was apparently a leader), it appeared that the group that had attempted to infiltrate was in fact no more than 50-strong and that there had not been 200 of them as was reported by Portuguese intelligence.⁴⁴

42. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 11, Top Secret G/OPS/3/3 "FOCUS", Vol. 8, Encls 54 and 55, 7 June 1974.

43. DOD, C Army D Ops Gp, Box 16, Top Secret G/OPS/3/, "FOCUS Sitreps", 3 Vol. 4, Situation Reports, 10–23 June 1974; 1 MA Gp, Box 108, Top Secret G/OPS/3/3, "FOCUS", Vol 6, Daily Sitreps, 10–23 June 1974.

44. DOD, OD Gp, Box 11, Top Secret War Diary, 1 MA, Vol. 5, Appx F, "Inrap: Buitgemaakte Dokumente", 15 July 1974.

Nevertheless, the size of the group of insurgents was unprecedented at the time, and for several months a large number of troops from various units was deployed in the Caprivi. There were also more show-of-force jumps by paratrooper companies for the benefit of the locals who might be considering joining SWAPO to be trained as members of PLAN.⁴⁵ Viljoen, anxious to exploit the operational potential of paratroopers, requested that the Air Force place a Paradak (a Dakota equipped for dropping paratroops) permanently at Rundu, where 1 MA HQ was located, while 3 Sub-Area requested that a Puma or Super Frelon helicopter be placed permanently at Ondangwa in Ovamboland. On 16 July 1974 an instruction was received by 1 Parachute Battalion to provide a parachute platoon that would remain at Rundu as a reserve for 1 MA. It would be relieved on a rotational basis.⁴⁶ By then Viljoen had already insisted that a suitable DZ be identified at every base in the Caprivi so that parachute reinforcements could be dropped if necessary, and a stock of parachutes was maintained at Rundu to enable several jumps to be carried out.⁴⁷ In a sense, these arrangements heralded the beginning of South Africa's version of what became known as fire force. For the next year or more, there were almost always companies from 1 Parachute Battalion in the Caprivi, either under training or actually deployed on operations.

The first operational parachute drop by the SADF did not have a specific code-name – it was merely a part of the larger Operation FOCUS that had been running since February 1972. Yet it warrants consideration in any study of SA airborne operations, because the largest attempted infiltration of an insurgent group until then was effectively thwarted. The rapid deployment of the paratroops had forced the insurgents to disperse and the dogged pursuit for 18 days by the paratroopers and the special forces, culminating in a day of skirmishes, had compelled them to abandon their mission and to withdraw back to the safety of Zambia. Although it was an effective example of the tactical versatility of an airborne force, the operation held the seeds of a strategic action. It provided a clear illustration of the strategic potential of an airborne force to be moved at short notice over thousands of kilometres to an otherwise inaccessible area of crisis.

45. Operational Diary of A Coy, 1 Para Bn, 22 August – 25 October 1974.

46. DOD, C Army Gp, Box 11, Secret Army HQ/G/OPS/3/3, "FOCUS", Vol. 9, Encls 35, 9 July 1974, 36, 10 July 1974 and 44, 16 July 1974; 1 Para Bn Gp, Box 16, Q/EQPT/1/0, Encl. 13, 4 October 1974 and Box 18, Q/EQPT/61/6, Encl. 68, 30 January 1975.

47. DOD, 1 MA Gp, Box 149, Top Secret G/OPS/3/3 Vol 7, "Operasies Onkonvensioneel (FOCUS)", Encl. 18, 5 June 1974; 1 Para Bn Gp, Box 18, Q/EQPT/61/6, Encls 68, 30 January 1975; 72, 12 February 1975; and 73, 18 February 1975.

Yet, from the available records it is apparent that the operation revealed glaring shortcomings. The first was the absence of trained pathfinders to be dropped ahead of the main force, resulting in an artificial compromise that would have been impossible under other circumstances. Secondly, the dearth of accurate intelligence prevented the paratroopers from being dropped at the point where they would have the greatest effect. In addition, a properly constituted, balanced and permanently available airborne force was not yet available, which meant that a hastily constituted and makeshift force had to be employed, some of it only partially trained. Furthermore, the paratroopers did not have the means to sustain themselves once they had jumped and were totally reliant on ground forces. Finally, and most importantly, the lack of an operational airborne HQ to plan and coordinate all airborne activities resulted in a piecemeal employment of the paratroopers once they were on the ground. Until these five issues were addressed no airborne force could be considered strategic.

7.4. EFFORTS AT EXPANSION: THE 3 SAI , THE PERMANENT FORCE AND THE SACC

PARACHUTE COMPANIES

During the four years that followed the initial operational drop by the paratroopers, significant efforts were made to correct the shortcomings that had emerged from the action. The first of these was a concerted attempt to increase the number of paratroopers immediately available for operational employment. CF paratroopers, who had first to be mobilised and then given refresher training, were not the answer. There had to be a bigger, full-time airborne force. Two major difficulties can be identified in this regard. Firstly, it had become abundantly clear that one year of national service was insufficient;⁴⁸ and secondly, the gruelling two-week selection phase (the so-called PT Course) at 1 Parachute Battalion was seriously limiting the number of volunteers who eventually qualified as paratroopers.⁴⁹

By the end of 1973, 1 Parachute Battalion had a strength of only 231 men, while its authorised strength was 736.⁵⁰ The unit's operational commitment was heavy, because two former police bases in the Caprivi were taken over by the paratroopers.⁵¹ The inability of the paratroopers to field more than two fully trained parachute companies at a time for operational deployments, and then only for a few months before they had to demobilise at

48. See the comments by Van der Waag, *Military History of SA*, p. 255.

49. For a description of the demands and rigours of this course at the time, see "The Agony of the Parabats", *Sunday Times*, 12 March 1972.

50. DOD, 1 Para Bn, Unit History File/Annual Historical Report (Jaarlikse Geskiedkundige Verslag) for 1973.

51. E-mail letter from Col Leon Groenewald (retd) in Oudtshoorn, 4 February 2014.

the end of their year of national service, was clearly cause for concern at Army HQ. Three experiments were conducted in an attempt to address this problem for the paratroopers; none of them proved successful.

The first was coupled to the voluntary extension of national service from one year to 18 months or to two years that was introduced for selected conscripts in 1974. A cash incentive was attached to this, as well as exemption from all further CF military commitments.⁵² Those volunteers who were selected for this extended service were concentrated at 3 SA Infantry Battalion (3 SAI) in Potchefstroom.⁵³ A decision was taken at Army HQ that this unit, or at least a part of it, should be parachute trained. The archival sources on this experiment are cryptic and vague, so an effort has been made to gauge the experience through interviews and correspondence with participants.

Volunteers were accordingly selected by the commander of 3 SAI, Commandant Martyn Viljoen, and formed into one company.⁵⁴ Following a period of intense physical preparation, they were sent to 1 Parachute Battalion in Tempe in August 1974. It had been decreed by Army HQ that they did not have to go through the two-week PT selection phase at 1 Parachute Battalion, and this did not sit well with the paratroopers; it flew in the face of their philosophy of tough selection and a single standard for admission to the title of “paratrooper”. There were 80 soldiers from 3 SAI who arrived at 1 Parachute Battalion and they were put through the standard physical admission tests before commencing their course. For this, they had been carefully and systematically prepared by parachute instructors on the staff of 3 SAI, who had previously spent several years at 1 Parachute Battalion. Their level of fitness was therefore exceptionally high. It was thus hardly surprising that according to one of them (Callie Roos, who, in subsequent years became the chaplain at 1 Parachute Battalion) they all passed the admission tests with ease.⁵⁵ The decision to waive the two-week PT Course for these troops was apparently the Army’s way

52. “Wat ons NDP’s sê”, *Byvoegsel tot Paratus*, February 1974, p. x; “National Service System”, *Paratus Special*, March 1974, p. 50; Undated Information Brochure for National Servicemen, “Welcome to 1 Parachute Battalion”, probably produced circa 1977, sets out the cash incentives paid out on completion of the term, as R900 for officers and R750 for other ranks completing 18 months, and R3,600 for officers and R3,000 for other ranks completing 24 months. See also Van der Waag, *Military History of SA*, p. 255.

53. DOD, 1 Para Bn (1), Box 13, Conf. A/PERS/40/0, Encl. 8, 3 SAI to C Army, “Verlengde Diens”, 20 November 1974.

54. E-mail correspondence, Col Martyn Viljoen (retd), between 8 and 16 February 2014; and Col P.P. Roberts (retd), Mossel Bay, 4 February 2014.

55. Interview, Chaplain Callie Roos, near Libangeni, KwaNdebele, 30 September 1992; also e-mail from Chaplain Callie Roos (retd), 2 February 2014.

of circumventing the attrition rate at 1 Parachute Battalion and thereby qualifying the greatest possible number of paratroopers. In this they were successful.

The parachute course was held from 19 August to 6 September 1974 and 72 of the 80 qualified as paratroopers, including five members of the PF.⁵⁶ They returned to Potchefstroom wearing their new parachute wings (disdainfully referred to as “plastic wings” by many of the paratroopers at 1 Parachute Battalion⁵⁷), but without the coveted maroon berets. One of their platoon commanders was Lieutenant Hannes Venter, detached from 1 Reconnaissance Commando, and he provided them with advanced training.⁵⁸ During their first operational deployment in the Caprivi and while patrolling in Angola, two CF paratroopers who were attached to the company commented on the excellent quality and standard of the troops.⁵⁹

However, for reasons that could not be established, Army HQ suddenly abandoned the experiment and in February 1975 the whole company, minus their PF personnel, were transferred to 1 Parachute Battalion. Here they became C-Company, under command of Captain Chris le Roux.⁶⁰ The company was finally issued with maroon paratrooper berets, but continued to encounter stark hostility from the other paratroopers. Nevertheless, spurred by the animosity, they bettered the other companies when it came to fitness tests or the weekly cross-country run.⁶¹ But they spent most of their second year (1975) deployed on the Namibian/Angolan border. In time the company was augmented by paratroopers from other companies who had signed on for the extended national service and gradually the animosity subsided. During the last four months of their service before demobilising at the end of 1975, the men of C-Company participated in Operation SAVANNAH with distinction.⁶² Because of this, as well as their two years of continuous service and the unusually long total time spent on deployments, they probably had more combat experience than any other paratrooper company at that time.

56. Course Record Book, Parachute Training Centre, Course 111V.

57. P.J. Els, *We Conquer from Above: The History of 1 Parachute Battalion, 1961–1991* (Pretoria, PelsA Books, 2010), pp. 85 and 153.

58. E-mail, Chaplain Callie Roos (retd), 2 February 2014.

59. Interviews, Col Hannes Venter, Langebaan, Western Cape, 28 October 1993; Capt Tommie Lamprecht (retd), Pretoria, 7 July 1995. Also e-mail, WO1 Patrick Loftus (retd), 30 November 2015.

60. E-mail, Maj Gen Chris le Roux (retd), 8 February 2014; Interview, Col Leon Groenewald, Oudtshoorn, 1 April 1993.

61. E-mail, Chaplain Callie Roos, 3 February 2014.

62. Interview, Col Leon Groenewald, Oudtshoorn, 1 April 1993; E-mail, Chaplain Callie Roos (retd), 2 February 2014.

The second of these experimental companies came into being a year later. It was a Permanent Force parachute company, not composed of conscripts. After Operation SAVANNAH, 1 Parachute Battalion continued to qualify approximately one rifle company from each intake of conscripts. But the extended incursion into Angola and the increase in insurgency after the establishment of the MPLA as the government in that country, had made it clear that the war was escalating.⁶³ When Constand Viljoen was promoted to lieutenant general and appointed Chief of the Army in September 1976,⁶⁴ it seems he was determined to ensure that there were sufficient, immediately available paratroopers in the Army. One of the first actions he took as Chief of the Army, therefore, was to make a submission to the Chief of the SADF, recommending that 1 Parachute Battalion be systematically converted to a PF unit of regular soldiers, and that he be given authority to commence recruiting men for the first company. The request was met with uncharacteristic alacrity. Within a day, on 15 September 1976, it was approved by both the Chief of the SADF and the Minister of Defence.⁶⁵

On 1 December 1976, the Defence minister announced that a Permanent Force company was to be established at 1 Parachute Battalion.⁶⁶ The new PF company, like its predecessor from 3 SAI, became C-Company. Applicants for the new company had to be medically fit, between 17 and 23 years of age and with at least a Standard 8 certificate (tenth grade schooling).⁶⁷ The criteria were reminiscent of those for the short-lived Mobile Watches more than 15 years earlier. Prominent advertisements appeared in newspapers throughout the country and the scheme was advertised on radio. See Appendix 63. On 1 January 1977 the first group reported for training. They underwent the same training as the conscripts and those who successfully completed the selection phase and the parachute training phase qualified as paratroopers after five months.⁶⁸ They were presented with their wings by Brigadier Pik van Noorden, the Second World War airborne veteran.⁶⁹

But all the advertising did not elicit the overwhelming response that had been hoped for; neither were the right sort of people being attracted. Although sufficient young men

63. L. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War, 1966–1989* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2013), pp. 28–32.

64. I. Uys, *South African Military Who's Who, 1452–1992* (Germiston, Fortress Publishers, 1992), addendum.

65. DOD, Gp Verslae Kluis 87/40, Box 226, "SA Leër Verslag oor die Organisasie en Dienstaat van 1 Valskermataljon: C Kompanie", G/SD/3/6 (1 Valsk Bn), 14 September 1976.

66. "Staandemag valskermkompanie Gestig", *Byvoegsel tot Paratus*, August 1977, p. viii.

67. Advertisement that appeared in the major newspapers throughout the country during late 1976; Recruiting Brochure for 1 Para Bn, undated, but probably from 1976.

68. Interview, Cmdt Gert van Zyl, Nelspruit, 20 July 1993; E-mail, WO1 Sakkie Cornelissen (retd), 2 February 2014.

69. "Staandemag valskermkompanie Gestig", *Byvoegsel tot Paratus*, August 1977, p. viii.

were recruited to fill a company (approximately 120), the attrition rate, particularly during the selection phase, culled many of them. There were also a number of misfits who displayed anti-social behaviour. According to some of those who served in this company, before long some of the men had gone AWOL (absent without official leave), been sent to detention barracks (DB) for serious military transgressions and even been charged in civilian courts for various crimes, landing up in prison.⁷⁰ By the end of the selection and parachute courses, held from 25 April to 27 May 1977, only 25 PF riflemen were left.⁷¹

A second intake of PF recruits commenced their training in July 1977, but there were only about 35 of them and their results were even more dismal. Less than eight of them passed the selection phase. By the time they qualified as paratroopers towards the end of October, it was obvious that the PF company was a failure. It was disbanded and the troops were allocated to B-Company, one of the national service companies. Most of those who had qualified were good material and had the necessary academic background to apply for junior leader training. They were sent to the Infantry School in Oudtshoorn in January 1978, returning to 1 Parachute Battalion at the end of that year as second-lieutenants or corporals. Several of them went on to rise to the ranks of commandant (lieutenant colonel) or warrant officer in the airborne forces.⁷² There were thus some positive spin-offs from the otherwise disastrous attempt to raise a PF parachute company – as much a failure as the first PF company in the early 1960s.

This led to the third experimental company, which was to prove the greatest failure of the three. Introducing the debate on his defence vote in parliament on 17 April 1978, the Defence minister P.W. Botha, announced that 1 Parachute Battalion would be enlarged and that members of the South African Cape Corps would be trained as paratroopers.⁷³ The Cape Corps was one of the oldest yet most controversial units in the SADF, with its predecessors being formed under the Dutch colonialists as far back as the 17th century.⁷⁴ Its soldiers came from among the local “Coloured” community – descendents of the Khoi peoples (who were the original inhabitants of South Africa), the Malay slaves and those of mixed race. Over the years, the Cape Corps had experienced name changes, had fought magnificently during the

70. E-mail, WO1 Sakkie Cornelissen (ret'd), 2 February 2014; Interview, Cmdt S.A. Taljaard, 11 March 1992.

71. Course Record Book, Parachute Training Centre, Course PARA 7703.

72. E-mail, WO1 Sakkie Cornelissen (ret'd), 2 February 2014.

73. “Botha tells of Army boosts”, *Star*, 18 April 1978; “Plan for Combat School”, *Eastern Province Herald*, 18 April 1978.

74. I. Gleeson, *The Unknown Force: Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers through Two World Wars* (Rivonia, Ashanti, 1994), pp. 51–61.

First World War and suffered the insult of being denied bearing arms during the Second World War. The officers had almost always been white, but the soldiers and NCOs had been Coloureds. Conscription was restricted to whites, so the Cape Corps of the 1970s relied solely on volunteers. These were readily forthcoming. By then members of the Cape Corps were regarded as combat soldiers, were trained infantrymen and had seen action while deployed on operations on the Namibian border.⁷⁵

It seems that there was considerable enthusiasm among the soldiers of the Cape Corps at the prospect of undergoing parachute training. Their OC described it as “a natural progression in the training process of the all-volunteer corps”.⁷⁶ The strength of the corps at that time stood at about 1,800 and there was great hope that this might be the answer to 1 Parachute Battalion’s manpower woes.⁷⁷ But those who had made the decision had not taken the exclusivity of the paratrooper fraternity into consideration as they did in the case of the company from 3 SAI. In addition, there appears to have been no programme of preparing the paratroopers for this radical (as it would certainly have been viewed at the time) imposition on their jealously guarded status. There can be little doubt that there was strong racial prejudice among many of the parachute instructors towards the men of the Cape Corps. If they had felt threatened by the company from 3 SAI, they were now faced with what some would have regarded as a double threat from the outsiders imposed on them, whittling away both their military exclusivity and their exclusively white preserve. In all probability, they had decided in advance that these soldiers would not make the course.

Furthermore, there was no suitable preparation of the Cape Corps soldiers for the rigours of the two-week parachute selection course. Unlike the company from 3 SAI, the Cape Corps volunteers were expected to do the full selection. And unlike 3 SAI, there were no parachute instructors in the Cape Corps to give them some idea of what to expect in Bloemfontein. Consequently, the Cape Corps company arrived at 1 Parachute Battalion totally unprepared for what lay ahead.⁷⁸ The course was held from 11 September to 13 October 1978 with predictable results: more than half of the company fell off the rigorous selection phase in the first few days, unable to stand the relentless pace and constant, extreme physical exertion. Most of the rest failed the admission tests at the end of the two

75. L. Engelbrecht, “Fact File: 9 SA Infantry Battalion”, article posted on *Defence Web*, http://www.defenceweb.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6917&catid=74&Itemid=30

76. “Parabats: ‘Natural Step’ for Cape Corps”, *Argus*, 19 April 1978.

77. *Friend*, 24 April 1978.

78. E-mail, Col Leon Groenewald (ret'd), 4 February 2014.

weeks. Ultimately, only two qualified as paratroopers.⁷⁹ It had been an unmitigated and embarrassing failure and no further attempts were made to train the Cape Corps in parachuting.

Adding weight to the argument on the need for careful preparation prior to attempting the parachute selection course, a large group of young officer-students from the Military Academy arrived at 1 Parachute Battalion just one month later to undergo parachute training. But they too, had not been properly prepared for the selection. The majority also fell off within the first few days and eventually only eight of them qualified.⁸⁰

None of this, of course, solved the manpower problem of 1 Parachute Battalion. By then, as will be seen in the next section of this chapter, a fire force permanently based at Ondangwa in Ovamboland was considered crucial to the counter-insurgency war and the paratroopers were to provide it. It was regarded as necessary to rotate the companies responsible for this task approximately every three months to ensure that they did not become operationally blunted and fatigued. But there were simply not enough national service companies to maintain this throughout the year. CF companies from 2 Parachute Battalion (and after its formation in 1977 also 3 Parachute Battalion) were being mobilised to fill the gaps, but calling these citizen-soldiers up for 90-day camps year after year proved an increasing drain on the country's economy and another solution had to be found.⁸¹

It would appear that at the time, no one was even prepared to consider the idea of training black paratroopers for 1 Parachute Battalion. While it will be seen later in this thesis that there were a few blacks trained as paratroopers from 31 and 32 Battalions by 1980,⁸² they were small groups who returned to their units after qualifying. But meanwhile, the solution to 1 Parachute Battalion's manpower shortage was provided from the existing source of conscripts in 1978. In 1977 the Defence minister announced an extension of the initial period of national service from one to two years.⁸³

By 1978 1 Parachute Battalion was beginning to feel the benefits of this decision. With the length of conscription doubled, two intakes a year taking place (January and July) and

79. Course Record Book, Parachute Training Centre, Course PARA 7812.

80. Ibid. Course PARA 7817.

81. Ninety-day call-ups for the CF were instituted towards the end of Operation SAVANNAH in January 1976. See Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War, 1966–1989* (Gibraltar, Ashanti, 1989), pp. 56 and 61. They continued until the end of the war in 1989, as shown in an unpublished article by S. du Plessis, "The Paratroopers: Last SADF Combat Force to Withdraw from Namibia".

82. Course Photographs on the wall of the Parachute Training Hangar, 44 Para Regt; and "Their Aim is to Wear 'Wings'", *Star*, 18 June 1980.

83. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Box 47, 1 Para Bn/102/12, "Allocation of NSM for Initial Training" 19 July 1977– 30 December 1982, Encl. 5, OC OFS Comd to Units, 25 October 1977.

the training curriculum lasting approximately nine months, the paratroopers found they were able to recruit two companies from each intake. By 1980 the unit had grown to eight rifle companies and at times was able to field as many as six of them simultaneously on operations.⁸⁴ There does not appear to have been any research done on why there was an increase in the numbers of volunteers for parachute training from each intake after the introduction of two years' conscription. Certainly, the number being called up did not increase. It is possible that faced with two years of compulsory military training, more young white men simply felt that they would rather use the opportunity to achieve something than allowing it to become time wasted, and that they therefore volunteered to become one of the elite. Whatever the reasons, by 1980 there was no longer any shortage of paratroopers immediately available for operational deployment.⁸⁵

7.5 FIRE FORCE: TACTICAL ZENITH

It is now necessary to examine the origins of fire force in the SADF. This became the ongoing airborne application that the South African paratroopers would be involved in from the time of the Angolan Civil War of 1975–1976 until the end of the remaining 13 years of conflict on the Namibian/Angolan border. A purely tactical application, significantly influenced by the Rhodesian concept, it came to dominate the thinking of most SADF paratrooper officers.⁸⁶

7.5.1. Early Efforts at Fire Force in the Wake of the Angolan Civil War

The withdrawal of the Portuguese from Angola in 1975, saw the three rival movements that had opposed them in the 13-year struggle now fighting one another to claim the spoils of victory.⁸⁷ South Africa had its own reasons for becoming embroiled in this conflict and these do not form part of this thesis.⁸⁸ Suffice to say that the secret and ill-advised military

84. 44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure, "A Concise History of the South African Parachute Forces" (As at 1 September 1991), Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1.

85. DOD, 1 Para Bn: Unit History File/Annual Historical Report (Jaarlikse Geskiedkundige Verslag) for 1980. Although numbers were constantly changing, with eight companies the battalion had an average strength that exceeded 1,000. This was the largest that the unit would become.

86. The prominence given to fire force training by 1 Para Bn is apparent from an interview in 1985 with a senior officer. See L.J. van Wyk, "Die Geskiedenis van 1 Valskermbataljon, 1961–1984, MA dissertation, UOFS, 1986, p. 81. There was also considerable publicity given to this role by the paratroops. See P. Coetzee and T. Fourie, "They Spell Death to the Terrorists", *Paratus*, August 1977; and Anon., "Roep die 'Bats'!", *Paratus*, January 1979.

87. There is an extensive historiography on the demise of the Portuguese empire and the independence of Angola. See, for example, T.G. Weiss and J.G. Blight (eds), *The Suffering Grass: Superpowers and Regional Conflict in Southern Africa and the Caribbean* (Boulder CO, Lynne Rienner, 1992); and D. Birmingham, *Portugal and Africa* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 1999).

88. Published accounts of Op SAVANNAH, as it was known by the SADF and Op CARLOTA, as it was called by the Cubans, include Spies, *Operasie Savannah*; S. du Preez, *Die Avontuur in Angola: Die Verhaal van Suid-*

adventure to intervene in the Angolan Civil War had major repercussions for the SADF, particularly regarding the development of armament and the expansion and modernisation of the military as a result of lessons learnt. For the paratroopers, it saw the fire force concept take firm shape.

However, with the escalation of the insurgency on the northern border of Namibia in 1974 there had been some helicopter operations by the SADF even before the outbreak of the Angolan Civil War. Operation SAUSAGE in August 1975 had involved five Super Frelon helicopters lifting 25 Bushmen soldiers (the term San is now considered more acceptable) and two unarmed Alouettes each carrying three soldiers, thus transporting a total of 132, supported by three Alouette gunships.⁸⁹ This airborne assault on a SWAPO base in south-east Angola was carried out with the tacit approval of the Portuguese. It was a surprisingly big and innovative helicopter action for the time and formed part of an even bigger operation by ground forces.⁹⁰

The temporary shift in focus by the SADF away from the insurgency conflict over the period September 1975 to about March 1976 because of the participation in the Angolan Civil War, almost left a vacuum in southern Angola. The SADF's unsuccessful attempt at preventing the Marxist MPLA organisation from becoming established as the new government in the country was aimed at avoiding a safe haven for SWAPO in Angola, from where they could launch insurgent attacks into Namibia. But the irony was that because of this deflection of attention by the SADF, southern Angola was, to some extent left open for SWAPO to move in. According to "Ho Chi Min" Namhlo, who became the Chief of Staff of PLAN, "while South Africa was striking deep into Angola, PLAN was able to operate almost with impunity in 'shallow Angola' – the area near the border."⁹¹

However, this was not entirely true. The SADF did not cease all counter-insurgency operations while the Angolan Civil War was raging. A small SADF tactical HQ was established at Pereira d'Eça (later renamed Ongiva), a little Portuguese town about 35km from the

Afrika se Soldate in Angola, 1975–1976 (Pretoria, J.L. van Schaik, 1989); P. Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, Pretoria* (Alberton, Galago, 2003).

89. The SAAF acquired the first of 16 French Super Frelon SA-321L helicopters in 1967. Designed to lift 27 troops, this was normally only possible at sea level. However, the San soldiers were small and light, so they could possibly have lifted 25 without much equipment at the altitude of SE Angola. See Potgieter and Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the SAAF*, p. 132; and J.W.R., Taylor (ed.), *Jane's All The World's Aircraft, 1976–77* (London, Macdonald & Janes, 1976), p. 40.

90. DOD, OD 1968 Gp, Box 109, Top Secret "Geschiedenis: 31 Bn", Annex to Bn Diary, Transcript: "History of 31 Bn told by Maj Upton"; Box 84, Top Secret War Diary, 1 Air Comp., Rundu, 1975, 25–28 August 1975, and Top Secret War Diary, 1 MA, Vol 9, 1–30 September 1975, Report, Op SAUSAGE, 29 August 1975.

91. S. Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means: SWAPO's Liberation War", in Leys and Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 25.

border (40km by road). From there, an attempt was made to contain SWAPO's efforts to infiltrate into Namibia and to clear them from the south of Angola. C-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion (the same company that had originally come from 3 SAI), having participated in the capture of the town a few months earlier, formed part of the force that was deployed under this tactical HQ. It conducted operations in the shallow cross-border area to the east of the town.⁹²

During the period November/December 1975, C-Company carried out at least three helicopter assault operations. Using a single Super Frelon helicopter (capable of transporting 17 troops at that high altitude) and two Alouette gunships with 20mm cannons, SWAPO bases that had been identified by UNITA (SWAPO's former ally) were attacked. The actions were controlled from the air, with the Army commander orbiting above the troops in one of the gunships. All three operations were highly successful and succeeded in destroying the bases and killing or capturing the insurgents. This was in no small measure due to the accurate intelligence provided by the UNITA informers. During one of these operations, Commandant Ewald Olckers became the first OC 1 Parachute Battalion to command his men in combat. These operations contained the organisational basis for a fire force.⁹³

Nevertheless, by the time of the SADF's withdrawal from Angola at the end of Operation SAVANNAH in March 1976, SWAPO had intensified the activities of its PLAN insurgents and the focal point of its campaign had moved away from the Caprivi to the now more easily accessible and more important Ovamboland. With an MPLA government in Luanda, SWAPO had at its disposal what it desperately needed to prosecute its armed struggle: a sympathetic host country with a border contiguous to the most densely populated part of Namibia. In the chaotic conditions that prevailed in Angola over this period, SWAPO was able to establish bases in the south of that country and to begin penetrating northern Namibia by infiltrating many small groups of armed insurgents. Early in 1976, as part of the efforts to counter this growing threat, the SADF's newly-formed 2 Military Area (2MA), headquartered in Oshakati, established at the large tarmac military airfield that had been built at Ondangwa, an airborne Reaction Force or Mobile Reserve (the terms favoured by the SADF senior officers, though the paratroopers always used the Rhodesian term "fire force"). Composed of paratroopers, the force used helicopters for

92. Interview, Col Jos Rabie, Pretoria, 19 November 1993.

93. Interview, Col Leon Groenewald, Oudtshoorn, 1 April 1993 and e-mail, 11 December 2013; Interview, Chaplain Callie Roos, Pretoria, 18 July 1990.

their deployments.⁹⁴ This became a permanent feature of the war. It was a natural continuation of the earlier small permanent parachute capability that had been established at Rundu after the first operational parachute drops in 1974.

The new helicopter-borne force was manned throughout its 13-year existence by the paratroopers and the first soldiers to be given this task were the members of the first company of CF paratroopers to be called up for a period of 90 days. They were commanded by the Officer Commanding 2 Parachute Battalion, Commandant Ian Ritchie.⁹⁵ They were accommodated in tents beside the runway at Ondangwa. Initially told that they were to be on standby to provide reinforcements, and would be inserted by parachute or helicopter into Angola should any of the withdrawing South African battle groups run into trouble, their task changed to being ready to fly out to deal with any SWAPO insurgents that were identified inside Namibia. They rehearsed the technique as best they knew how, but were never called out.⁹⁶

In an interview Ritchie recalled that at Ondangwa he had at his disposal two Alouette gunships and three Pumas. But there were no tested tactics for the employment of his force and there was no written doctrine to guide him or provide a basis for appropriate training curricula. The concept at Ondangwa was based on reaction, with no provision made for hunting and finding the insurgents, as was the case in Rhodesia. Certainly, the SAAF helicopter pilots who had deployed in Rhodesia had experience of fire force, but it was the Rhodesian Army commander who controlled the operation and in this early stage of the war the CF Army paratrooper officers lacked the experience of their Air Force helicopter counterparts.⁹⁷

This situation did improve as the South Africans gained experience, and the officer who took over the role from Ritchie, Captain Lukas Grundlingh of B-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion, was a regular soldier who had undergone training at the Rhodesian School of Infantry. He was a competent and aggressive fire force commander who worked hard to establish and hone the technique. During Grundlingh's tenure as fire force commander, Constand Viljoen, now a major general, was the General Officer Commanding 101 Task

94. Citation, Cmdt Ian Ritchie to GOC 1 SA Corps, 10 May 1977; telephone interview, Cmdt Ian Ritchie (ret'd), 9 January 1992.

95. Interview, Cmdt Ian Ritchie (ret'd), Johannesburg, 5 February 1992.

96. Telephone interviews, Cmdt Gerrie Steyn (ret'd), 8 January 1992; Cmdt Ian Ritchie (ret'd), 9 January 1992.

97. A.J. Venter, *Gunship Ace: The Wars of Neall Ellis, Helicopter Pilot and Mercenary* (Pretoria, Protea Book House, 2012), pp. 30–45. The experiences of helicopter pilot Neall Ellis clearly illustrate the greater exposure to fire force that the helicopter crews had compared to their Army counterparts.

Force, the headquarters that had been established over the forces used during Operation SAVANNAH. This HQ remained in existence for some time afterwards, with Viljoen running the operations along the northern Namibian border.⁹⁸ This was fortunate for Grundlingh and his paratroopers, because Viljoen was totally convinced of the value of the fire force concept.⁹⁹

During May 1976, the dynamic Viljoen initiated a high-density operation in Ovamboland in a successful attempt to flush out SWAPO insurgents who had managed to infiltrate. With his tactical HQ for the operation located at Ondangwa airfield, right next to the fire force base, Viljoen ensured that the paratroopers were called out at every possible opportunity. There were many such opportunities, because there were many contacts made with insurgent bands. On 30 May 1976 during a particularly heavy fire force contact about five kilometres south of the border cutline¹⁰⁰ and some 40km east of Eenhana, both Alouette helicopters, one carrying Grundlingh and the other carrying his second-in-command, Lieutenant David Blaauw, received multiple hits from insurgent small arms fire, compelling one of them to make a forced landing on its way back to Ondangwa.¹⁰¹ Blaauw recalled that during this period the paratroopers had to give General Viljoen a daily de-briefing on their operations and make suggestions for the organisation and application of the fire force. As a direct result of these de-briefings, the conventional organisation of the parachute companies was altered for fire force duties, so that they were tailored to fit into the available aircraft.¹⁰²

After the disbandment of 101 Task Force later that year, the SADF's campaign in Ovamboland was conducted by 2MA. But it appears that there were few of the subsequent area commanders who had a paratrooper background and even fewer who were convinced of the value of fire force as an instrument of tactical manoeuvre.¹⁰³ Therefore, the technique did not reach the same high level of effectiveness in Ovamboland that the Rhodesians achieved. However, there were also other factors that played a part.

98. Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, p. 277.

99. Diary of Maj L.W. Gerber for period 15 May – 5 August 1976. Viljoen's belief in the concept is apparent from Gerber's encounters with him, described in his diary.

100. "Cutline" refers to a fire break forming a perfectly straight line through the otherwise trackless bush. Cutlines were often used as roads. Such a fire break, cleared of all bush, ran the length of the Angolan/Namibian border from the Cunene River to the Kavango River; a distance of some 400km of flat, featureless, bush-covered terrain.

101. Tel. interview, Cmdt D.I. Blaauw, 19 February 1992; Diary, Maj L.W. Gerber, 15 May–5 August 1976.

102. Tel. interview, Cmdt D.I. Blaauw, 19 February 1992.

103. Top Secret Trg Report, Jan 78 Intake, D Coy 1 Para Bn, 1 VALSK BN/308/3/1, 31 December 1979, Appx E: Operational Debriefing Report, D-Coy, 1 Para Bn, 28 December 1978 –29 April 1979.

For one thing, the Rhodesians generally only employed their regular Army troops and leaders from the Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI) or the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) to man their three permanent fire forces, rotating commandos/companies so that they all received equal exposure.¹⁰⁴ Towards the end of the Rhodesian campaign, the number of fire forces was increased to six to cope with the intensified level of insurgency, and one of these was partially manned by part-time soldiers of the Rhodesia Regiment (RR), due to the manpower shortage.¹⁰⁵ The SADF, in contrast, used both the national service 1 Parachute Battalion with its regular officers and NCOs and the part-time CF 2 Parachute Battalion (and after it was established, also the CF 3 Parachute Battalion). National service companies from 1 Parachute Battalion usually did a tour of four months as the resident fire force at Ondangwa,¹⁰⁶ while CF companies did a shorter stint of just over two months because retraining and travelling time took up some of their 90 days.¹⁰⁷ So whereas the Rhodesians were deploying for six-week stints up to five times a year,¹⁰⁸ the South African CF soldiers were rarely deployed more than once a year and almost never comprised exactly the same group of soldiers or served under the same commanders for subsequent deployments. This absence of continuity meant that the level of experience and training specifically for fire force-type operations varied, depending on the company doing duty. It also meant that the fitness level of the soldiers varied, because it was impossible for a part-time unit to maintain the same level of fitness as a full-time unit composed of much younger soldiers.

Secondly, the terrain in Ovamboland was distinctly different from that in eastern Rhodesia. There were no rocky koppies or *gommas* that could be utilised by OPs in

104. Interview, Cmdt Barry Gettliffe (ret'd), Irene, 22 June 1995. Gettliffe served in the RAR and commanded fire force operations prior to joining the SADF.

105. Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky*, p. 95.

106. Interviews, Cmdt Johan Blaauw, Bloemfontein, 20 July 1990; Col Leon Groenewald, Oudtshoorn, 1 April 1993; Col Vion Hattingh, East London, 26 July 2013; Col J.R. Hills, Tempe, 24 April 1990; Cmdt Piet Nel, Port Elizabeth, 14 October 1991; and Col A.J. "Pale" van der Walt, Centurion, 5 July 1994.

107. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Rack 3, Conf. 1 VALSK BN/308/3 "Opleidingsverslag: Julie 1976 Inname: B Kompanie, 1 Valskermbataljon", 30 June 1977, where B-Coy, 1 Para Bn was deployed on fire force duties from 23 February to 25 June 1977 (123 days); Top Secret Trg Report, Jan. 1978 Intake, D Coy 1 Para Bn, 1 VALSK BN/308/3/1, 31 December 1979, Appx E: Operational Debriefing Report, D-Coy, 1 Para Bn, 28 December 1978-29 April 1979, where D-Coy, 1 Para Bn was deployed from 28 December 1978 to 29 April 1979 (also 123 days). Maj L.W. Gerber, Diary for period 15 May to 5 August 1976 shows that B-Coy, 2 Para Bn (CF) was called up for the period 13 May to 5 August 1976 (85 days), but was only actively deployed from 24 May to 30 July 1976 (68 days).

108. C. Cocks, *Fireforce: One Man's War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Johannesburg, 30° South Publishers, 2006), p. 110.

Ovamboland – there was just an endless, flat, sandy, bush-covered plain.¹⁰⁹ This gave those detractors of the fire force concept their greatest lever to oppose it: an absence of accurate intelligence that could pinpoint the location of insurgents on the ground meant that the fire force simply could not be employed pro-actively and was therefore restricted to being a Reaction Force – the term favoured by the SADF hierarchy.¹¹⁰ This, however, was hardly valid, because there were other ways of securing the necessary intelligence than simply relying on OPs. These are addressed later in this thesis.

But lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the Rhodesians adopted a mobile, manoeuvrist approach to the siting of their fire forces, moving them readily if the situation demanded it, so that they would be located close to where the action was likely to be. They grasped the initiative by searching for or channelling the insurgents so that they could be pre-empted and trapped by the fire force.¹¹¹ The SADF located its single permanent Reaction Force at the SAAF base next to the Ondangwa airfield and rarely moved it from there. The very name Reaction Force betrayed the thinking of the HQ of 2MA at Oshakati: the initiative was relinquished to the insurgents.¹¹² Although there were times, when the insurgents penetrated through Ovamboland into the “white farmlands” south of the veterinary red line, that the Reaction Force was moved down to the Tsumeb/Otavi area, but these were infrequent.¹¹³

The first such occasion was in June 1976 during the third parachute company’s tour of duty as a fire force. B-Company, 2 Parachute Battalion under command of Major Lewis Gerber achieved some successes in the area as a fire force. But often the paratroopers at Ondangwa had to be content with carrying out what were called Eagle Operations, in which the fire force would swoop unexpectedly on a suspect kraal or village in their helicopters to carry out a search for insurgents that might be holed up there. Occasionally successful,

109. The flatness of the terrain can be gauged from the 1:50 000 topographical series of maps of the area, particularly those numbered 1716 and 1816, where a map will often not show a single contour line. See *Map Catalogue* (Pretoria, Government Printer).

110. Confidential Operational Debriefing Report for D-Coy, 1 Para Bn for period 28 December 1978 to 29 April 1979 in 2 MA, SWA by Capt D.I. Blaauw, LWM.

111. The highly mobile approach that the Rhodesians adopted for their fire forces is well documented in the works about the technique cited earlier in this and the previous chapter.

112. The term “Mobile Reserve” was also applied to the fire force by 2MA. On this see DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Rack 3, Conf. 1 VALSK BN/308/3 “Opleidingsverslag, Julie 1976 Inname, B Komp, 1 Valsk Bn”, Appendix T: “Voorgestelde Mobiele Reserwe Konsep”, 30 June 1977.

113. Diaries, Maj L.W. Gerber, 15 May–5 August 1976; Capt M. Alexander, 27 March–21 April 1979; and Maj M. Alexander, 7 April–13 May 1982.

these operations more often than not yielded no positive results.¹¹⁴ This was not surprising, because these operations were based more on exasperation than on accurate intelligence.

7.5.2. SADF Paratroopers on Attachment to Rhodesian Fire Forces

At 1 Parachute Battalion, there was considerable concern and frustration about the reluctance of non-paratrooper commanders in the operational area to use the fire force correctly. There was also an awareness of shortcomings in their own abilities among the paratrooper company commanders because they were not gaining sufficient experience in the technique.¹¹⁵ A growing consciousness of the need to perfect fire force was felt as the respective company commanders rotated through tours of operational duty in this role and compared notes on their return. There was also a need to train the troops effectively for what they would be doing in the operational area.¹¹⁶ Sometimes a PF company commander would pen some guidelines for the CF company commander who would be relieving him,¹¹⁷ but often the experience gained during a tour of duty would simply be lost to the successors, despite SOPs being drawn up.¹¹⁸ Accordingly, in 1977 the Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion, Commandant Ewald Olckers, was given permission to attach two of his officers to the Rhodesian Army for a period of six weeks from 7 September to 18 October 1977 to study the fire force technique. Those selected were Major Anton van Graan, commanding A-Company, and Captain Fred Burger, commanding the Parachute Training Wing.¹¹⁹

Van Graan (who later commanded 1 Parachute Battalion) was attached to the fire force at Chiredzi in the south-east of Rhodesia for four weeks. During this time he was dealt into a stick as an ordinary rifleman with three Rhodesian soldiers. He participated in seven operations, in four of which he was dropped by parachute, twice inside Mozambique. In the other three he was deployed by helicopter. He also spent a week with a company that was

114. Diary, Maj L.W. Gerber, 15 May–5 August 1976.

115. Confidential Operational Debriefing Report for D-Coy, 1 Para Bn, 28 December 1978–29 April 1979, 2MA, SWA by Capt D.I. Blaauw, LWM.

116. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Rack 3, Conf. 1 VALSK BN/308/3 “Opleidingsverslag, Julie 1976 Inname, B Komp, 1 Valskn Bn”, Appendix T: “Voorgestelde Mobiele Reserwe Konsep”, 30 June 1977 and “Opleidingsverslag: Julie 1977 Inname, B Komp, 1 Valsk Bn”, Appendix AA: “Operational Report of B Coy, 1 Para Bn” for period 11 November 1978 to 29 December 1978 in 2MA, SWA, 24 December 1978.

117. Maj André Bestbier, OC A-Coy, 1 Para Bn to Capt Jeremy Wiley, OC D-Coy, 2 Para Bn, 4 November 1976.

118. Unit Special Operation Order No 1/76 by Officer Commanding 2 Parachute Battalion, “Fire Force: Standing Operational Procedures”, File ref 2 PARA BN/G/OPS/3/3, 22 October 1976.

119. DOD, Secret Report, 1 VALSK BN/309/1 “Afgedeelde Operasionele Diens Rhodesiese Leër: Maj A.L. van Graan”, 30 December 1977; Interviews, Brig (later Maj Gen) Anton van Graan, Pretoria, 26 February 1991, and Col Fred Burger, Pretoria, 30 June 1995.

deploying OPs in the Honde Valley, and did OP work with them. Burger spent a week at the Parachute Training School at New Sarum in Salisbury, looking at the operational training methods being used by the Rhodesians, and was then attached to fire forces at Grand Reefs and Mtoko. He too, was dealt into sticks with Rhodesians and participated in three significant contacts with insurgents, two when deployed by helicopter and one by parachute.¹²⁰

Much was learnt from this operational visit and a number of techniques were incorporated into the South African concept and training as a result. However, there was considerable criticism levelled at the Rhodesians in Van Graan's report for numerous shortcomings, including bad battle discipline and poor shooting (Van Graan was an international shottist who set extremely high standards for shooting by the paratroopers). Burger too, found the Rhodesians very lax in their safety standards for parachuting.¹²¹

It was not long before the SADF paratroopers received far greater exposure to the Rhodesian war and the fire force concept. In the meantime, the fire force (as it was called by the paratroopers and pilots who manned it) or Reaction Force/Mobile Reserve (as it was variously called by others in the SADF) continued to struggle along at Ondangwa, with the HQ at Sector 10 (as 2MA had been renamed in 1979¹²²), under which it fell showing no interest in what was happening in Rhodesia. There was a general feeling among both commanders and staff officers at the headquarters that fire force could not work in Ovamboland. The result was that the paratroopers were frequently used for all sorts of other tasks and spent long periods of inactivity in the base at Ondangwa. This led to considerable frustration among the more operationally-minded parachute commanders and their attempts to sell their ideas to the Sector HQ sometimes met with harsh animosity.¹²³

Yet ironically, as the Rhodesian war drew to a close, the South African paratroopers became heavily immersed in the application of the fire force concept in that country. After a referendum among Rhodesia's whites in January 1979, followed by a poll in April resulting in the election of the first black prime minister, Bishop Abel Muzerewa of the United African

120. DOD, Secret Report, 1 VALSK BN/309/1 "Afgedeelde Operasionele Diens Rhodesiese Leër: Maj A.L. van Graan", 30 December 1977.

121. Ibid.; Interview, Col Fred Burger, Pretoria, 30 June 1995.

122. H.-R. Heitman, *Modern African Wars (3) South-West Africa* (Oxford, Osprey, 1991), p. 14.

123. Operational Debriefing Report for D-Company, 1 Para Bn, 28 December 1978–29 April 1979, where Capt D.I. Blaauw pleads vainly for 32 Bn troops to be used in the way the Rhodesians used the Selous Scouts to identify locations of insurgents for the fire force to attack them. See also diary of Lt M. Alexander, OC B-Coy, 1 Para Bn, 5 December 1978, where Lt Piet Nel, Acting OC A-Coy, 1 Para Bn is recorded as being virtually thrown out of the HQ for making suggestions on the employment of the paratroopers.

National Council (UANC), the country adopted a clumsy compromise name: Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. The two liberation movements spurned this development, and their armed wings, the Zimbabwe National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) simply intensified the war. Over the previous few years the shooting down of two civilian Air Rhodesia Viscount aircraft by ZIPRA with large-scale loss of life, the flooding of the countryside with insurgents who waged an ever-growing terror-campaign, sabotage in the cities, emigration by many whites, the boycotting of conscription and a general sagging of morale among the war-weary remaining whites, all signified that Rhodesia was in its death throes.¹²⁴ Despite this, the South African government, under its new prime minister, P.W. Botha, entertained hopes of a workable relationship with an internationally recognised Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. On 23 March 1979, it signed a Total National Strategy agreement with the transitional government of Zimbabwe/Rhodesia. This confirmed a joint "execution of the southern Africa strategy". It ensured that South Africa's security perimeter was on the Zambezi, secured the exclusion of ANC forward bases and legitimised South African military involvement with the Rhodesian security forces.¹²⁵ This agreement signalled the participation by South African paratroopers in the war in Rhodesia.

7.5.3. SADF Paratroopers Deploy Fire Forces into Rhodesia

The Rhodesians were registering impressive figures of "kills" achieved by their fire forces. But the numbers of insurgents they faced were not diminishing. Indeed, the insurgents were gaining ground, increasing their support among the local indigenous people. It had become necessary to employ fire forces in many parts of the country because the insurgents had infiltrated throughout the rural areas and were now virtually swarming across the country. The external attacks by the Rhodesians on insurgent camps were not stemming the tide. In short, the Rhodesians were losing their war.¹²⁶

On 10 September 1979 the Lancaster House conference on Rhodesia began. It dragged on until just before Christmas. But while the politicians talked, the generals launched numerous raids of an almost conventional nature into neighbouring states. Their

124. Moorcraft and McLaughlin, *Chimurenga!*, pp. 205–208. There is a copious historiography of the Muzerewa era. See for example, M. Brecher and J. Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 102–117; M. Preston, *Ending Civil War: Rhodesia and Lebanon in Perspective* (London, I.B. Taurus, 2004); and H. Wiseman and A.M. Taylor, *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe: The Politics of Transition* (New York, Pergamon Press, 1981).

125. S. Onslow, "The Rhodesia/Zimbabwe Conflict 1974–1980", in S. Onslow and A-M. van Wyk (eds), *Southern Africa in the Cold War, Post-1974* (Washington, Woodrow Wilson Int. Center for Scholars, 2013), p. 173.

126. E. Yorke, "'One-Sided COIN': A Politico-Military Study of the Rhodesian Bush War, 1966–80", in G.Fremont-Barnes (ed.): *A History of Counterinsurgency*, Vol. 1, pp. 248-251.

targets were ZANLA and ZIPRA bases, and their aim was to better the Rhodesian position at the talks.¹²⁷ But the Rhodesian Armed Forces were in trouble: they were short of manpower, were waging a war across their borders as well as inside their country and were stretched beyond their limit. The only country they could appeal to for help was South Africa – the country that had used Rhodesia in its efforts to find black friends in the rest of Africa and that had not hesitated to turn the screws onto Rhodesia in the past. But now South Africa was increasingly alarmed at the developments to the north and the conflict that appeared to be getting completely out of hand was posing a threat much closer than the one in faraway Namibia. During the April 1979 elections in Rhodesia, the SADF had deployed about 40 officers inside that country, all surreptitiously wearing Rhodesian camouflage uniforms, and they were attached to various headquarters and units for about a month. Two of them were from 1 Parachute Battalion: Major Jos Rabie and Captain Johan Blaauw.¹²⁸

During the course of 1979 the SADF began to deploy troops openly on both sides of Beit Bridge, the road and rail link between the two countries across the Limpopo River. That much was admitted to by the South African government, but it insisted that its actions were merely aimed at protecting the vital piece of South African infrastructure that spanned the border.¹²⁹ In fact, the South African Army involvement was far greater, and during the latter half of the year it took on a distinctively offensive character.

The next chapters describe how the SADF had undergone significant expansion the previous year, including the establishment of a parachute brigade. Colonel Jan Breytenbach was appointed as the second-in-command of the new 44 Parachute Brigade (the commander was Brigadier M.J. du Plessis) and the SO1 Operations was the newly promoted Commandant Anton van Graan, who the year before had been deployed with a fire force in Rhodesia. The new brigade was responsible for the continued training and ultimately the employment of the two Citizen Force parachute battalions.¹³⁰

Breytenbach and Van Graan called up one CF company at a time and conducted much of their training in the area of Gumbu Mine and the Madimbo airfield along the southern bank of the border with Rhodesia. This area, known as the Madimbo Corridor, was heavily wooded and included marshes, rocky koppies and the Limpopo River, forming a corridor approximately 50km long and an average of 6km wide between Rhodesia and the

127. Moorcraft and McLaughlin, *Chimurenga!*, pp. 210–219.

128. Interview, Col Jos Rabie, Pretoria, 19 November 1993.

129. Moorcraft and McLaughlin, *Chimurenga!*, p. 168.

130. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Annual Historical Report for 1979, 44 Parachute Brigade, DD929.

black homeland of Venda. The Kruger National Park lay to the east and white farmlands to the west. The area, with its lush vegetation, had been cleared of human habitation, so it had an abundance of game, including the big five, which roamed freely between Rhodesia and South Africa, both in and outside the borders of Kruger National Park. It was an ideal counter-insurgency training ground for the military, under whose jurisdiction it fell. Breytenbach, with his extensive network of acquaintances among the Rhodesians, made unofficial contact with them and agitated for his paratroopers to participate in their war. Constand Viljoen, the Army Chief, quickly put a stop to this, but Breytenbach was encouraged to train the paratroopers in the Rhodesian fire force technique. Van Graan, with his exposure to the Rhodesians, was the right man for the job. He set about compiling a manual on fire force operations, and a Paradak and several helicopters were sent to Madimbo for this training. A total of four CF companies were trained in this way, spending an initial period in Bloemfontein before being parachuted into the Limpopo Valley and honing their fire force drills with the use of the helicopters.¹³¹

Throughout that year, the remote airfield in the thick bush at Madimbo was tarred and extended so that it could accommodate C-130 Hercules aircraft, and a transit tent camp was established there. On 23 July 1979, Northern Transvaal Command, under whose military jurisdiction the border with Zimbabwe fell, was authorised by South African Army HQ to carry out a combined operation with the Rhodesians inside Rhodesia with the objective of preventing insurgents from crossing into South African territory. The fire force technique was to be exercised. It was a five-day operation, code-named DITSEM and involved a company from 3 Parachute Battalion, two sticks of Rhodesian paratroopers and various specialists such as trackers and signallers, as well as aircraft provided by the South African Air Force. The operation was conducted in the area north of the Madimbo Corridor. This was the very first recorded combined operation between the SA Army and the Rhodesians inside Rhodesia (the special forces at the time fell directly under the command of the Chief of the SADF, so were not considered Army troops) and it took place from 23 to 27 July 1979. It was clearly an airborne operation, but unfortunately no record could be found which gives details about the operation or its results. All that is clear is that it did indeed take place.¹³²

131. Interview, Brig A.L. van Graan, Oudtshoorn, 3 September 1992; Training Programme "44 Valskerbrigade Oefening GUMBU VIER vir A Komp, 3 Valsk Bn", October 1979.

132. DOD, 44 Para Bde (1), Box 190, Top Secret File 309/1/2 Vol. 1, Encl 3, 23 July 1979.

Just over a month later the first South African fire force deployed inside Rhodesia.¹³³ Known as Operation BOWLER by the South Africans and Operation BALLAST by the Rhodesians, the deployment of SADF fire forces in Rhodesia continued for six months. According to the Operational Instruction issued by Chief of the SADF the purpose of the operation was to provide limited, under-cover, offensive operations of short duration in the south-east of Rhodesia in support of the Rhodesian security forces. These operations would initially be conducted inside Rhodesia up to a distance of approximately 100km from the South African/Rhodesian and the Mozambican/Rhodesian borders,¹³⁴ but by early October Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen, Chief of the Army, had managed to gain permission to extend this to 200km.¹³⁵ See Appendix 64 for a map of SADF area of operations in Rhodesia. The operation took place in the greatest secrecy, because the South African government vigorously denied any involvement in the Rhodesian war.

D-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion, comprising national service paratroopers, reported to Madimbo Airfield on 7 September 1979. Here they underwent intensive training by Rhodesian officers and NCOs, learning the fire force technique and the intricacies of the Rhodesian radio procedures.¹³⁶ They were issued with Rhodesian uniforms to deploy, ostensibly as Rhodesians. Earlier that year the paratroopers had been issued with the new 5.56mm R4 assault rifle, based on the design of the Israeli Galil, but now they had to be re-issued with their folding-stock 7.62mm R1 rifles (the Belgian FN), because the Rhodesians used the FN. The South African soldiers had their money exchanged for Rhodesian dollars and all the vehicles that accompanied them were of the types used by the Rhodesian forces, with Rhodesian military registration numbers replacing the South African ones. The vehicles were painted in Rhodesian camouflage livery. With their supporting elements, the South African force that crossed the border to commence offensive operations on 19 September 1979 numbered some 25 Permanent force officers and NCOs and 130 national servicemen.¹³⁷ They remained in Rhodesia until 15 October 1979,¹³⁸ and the pattern of their deployment was to be repeated by the companies that came after them. The fire force was

133. *Ibid.*, Encls 4, 29 August 1979, and 5, 5 September 1979.

134. DOD, HS OPS (5), Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol. 1, "BOWLER/STORING", Encl. 3, 2 September 1979.

135. *Ibid.*, Encls 33, 4 October 1979 and 34, 5 October 1979.

136. Telephonic interview, Cmdt D.I. Blaauw, 19 February 1992; Interview, Col A.J. van der Walt, Centurion, 5 July 1994.

137. DOD, HS OPS (5), Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol. 1, "BOWLER/STORING", Encls 2, 31 August 1979, and 9, 19 September 1979.

138. Top Secret Training Report, January 1978 Intake, D-Coy, 1 Para Bn, Appendix G, Ref. 1 VALSK BN/308/1, 31 December 1979.

what the Rhodesians described as a Jumbo Fire Force because it was significantly bigger than those usually deployed in their country.¹³⁹

D-Company had at its disposal three (later four) Puma helicopters, three Alouettes (two gunships and the third a command helicopter), one Paradak and one Cessna light aircraft, all supplied by the SAAF.¹⁴⁰ There was also a Rhodesian Lynx aircraft for close air support. In theory at least, it gave them the capacity to place more than 60 troops on the ground with one lift. The aircraft were based at Wanezi, a dirt airstrip near Chiredzi, not far from the Gona-re-Zhou Game Reserve, from where the fire force operated. The company of paratroopers commenced their tour of duty with a significant success. They had barely arrived when they received their first call-out.¹⁴¹ The action lasted four hours and 20 minutes and resulted in the killing and capturing of some 30 insurgents.¹⁴² A signal was sent from the Chief of the SADF reporting the action to the prime minister.¹⁴³ A subsequent action against a far smaller group of ZIPRA insurgents showed them to be better trained and more determined than those from ZANLA.¹⁴⁴

The South African paratroopers, with their substantially better air assets, were quick to master the fire force technique, carrying out almost daily operations by helicopter and dropping paratroopers from the Dakota when necessary. Their success rate was high, and they suffered no combat casualties during their month-long deployment. Falling as they did under the operational command of the Rhodesian Army's 4 Brigade based at Fort Victoria (subsequently Masvingo), they were soon visited by the brigade commander, who was accompanied by Lieutenant General Peter Walls, the Rhodesian Chief of Combined Operations, both to welcome them and to congratulate them on their successes. Their South African superior for this operation, Brigadier Hannes Botha, the SA Army's Director of Operations, also visited the paratroopers. Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen, the Chief of the Army, accompanied him.¹⁴⁵ Both of them, like Walls, were also paratroopers.

The Rhodesian command was very happy with the performance of the South African paratroopers in the fire force role and were grateful for the relief this gave their own hard-

139. Wood, *Counter-Strike From the Sky*, pp. 94–95 and 203.

140. DOD, HS OPS (5), Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol. 1, "BOWLER/STORING", Encl. 7, 12 September 1979.

141. Tel. interview, Cmdt D.I. Blaauw, 19 February 1992; Interview, Col A.J. van der Walt, 5 July 1994.

142. DOD, HS OPS (5), Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol. 1, "BOWLER/STORING", Encl. 10, 20 September 1979.

143. *Ibid.*, Encl. 11, 20 September 1979.

144. Tel. interview, Cmdt D.I. Blaauw, 19 February 1992; Interview, Col A.J. van der Walt, 5 July 1994.

145. Interviews, Maj Endri Steyn and Capt Eugene Eloff, Pretoria, 25 November 1994.

pressed forces. Walls and his counterpart in South Africa, General Magnus Malan, the Chief of the SADF, were in direct contact concerning the employment of this force,¹⁴⁶ and on 13 October 1979 the two military supremos met for detailed discussions at Jan Smuts International Airport outside Johannesburg. The notes from this meeting indicate that the Rhodesians were anxious to retain the South African fire force in the south of their country, and Malan gave the assurance that he did not intend to withdraw it.¹⁴⁷

Initially known as Bravo Force, the SADF fire force, according to the Operational Instruction issued by SA Army HQ,¹⁴⁸ was relieved on 15 October 1979 by F-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion. This second company was flown to Rhodesia by two C-160Z Transall aircraft, which then flew Blaauw's company back to South Africa.¹⁴⁹

The fire force was moved as often as the threat from insurgents changed to a different part of the brigade's area of responsibility. These included Mkwazine (an airfield in the bush to the north-east of Rutenga), Liebig 7 (a large cattle ranch halfway between Fort Victoria and Bulawayo) and a farm known as Palm River Ranch, both of which had dirt airstrips from which a Dakota could operate.¹⁵⁰

The versatility and carrying capacity of the four Puma helicopters (they were the L-model, capable of lifting 16 lightly equipped troops) made the Paradak superfluous. The time taken to fit parachutes and the difficulty of finding suitable DZs in the often thick bush amidst rocky *gommas* limited the value of dropping paratroopers, while troops delivered by helicopter could be scrambled in minutes and the much smaller helicopter landing zones (LZs) were plentiful. But an airstrip was still needed for the Lynx close air support aircraft. F-Company found itself being moved gradually further west, from one airfield to another as the situation demanded. It was very different to the concept that was used in Ovamboland. In the Operational Diary of F-Company, the capabilities of the ZANLA insurgents were described as "in general pathetic, because their weapons are old and in bad condition. They surrender easily, [are] badly trained and they tend to hide away during contacts".¹⁵¹ The company commander described their contacts with ZANLA as a "turkey shoot". But in their

146. DOD, HS OPS (5), Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol. 1, "BOWLER/STORING", Encl 36, 5 October 1979. This signal referred to discussions between the two military supremos on 4 October 1979.

147. Ibid., Encl. 40, Notes on Talks between C SADF and Commander Combined Operations ZR at Jan Smuts Airport, 13 October 1979 and 15 October 1979; DMI (10), Top Secret MI/309/5/BOWLER, Encl. 6, Secret Memo from CS Ops to C SADF, Ref. CS OPS/309/5/BOWLER, 15 October 1979.

148. DOD, HS OPS (5), Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol. 1, "BOWLER/STORING", Encl. 6, 7 September 1979.

149. Interview, Cmdt P. Nel, PE, 14 October 1991; E-mail from Lt Col Kobus Hoon (ret'd), 14 March 2014.

150. Incomplete copy of Operational/War Diary of F-Coy, 1 Para Bn for period 17 October–7 November 1979.

151. Ibid.

combat against ZIPRA insurgents, particularly when they were operating in the Matopos Hills (now spelt Matobo), the paratroopers experienced bloody, close-quarter fighting in rocky outcrops, caves and thick bush. A number of the South Africans were wounded and the paratroopers were forced to learn some new techniques from the Rhodesians on how to wage this type of war. Before arriving in Rhodesia, the company had close to four months of operational experience against SWAPO insurgents in Namibia and Angola, but this they found a very different and more brutal war.¹⁵²

Meanwhile, another operation was initiated involving SADF parachute forces inside Rhodesia. Operation STORING (called UNION by the Rhodesians) involved the paratroopers working with the Rhodesians in the shallow area across the border (within about 25km of the Limpopo River). The need was identified to create a temporary but very aggressive presence in the area that would deter insurgents from operating there.¹⁵³ The first paratroopers to participate in Operation STORING were from a CF company undergoing training in the Madimbo Corridor: A-Company, 2 Parachute Battalion.¹⁵⁴ The deployment was not an airborne action and they crossed the dry Limpopo on foot, about 50km east of Beit Bridge.¹⁵⁵ They too, wore Rhodesian camouflage uniforms and used R1 rifles and by patrolling and laying ambushes at water points they killed four insurgents in contacts during their six-day deployment from 23 to 28 September 1979.¹⁵⁶

A second action as part of Operation STORING was far bigger and more ambitious, though it yielded fewer results. Of similarly short duration, it included a parachute drop and was also a combined South African/Rhodesian undertaking. By the middle of October 1979 A and G-Companies from 1 Parachute Battalion were undergoing COIN training in the densely wooded Limpopo Valley. They were placed under command of Major Chris le Roux, the second-in-command of 1 Parachute Battalion and briefed for the pending operation in Rhodesia by Colonel George Kruys, the overall commander. Liaison with the Rhodesian officers who would be participating was carried out, marrying up drills were done with their

152. Ibid.

153. DOD, DMI (10), Top Secret MI/309/5/BOWLER, Encl. 17, MA Salisbury to C Army, 24 September 1979.

154. Diary and Training Report, Capt W. Jooste, 4 September–2 October 1979; Training programme “44 Valskermbbrigade Oefening GUMBU VIER vir A Komp, 3 Valsk Bn”, October 1979.

155. SANDF Archives, HS OPS Gp 5, Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol 1, “BOWLER/STORING”, Encl. 15, 22 September 1979 and 16, 21 September 1979.

156. DOD, HS OPS (5), Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol. 1, “BOWLER/STORING”, Encls 23, 24 September 1979 and 25, 26 September 1979; Telephonic interview, Maj Willie Jooste (retd), George, 11 July 1995.

troops and the South Africans were issued with Rhodesian camouflage uniforms.¹⁵⁷ G-Company, together with two 20-man hawk groups¹⁵⁸ from A-Company, crossed the Limpopo on 4 November 1979 and linked up with the Rhodesians to form an extended stop-line.¹⁵⁹ At daybreak on 5 November the first of the remaining two hawk groups from A-Company were parachuted into Rhodesia from a SAAF Dakota, painted in Rhodesian camouflage pattern. Once both platoons were on the ground they commenced a sweep southwards towards the river.¹⁶⁰

The two companies of paratroopers spent a week inside Rhodesia, sweeping, patrolling and laying ambushes. When the operation was concluded and the South African troops were withdrawn back across the Limpopo on 10 November 1979, they had killed one insurgent and six collaborators (*mujibas*) and wounded three insurgents.¹⁶¹ The “head count” was unimpressive, but the aim of these operations was to create the impression among the insurgents that the area was saturated with troops and therefore not suitable for them to consider moving through. This was seen as securing the SA border from infiltration and in this the operation was probably successful.

While this operation had been in progress the Rhodesians had appealed to the South Africans for greater force levels to be deployed in the south of the country in the run-up to the election that was looming as a result of the Lancaster House talks in London. The security situation inside Rhodesia had deteriorated rapidly and the thinly stretched Rhodesian forces were incapable of covering the whole country. In the Tribal Trust Lands to the south of Fort Victoria, ZANLA had taken over complete control, because the area was simply too large for the Rhodesians to cover effectively. The upshot of this was a decision to provide a second South African fire force as well as a battalion of South African infantry to operate in the south of Rhodesia, and a strengthened company group at Beit Bridge.¹⁶²

This meant that the SADF, increasingly committed along the northern Namibian border, was now effectively fighting a war on two fronts and its resources were becoming

157. DOD, DMI (10), Top Secret MI/309/5/BOWLER, Encl. 25, Ops Instr 10/79, Ref. 309/1/3/STORING, 15 October 1979. Also HS OPS (5), Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol. 1, “BOWLER/STORING”, Encl. 62.

158. The term “hawk group” (sometimes rendered “eagle group”) was the translation of the Afrikaans *valkgroep*, a tactical grouping of 20 to 22, roughly corresponding to a platoon, but used by the paratroopers because it could be transported by one Dakota or two Puma helicopters.

159. Interview, Rocky Williams, Pretoria, 22 June 1995. A signaler during the operation, he later joined MK.

160. A-Coy, 1 Para Bn Operational/War Diary, 1–11 November 1979; Interviews, Cmdt Nic van den Bergh, Pretoria, 1991; and Col Vion Hattingh, East London, 26 July 2013.

161. DOD, HS OPS (5), Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol. 1, “BOWLER/STORING”, Encl. 67, 13 November 1979.

162. *Ibid.*, Encl. 63, 9 November 1979; Rhodesian Top Secret Combined Operations Directive 9/79, Ref. G/1/1, 27 November 1979.

stretched. Although in terms of overall SADF numbers the Rhodesian front was relatively small, it was becoming a drain on the paratroopers. The provision of a Reaction Force at Ondangwa required the constant deployment of a company of paratroopers by 1 Parachute Battalion on a rotational basis and there were always requests from both the operational HQs of Sectors 10 and 20 in Namibia for parachute companies to be used in both internal and external operations. It was therefore decided to call up CF parachute companies to man the second fire force in Rhodesia. The infantry battalion, made up of three companies of soldiers, mainly from 3 SA Infantry Battalion, was under the command of Commandant Roland de Vries and was known as Force X-Ray. They were operated in the Sengwe area (the south-eastern corner of Rhodesia, bordering on Mozambique and South Africa), carrying out somewhat fruitless patrols by vehicle and on foot, laying ambushes and liaising with the local population in so-called protected villages. They saw some action, killed and wounded a few insurgents and lost one company commander in action, but an almost total absence of intelligence made their deployment very frustrating.¹⁶³

The first South African fire force, manned by successive companies from 1 Parachute Battalion and now renamed Zulu, was by then under command of 1 Brigade, headquartered in Bulawayo. The second, Fire Force Yankee, was initially formed by G-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion, until the first Citizen Force company could be called up and mobilised. They deployed inside Rhodesia to Rutenga and later Mabalauta from 12 to 26 November – only two weeks.¹⁶⁴

They were replaced by A-Company, 3 Parachute Battalion, forming the first CF fire force. Called up to Bloemfontein, the citizen soldiers were given refresher training before being flown to Madimbo for further fire force training.¹⁶⁵ After deploying on 12 November to the Triangle/Buffalo Range area in Rhodesia for additional training by the Rhodesians, they commenced operations from Wanezi. Their deployment was singularly successful, using the RAR as well as the Selous Scouts to do OP work.¹⁶⁶ Later, when the Pathfinder Platoon from 1 Parachute Battalion was sent to Rhodesia they too, were utilised for OP work.¹⁶⁷

163. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm*, pp. 318–330. De Vries's dates for initial deployments of Forces X-Ray and Yankee differ from those in official archival documentation.

164. Interview, Brig Chris le Roux, Nelspruit, 20 July 1993.

165. DOD, HS OPS (5), Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol. 1, "BOWLER/STORING", Encl. 82, 29 November 1979.

166. Interview, Capt Dolf du Plessis (ret'd), Hartebeespoort Dam, 14 June 1995.

167. Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgefield, 29 December 1990.

The paratroopers were now deploying two fire forces in Rhodesia: one formed by a national service company from 1 Parachute Battalion, under 1 Brigade in the Rhodesian Operation TANGENT area, fighting principally against ZIPRA insurgents; the other by a CF company under 4 Brigade in the Rhodesian Operation REPULSE area, fighting ZANLA insurgents. At the same time, the fire force at Ondangwa in Namibia, composed of a national service company under Sector 10 was fighting SWAPO's PLAN insurgents. It was the greatest extent to which the paratroopers would be committed to this role in the war and 44 Parachute Brigade became the only formation of the SA Army to be fighting on two fronts simultaneously, against three different insurgent armies.

However, given the poor logistic support experienced by the parachute companies for Operation BOWLER and judging by the often slipshod and indifferent staff work that was evident in the operational instructions and appendices issued by SA Army HQ to the company commanders, it is apparent that the Rhodesian adventure did not enjoy the same priority, commitment and urgency as the involvement in Namibia and Angola. There was never an operational HQ established to co-ordinate the SADF participation in the Rhodesian campaign – it was simply run directly from Army HQ in Pretoria. This was something Army HQ was never designed to do. From the files in the archival group Chief of the Army BOWLER it appears as if the operation was run as a side-line to the Directorate of Operations by a single staff officer, Colonel Schultz.¹⁶⁸

This might have been because Rhodesia was already regarded as a lost cause or because the mainly Afrikaner whites in Namibia were regarded as "*ons mense*" (our people), while the English-speaking Rhodesians were considered as foreign "*Filistyne*" (Philistines – a derogatory term frequently used by some conservative, Calvinist, mainly Afrikaans-speaking white South African soldiers to describe the more secular Rhodesians). But Rhodesia was not administered by South Africa, while Namibia was. And the Rhodesian Front approach of a qualified franchise was very different to the National Party's policy of apartheid. The former was evidently seen by the NP politicians as sowing confusion in the West about South Africa's own policies: for them, the Rhodesian policy was seen as intending to extend white supremacy as long as possible, while apartheid, in contrast, was seen not as being about supremacy, but about separation with equality. However bizarre this interpretation

168. In an interview, Capt Dolf du Plessis (14 June 1995) described how he addressed his concerns regarding administrative inefficiencies and poor logistic support to two visiting SA Army major generals, Gleeson and Fourie. After a visit to the SADF fire forces in Rhodesia, the Chief of the Army had upbraided his staff for the poor logistic support being given to the paratroopers. See DOD, C Army BOWLER Gp, Box 3, Memo C Army to GS3 and GS4, 5 October 1979.

might now appear, Pretoria's leaders were therefore probably seeing South Africa's interests as increasingly jeopardised by Rhodesia's intransigence, and this was conceivably being filtered down to the senior officers of the SADF. L'Ange indicates, somewhat cynically, that the South African government was prepared to sacrifice the 40,000 Afrikaners in Rhodesia in order to save the 75,000 Afrikaners in Namibia.¹⁶⁹

From a purely military point of view, South Africa was not party to the strategy for the campaign in Rhodesia and SADF troops, equipment and aircraft were merely "on loan" to that country for them to employ within certain parameters. It was thus not surprising that the military authorities in Pretoria showed a reluctance and lack of enthusiasm for the paratroopers' little war north of the border, given that they had a far bigger conflict to contend with in Namibia; a conflict that involved them directly and for which they had to plan and strategise. Whatever political or diplomatic considerations were at issue, the military approach to Rhodesia, based on available archival evidence, was not given anything like the same urgency or priority as the Namibian problem.

In fact, by late December 1979 both the SA Army and the SAAF were issuing instructions for contingency plans to be prepared by all SADF forces deployed in Rhodesia for a rapid withdrawal from that country within six hours, should the situation demand it.¹⁷⁰ At Fire Force Zulu, F-Company had been relieved by E-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion,¹⁷¹ and Fire Force Yankee was now manned by the second CF contingent, C-Company, 3 Parachute Battalion.¹⁷² On 28 December, after the eventual signing of an agreement at the Lancaster House talks in England a week before, a ceasefire came into effect. Officially, the war in Rhodesia was over. There were still sporadic clashes, but suddenly, the South African fire forces found themselves sitting around at their airfields with no more call-outs. Yet matters remained on a knife edge, and the South African government was not prepared to withdraw its forces. With the security forces confined to their bases, there was an upsurge of violent crime and political intimidation in the rural areas of Rhodesia. An election was drawing nearer and many insurgents were bent on capitalising on their new-found freedom of movement to persuade the local people to place their crosses where they were told was

169. G.L'Ange, *The White Africans: From Colonisation to Liberation* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2005), pp. 331–332.

170. DOD, HS OPS (5), Box 117, Top Secret HSOPS/309/5 Vol. 1, "BOWLER/STORING", Encls 99, 21 December 1979, and 100, 27 December 1979.

171. Operational/War Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn, 26 November 1979 to 15 January 1980.

172. Interviews, Capt "Pip" du Plessis (retd) and Lt Morné Coetzer (retd), Westonaria, 28 March 1992.

the right place.¹⁷³ A British governor, Lord Soames, was sent out to Rhodesia with a 1,300-man Commonwealth Monitoring Force, but this handful of troops clearly could not control the situation. On 6 January, Soames, intent on stabilising the wave of lawlessness, authorised the redeployment of the security forces with orders to use minimum force.¹⁷⁴ The insurgents were, in terms of the agreement, supposed to congregate in specified assembly points under the eye of the Commonwealth Monitoring Force, but it was their reluctance to do so that had prompted Soames to take this drastic step. The two South African fire forces again found themselves being called out to deal with insurgent incidents.¹⁷⁵ The British must have known that the South Africans were deployed inside Rhodesia, but seem to have chosen to ignore the fact, conscious perhaps, that they needed all the troops they could get to handle that volatile situation.¹⁷⁶

When the time came to rotate the South African fire forces at the end of their scheduled tours of duty, this was done. At Fire Force Zulu, E-Company was replaced by F-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion on 16 January 1980. At Fire Force Yankee, the CF paratroopers were replaced by G-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion.¹⁷⁷ This meant there were now two experienced national service parachute companies deployed across the border; both had previously served tours of duty as fire forces in Rhodesia. But for these last two fire forces of South African paratroopers, this time things were extremely quiet, with almost no call-outs¹⁷⁸ – a marked contrast to the start of the Rhodesian adventure. Unfortunately, all three archival groups consulted on Operation BOWLER (Chief of Staff Operations, Military Intelligence and Chief of the Army) revealed a blank – an absence of documentation for the last two months of the SADF deployment in Rhodesia.

The involvement of these two companies from 1 Parachute Battalion in this dying campaign of the Thirty Year War was intended to culminate with a spectacular attack on an insurgent assembly point (this operation and the final demise of Rhodesia is discussed in the next chapter). Instead, it ended with a whimper as all SADF elements were involved in a hasty and undignified withdrawal from Rhodesia immediately after the results of the

173. Moorcraft and McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War*, pp. 174–175.

174. *Ibid.* pp. 213–231, provides a graphic account of the events in Rhodesia.

175. Operational/War Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn for period 26 November 1979 to 15 January 1980.

176. In an interview with Cmdt P. Nel in Port Elizabeth on 14 October 1991 he described how, at an Order Group held in Bulawayo at HQ 1 Bde in late January 1980, the British officer who was present as a member of the Commonwealth Monitoring Force, greeted him with a smile and the words, “How is the commander of the South African Fire Force Zulu?”

177. DOD, C Army Op Bowler Gp, Box 1, C Army to FF Yankee, 1 Para Bn and 44 Para Bde, 16 January 1980.

178. Operational/War Diary of G-Coy, 1 Para Bn for period 25 January to 6 March 1980.

election were announced. Operation BOWLER was terminated and both Fire Force Yankee and Fire Force Zulu ceased to exist. F and G-Companies proved to be the last SADF paratroopers deployed inside Rhodesia.¹⁷⁹

Nevertheless, the participation of the paratroopers in the Rhodesian conflict had seen what was probably the most prolonged period of intense operational activity they had been involved in. On the tactical level, many lessons were learnt regarding the fire force technique and a great deal of experience had been gained. Paratroopers first entered Rhodesia on an operation for five days in July 1979, and thereafter they were deployed on operations continuously from 19 September 1979 to 8 March 1980 – a period of 24 weeks, or more than six months. During this time a total of nine different parachute companies had been deployed: five from 1 Parachute Battalion, one from 2 Parachute Battalion and three from 3 Parachute Battalion. Seven of these had been employed in an airborne role, six of them as part of fire forces. Four of the 1 Parachute Battalion companies had served as part of fire forces, two of them for two tours of duty. Two companies of 3 Parachute Battalion had been part of fire forces. An average tour of duty as part of a fire force for the national service paratroopers of 1 Parachute Battalion had been six weeks, and in the case of Citizen Force paratroopers it had been four weeks. This provided the paratroopers with a wealth of experience in tactical airborne operations to take back to the campaign in Namibia.

7.6. DEDUCTIONS: STRATEGY OR TACTICS?

With the disintegration of the *cordon sanitaire* around South Africa, the SADF became increasingly involved in military operations, first in Angola and later briefly in Rhodesia. The first operational parachute drop in the Caprivi illustrated the strategic potential of an airborne force; but the adoption of the fire force technique gave the South African paratroopers valuable insight into the mobile tactical application of the airborne capability. However, this did nothing to develop a strategic capability. Little was done to provide the paratroopers with the capability to operate independently to carry out strategically important tasks. Instead, the focus became one of tactical emphasis, in support of and reliant on ground forces.

179. Diary, Capt M. Alexander, B-Coy Cmdr, 1 Para Bn, 18 February–6 March 1980, entry 5 March 1980; Interviews, Cmdt P. Nel, Port Elizabeth, 14 October 1991; and Lt Col Chris Grové (ret'd), Pretoria, 13 June 1995. Grové described how a great deal of SADF equipment was left behind in Rhodesia, including “mountains of ammunition”.

When the initial period of conscription was increased in 1978 to two years, the SADF's paratroopers soon reached an exceptional level of proficiency. But without a carefully formulated strategic vision at the highest level, the employment of airborne troops would remain a tactical matter. With the notable exception of Constand Viljoen, neither the thinking of the senior military decision makers nor the parachute officers on the ground yet reflected an appreciation or understanding of the strategic value of airborne forces. It would appear that the SADF was increasingly seeing its airborne capability primarily as a tactical asset. However, Viljoen did not lose sight of the strategic potential of an airborne capability and in the next two chapters this will be examined.

CHAPTER 8

STRATEGIC APPLICATION: CROSS-BORDER AIRBORNE STRIKES

8.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter shows a shift in thinking by the SADF, from the employment of paratroopers in a purely tactical role to a realisation of their strategic potential. The factors influencing the Supreme Command's strategic thinking in the 1970s are examined, contextualising how this led to the military extracting a political decision to embark on cross-border pre-emptive strikes against SWAPO. This had a profound effect on South Africa's airborne capability

The significant influence on SADF strategic thinking of the largest cross-border airborne strike carried out by the Rhodesian armed forces is then considered. Shortly afterwards, it was virtually replicated when the SADF executed its first independent airborne attack: the parachute raid on Cassinga. The raid is analysed for its strategic significance and is contrasted with the Rhodesian operation. A subsequent aborted airborne attack by the SADF is discussed briefly in order to illustrate how faulty intelligence and poor strategy can doom an airborne operation with all the hallmarks of tactical success, to strategic failure.

8.2. STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS IN THE 1970s

After the exposure by the SADF to what amounted to a conventional war in Angola in Operation SAVANNAH, 1975/76, the SADF underwent some significant introspection and made a critical reassessment of its capabilities.¹ It took a hard look at the organisation, the tactics, the training and the equipment that was needed by the South African military.² This is not to imply that nothing was done before SAVANNAH. The Defence minister P.W. Botha had long been working on modernising the SADF, and as early as 1973, for example, the development of a new infantry fighting vehicle (IFV) by South Africa was already under way,³

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1. SADF Archives (hereafter DOD), HVS Gp, Box 40, Top Secret HS/11/3/14/2, Encl. 5c, Evaluation, Op SAVANNAH, 27 April 1976; Aanvullende Dokumente Gp, Box 84, Op SAVANNAH: Nabetraging en Regstellingsaksies, 5 March–19 April 1976.
 2. L. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War, 1966–1989* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2013), pp. 45–49; K. van der Merwe, *Die Suid-Afrikaanse Leër-Gevegskool: Ontstaan en Ontwikkeling, 1978–1976* (Postmasburg, SA Leër-Gevegskool, 1996), pp. 29 and 38–39.
 3. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm: Strength Lies in Mobility* (Tyger Valley, Naledi, 2013), pp. 64–67 and 102–193.

while the expansion, reorganisation and modernisation of the conventional forces of the SA Army, commencing in 1974, has already been noted.

Internally, the Soweto Uprising of 1976 served as a stark reminder of the simmering discontent of the oppressed black masses; and when the so-called information scandal broke in 1978, leading to the fall of John Vorster, first as prime minister and then as the titular state president, the underlying brittleness and corruption of the monolithic NP government was exposed.⁴ South Africa was experiencing a political leadership crisis and was consequently seen as vulnerable, by its enemies and by its own military leadership.⁵

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that it was the first-hand experience of war in Angola during Operation SAVANNAH that created a real sense of urgency among the leadership in the military. Facing Soviet-backed Cubans who were using sophisticated, modern armament in combat in Angola was a sobering experience for the South African military. Some commentators claim that the SADF, despite severe equipment and personnel shortages, acquitted themselves remarkably well in this operation.⁶ Others are critical and disparaging, painting a picture of ignominious defeat for the South Africans.⁷ Much depends on the sympathies of the commentator.

In the dissertation by John, the political and diplomatic implications of Operation SAVANNAH are discussed and the following observation is made:

The fact that South Africa's objectives were not achieved in Angola did not weaken the military's position in the ensuing debate about the future direction of regional strategy. Instead the decision to invade Angola marked the start of the military's ascendancy in foreign policy.⁸

There was, however, another event that played a far greater role in this ascendancy. It took place two years after Operation SAVANNAH, in 1978, when the country experienced a change in leadership. Indeed, 1978 proved a momentous year for South Africa because of the political upheaval within in the ranks of NP government. The aggressive and frequently

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4. See T.G. Karis and G.M. Gerhart (eds), *From Protest to Challenge A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1990, Volume 5, Nadir and Resurgence, 1964–1979* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 1997), pp. 156–184; S.M. Ndlovu, *The Soweto Uprising, Part 1: Soweto*, in SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2 (1970–1980)*, pp. 317–350.
 5. See G.M. Carter, “South Africa: Growing Black-White Confrontation”, in G.M. Carter and P. O’Meara (eds), *Southern Africa: The Continuing Crisis* (London, Macmillan, 1979), pp. 127–134; M. Malan, *My Life with the SA Defence Force* (Pretoria, Protea Book House, 2006), pp. 245–246.
 6. F.J. du T. Spies, *Operasie Savannah, Angola, 1975–1976* (Pretoria, SADF, 1989); W. Steenkamp, *South Africa’s Border War, 1966–1989* (Gibraltar, Ashanti, 1989), pp. 36–60.
 7. See, for instance, M. Junior (ed.), *Angola: the Failure of Operation Savannah, 1975* (Bloomington, Author House, 2015).
 8. N. John, “South African Intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975–1976: Motivations and Implications”, MA Dissertation, UCT, 2002, pp. 135–136.

impetuous P.W. Botha replaced the often cautious and sometimes stoical John Vorster as prime minister. Vorster had, as a former Police minister, tended to favour the advice of his police generals on security matters; but Botha, who had been Defence minister for 12 years, had already transformed the Defence Force from a moribund organisation, caught up in the thinking of the Second World War, into a dynamic, rapidly modernising force with young, ambitious generals in command. Botha's style and emphasis appealed to the military men, and he was prepared to listen to them. Strategically, the emphasis changed from the reactive approach of the policeman to the pre-emptive actions of the soldier.⁹ This opened up opportunities for airborne thinking on a military-strategic level.

The intellectual influence on Botha of generals such as "Pop" Fraser and later André van Deventer and even Magnus Malan was profound, long before he took over the reins of government.¹⁰ They had introduced Botha to the writings of military thinkers like the French strategist, General André Beaufre (1902–1975) and the American analyst of revolutionary warfare, Lieutenant Colonel John J. McCuen, as well as those of Sir Robert Thompson, the British counter-insurgency proponent.¹¹ These detailed studies were based on first-hand experience of the insurgency wars in French Indo-China, Algeria, Malaya and the early part of the Vietnam conflict. The South African Defence College, established in Pretoria in 1972,¹² presented Joint Staff courses for officers of the rank of colonel and higher from all services (as well as selected civilians, mainly from other government departments) where they were versed in strategic matters and exposed to the teachings of these and other proponents of counter-insurgency. In Beaufre's notion of "total onslaught" and "total strategy", he referred to the breadth rather than the intensity of both these concepts: they were seen to encompass all fields, such as military, political, diplomatic, economic, sporting, religious, cultural, etc. This approach was embraced by the South African generals and readily adopted by P.W. Botha. In the 1977 *Defence White Paper*, the need was expressed for an all-encompassing "total national strategy".¹³ With Botha's accession to power, this strategy was soon implemented.

9. See H. Giliomee, *The Last Afrikaner Leaders* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2012); J. D'Oliveira, *Vorster: Die Mens* (Johannesburg, Perskor, 1977); D.S. Prinsloo, *Stem uit die Wilderness* (Mossel Bay, Vaandel, 1997); E. Rhoadie, *P.W. Botha: The Last Betrayal* (Johannesburg, SA Politics, 1989).

10. See Malan, *My Life with the SADF*, p. 203.

11. A. Beaufre, *Introduction to Strategy* (London, Praeger, 1965); *Deterrence and Strategy* (London, Praeger, 1966); and *Strategy of Action* (London, Faber, 1967). All are English translations. See also the writings of J.J. McCuen and R. Thompson that have been referred to earlier in this thesis.

12. "South African National Defence College", available at <http://www.defcol.mil.za>.

13. *White Paper on Defence and Armament Supply, 1977*, p. 4, par 2.

As early as 1972, the State Security Council (SCC) had been established as a cabinet-level body to coordinate security matters. Under Botha's chairmanship, it was enlarged and became possibly the most powerful government organ, dominated by the military and overseeing the National Security Management System (NSMS). This hierarchy of committees permeated down to much lower administrative levels throughout South Africa, ensuring that every government department was part of the overall strategy.¹⁴ This strategy, in the view of many observers appeared to be geared primarily to preventing the overthrow of the political *status quo* and the safeguarding of white rule in South Africa.¹⁵ This, perhaps, was the apartheid government's strategic failure: strategic theory and processes were in place, but without a clear national strategy with an achievable aim.

However, in terms of the military aspects, especially after Botha's assumption of power, there were clear guidelines, proffering a framework for a military strategy. Vorster and Botha differed radically in how they saw the response by the military to the threat of armed resistance and insurgency. While Vorster had been inclined to defend the borders and had been somewhat reluctantly drawn into the Angolan misadventure of 1975, Botha saw the projection of military force far beyond the borders as being in line with the implementation of the doctrines propagated by Beaufre, McCuen and Thompson. Botha also displayed far more intransigence on the question of Namibian independence than did Vorster.¹⁶ From the time of Vorster's deployment of policemen inside Rhodesia as early as 1967, the broad strategy that according to Hamman "dominate[d] defence and political thinking for more than a decade", was already taking shape. Its main objective was "to keep the defence line as far away from South Africa as possible, and [in this] Angola, Mozambique and Rhodesia formed effective buffers against direct foreign intervention".¹⁷

Even before he came to power, Botha began to urge Vorster to adopt a more aggressive strategy towards the growing insurgency war. Political pressure on South Africa had increased sharply when the Democratic Party came to power in the United States in 1976. The South Africans found themselves faced by a powerful American triumvirate determined to do all it could to bring an end to the apartheid state: President Jimmy Carter, his Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, and the US chief representative at the UN, Andrew

14. Malan, *My Life with the SADF*, pp. 202–212; "South Africa-National Security Management System", www.mongabay.com/history/south_africa/south_africa-national_security_management_system.html

15. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p. 37.

16. H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2003), pp. 589–591.

17. H. Hamann, *Days of the Generals: The Untold Story of South Africa's Apartheid-era Military Generals* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2001), p. 51.

Young. The abrasive approach of the Carter administration quickly got under the skin of the South African prime minister and his cabinet. John Vorster dug his heels in and displayed a stubborn obduracy towards the demands being made on South Africa. This coincided with the heavy-handed crackdown of the apartheid government in the wake of the Soweto riots of 1976. The mandatory arms embargo imposed by the UN against South Africa in November 1977, the introduction that same year of a Code of Conduct by the European Community in its dealings with South Africa, and the informal adoption in 1978 of the Sullivan Principles by the US, saw increasing economic disinvestment in South Africa; these were all indicative of the growing isolation of the Pretoria regime.¹⁸

At the same time, SWAPO was stepping up its insurgent campaign in northern Namibia, operating almost with impunity from bases in Angola and Zambia after the South African withdrawal from Angola in 1976. Assassinations of Namibian tribal chiefs sympathetic to the government, abduction or removal of children and adults to take them to Angola for training, laying of landmines, planting of bombs and arson attacks were increasing in frequency and causing grave concern to the South African occupiers.¹⁹ But the military threat was not the only constraint the South African government faced. Internationally, sporting bans were crippling South Africa's ability to compete on the world stage (a major issue for the sports-minded white South African population) and the effects of the arms embargo were being keenly felt. Travel abroad by South Africans had been severely curtailed and those in government, particularly Defence minister P.W. Botha, in line with Beaufre's doctrines, were increasingly seeing the country as under siege.

Faced with these pressures, Vorster was eventually compelled to abandon his earlier refusal to negotiate with SWAPO. The US then initiated the formation of a so-called Contact Group of the five Western nations who were at the time members of the UN Security Council: the US, the UK, France, Canada and West Germany. This group of representatives from the so-called big five states was tasked with facilitating negotiations between South Africa, SWAPO and the frontline states of southern Africa (including SWAPO's host countries). Vorster made concessions that moved towards Namibian independence,

18. A. Thomson, *US Foreign Policy Towards Apartheid South Africa, 1948–1994: Conflict of Interests* (New York, St Martin's Press, 2008), pp. 102–109; R. Hendrickson, *Promoting US Investment in Sub-Saharan Africa* (New York, St Martin's Press, 2014), pp. 44–48; L'Ange, *The White Africans: From Colonisation to Liberation* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2005), pp. 341–342.

19. S. Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means: SWAPO's Liberation War", in C. Leys and J.S. Saul (eds), *Namibia's Liberation Struggle: The Two-Edged Sword* (London, James Currey, 1995), p. 29; and Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p. 74.

abolishing white representation for the territory in the South African parliament and placing it under an administrator general. The Contact Group accepted these changes, but SWAPO did not. The liberation movement demanded that the UN administer the territory until independence and that all SADF troops be withdrawn before independence elections. South Africa would not agree to this, holding out in an effort to ensure that independence would at least leave Pretoria with some modicum of political and economic influence over Namibia.²⁰

8.3. CROSS-BORDER STRATEGY

While the diplomatic wrangling continued, the generals in the SADF were becoming restless. SWAPO was increasing the ability of its PLAN fighters to operate inside Namibia almost without impediment. Militarily, South Africa had lost the initiative and regaining the upper hand was becoming a strategic necessity. According to Stapleton, “the South Africans began to realize that they had to do more than simply respond to the latest insurgent incident and take bold action to destroy SWAPO logistics and command”.²¹ He also points out that the SADF was still smarting from its politically imposed withdrawal from Angola in 1976, and had suffered embarrassing losses in an abortive special forces airborne raid on a SWAPO base at Ekeke in Angola during October 1977. In order to regain the initiative in the insurgent war and to recover lost prestige and boost morale, it was crucial for the generals to achieve a success that would restore the military situation – and the SADF’s standing.

On 29 December 1977 the South Africans made a watershed decision when Botha and his generals, who were attending a meeting in the holiday home of prime minister Vorster at Oubos on the southern Cape coast, finally extracted a political go-ahead to carry out pre-emptive cross-border strikes. The politicians felt there was no chance of SWAPO acquiescing to the South African proposals for Namibia, and that South Africa would have to terminate participation in negotiations with the Western five’s Contact Group. The proposed election in Namibia (a South African initiative, not accepted by SWAPO or the Western five²²) would still take place, and ensuring the political success of the contest,

20. L’Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 343. For more on the Western Contact Group see M.P. Karns, “Ad Hoc Multilateral Diplomacy: The United States, the Contact Group and Namibia”, *International Organization*, 41, 1 (December 1987); H. Melber, *Understanding Namibia: The Trials of Independence* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014); and V. Jabri, *Mediating Conflict: Decision Making and Western Intervention in Namibia* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990).

21. T.J. Stapleton, *A Military History of South Africa: From the Dutch-Khoi Wars to the End of Apartheid* (Santa Barbara, Security International, 2010), p. 174.

22. C. Breytenbach, *Namibia: Birth of a Nation* (Montagu, Luga Publishers, 1989), p. 8.

argued Botha, would be dependent on military successes before the elections were held. He felt it necessary to hurt SWAPO in order to discredit them, and this would require crossing the border and destroying their bases. Vorster reluctantly agreed, but insisted that he would first have to authorise each operation so that the timing and effect on the political and diplomatic situation could be considered.²³

In his memoirs, Magnus Malan makes mention of the agreement at Oubos, but in contrast to the evidence in the official records, claims that the meeting provided the SADF with a certain freedom of action “if ... a lack of time made it impossible to get prior ministerial or cabinet approval for an urgent military action, the enemy could be engaged with military approval only.” He also claims that the SADF was authorised to conduct operations up to 150km across the border without political authorisation.²⁴

Whatever the technicalities, the SADF was thus, by 1978, preparing itself for an escalation in conflict, and this was particularly apparent with the doubling of the length of national service that year from one to two years duration.²⁵

8.4. STRATEGIC CROSS-BORDER AIRBORNE RAIDS DURING THE THIRTY YEAR WAR

It now becomes necessary to examine how the airborne capability that had developed in the SADF was first applied to achieve deliberate strategic aims. An operation such as this, with a strategic aim, would be expected to exercise a decisive effect on the course of the war, or significantly influence the political situation in favour of the government – to the detriment of the insurgents. The only such airborne operation carried out by the SADF paratroopers was the raid on Cassinga, and it clearly illustrates the strategic employment of airborne forces, independently from ground forces.²⁶ A second operation, planned to take place in Rhodesia, came close to being executed, but was aborted due to political developments. It is also briefly considered below.

An important precursor to the attack on Cassinga was a strategic airborne operation carried out by the Rhodesians. It is important to consider this, because the development of an airborne capability by the SADF closely paralleled that of the Rhodesian Armed Forces and there is documentary evidence that the success of the Rhodesian operation directly

23. DOD, Unreferenced secret file, “(SWA) MINISTER Oubos Vergadering, 29 Des. 77”, Top Secret “Notas, Vergadering te Oubos, 29 Desember 1977”, by Lt Gen C.L. Viljoen, 4 January 1978.

24. Malan, *My Life with the SADF*, pp. 173–174.

25. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Box 47, 1 Para Bn/102/12, “Allocation of NSM for Initial Training”, 19 July 1977–30 December 82, Encl. 5, OC OFS Comd to Units, 25 October 1977; SADF, *SADF Review, 1987* (Durban, SADF, 1988), p. 33; Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p. 48.

26. Strategic operations by the South African Special Forces do not fall within the scope of this study.

influenced the decision by the South African Supreme Command to embark on a similar, high-risk action just six months later.²⁷ There was a marked similarity in the aims of the two operations, and it can almost be said that the decision to carry out the South African operation can only be understood in the light of the success of the Rhodesian operation. And yet there were important differences between the approach of the Rhodesians and that of the SADF to an operation of this nature: differences that need to be highlighted in terms of the basic principles of vertical envelopment and the requirements for a strategic airborne capability. This applied particularly to ground-air co-operation.

Because the Rhodesian operation does not form a direct part of the SADF airborne development, it is only covered superficially in this thesis to gauge its influence on the SADF operation and to draw relevant comparisons. There are detailed accounts and analyses of both operations in the historiography and reference is made in this study to some of these publications. The focus in this thesis, however, is on the tactical means used to achieve strategic aims and the degree of success or failure in strategic terms.

8.4.1. The Rhodesian Operation DINGO (Chimoio and Tembué, Mozambique)

Operation DINGO was the airborne attack carried out by the Rhodesian Armed Forces on two successive objectives at Chimoio and Tembué in Mozambique, in November 1977. It was the largest airborne operation carried out by the Rhodesians, and about 200 airborne troops from the SAS and RLI and some 61 aircraft (almost the whole of the RhAF) participated. There is an extensive historiography on the Rhodesian operation, mainly from the perspective of the Rhodesians, but with some publications and many articles giving the viewpoint of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), the armed wing of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), that was on the receiving end of the Rhodesian attacks. Among the more prominent works dealing with the Rhodesian side are: J.R.T. Wood, *Operation DINGO* (2011) and his *Counter-Strike from the Sky* (2009); I. Pringle, *Dingo Firestorm* (2012); M. Adams and C. Cocks (eds), *Africa's Commandos* (2013); B. Cole, *The Elite* (1984); and A. Binda, *The Saints* (2007). Providing a counter to these accounts are: A. Mutambara, *The Rebel in Me* (2014); D. Cauter, *Under the Skin* (1983); and P. O'Meara, "Rhodesia/Zimbabwe: Guerrilla Warfare or Political Settlement?", in Carter and O'Meara (eds), *Southern Africa: The Continuing Crisis* (1979). While access to official Rhodesian

27. DOD, Loose Folder titled "Cassinga", Top Secret letter C SADF to Minister of Defence, "Militêr Politieke Situatie in Suidwes-Afrika", 27 February 1978.

records of the operation was not possible, much of the account by Woods is based on official documentation.

By 1977 the insurgent war had reached an advanced stage and the Rhodesians were fighting two insurgent movements in most rural parts of the country, having failed to prevent their large-scale infiltration across the borders. Militarily, they needed to disrupt the reinforcement and re-supply of ZANLA groups inside Rhodesia from Mozambique. Politically, the prime minister, Ian Smith, was being driven into a corner. The effect of sanctions on the country was enormous. There was growing pressure on Rhodesia from South Africa and the USA and the intensification of the insurgent war and severely adverse economic position that Rhodesia found itself in, forced Smith to seek some form of settlement.²⁸ The failure of the most recent Anglo-American initiative in Geneva had led him to opt for an “internal settlement” with more moderate African nationalists inside Rhodesia.²⁹

Robert Mugabe and many others in the international community believed that ZANU was winning the war,³⁰ and in order to show that he was working from a position of strength in his internal negotiations, Smith needed to strike a quick and heavy blow against Mugabe, his main adversary in the war. The two main ZANLA operational complexes in Mozambique had been identified at Chimoio and Tembué, but until then, attacking them had been regarded as too risky a venture.³¹ Now, however, Smith personally approved the attack as a national strategic imperative for the Rhodesian government.

The Chimoio complex located some 90km inside Mozambique, east of the border town of Umtali (subsequently Mutare), was known to house the ZANLA main operational headquarters.³² Tembué, located in Mozambique’s Tete Province some 185km from the Rhodesian border and beyond the Cahora Bassa Dam, was a smaller base. It had been identified as a major training base and the principal staging point prior to deployment into the northeast of Rhodesia.³³

28. P. O’Meara, “Rhodesia/Zimbabwe: Guerrilla Warfare or Political Settlement?”, in Carter and O’Meara (eds), *Southern Africa: The Continuing Crisis*, p. 39.

29. M.C. White, *Smith of Rhodesia* (Cape Town, Don Nelson, 1978), p. 99.

30. I. Pringle, *Dingo Firestorm: The Greatest Battle of the Rhodesian Bush War* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2012), p. 107.

31. J.R.T. Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky: The Rhodesian All-Arms Fireforce in the War in the Bush, 1974–1980* (Johannesburg, 30° South Publishers, 2009), pp. 124 and 125.

32. A. Mutambara, *The Rebel in Me: A ZANLA Guerrilla Commander in the Rhodesian Bush War 1975–1980* (Solihull, Helion, 2014), p. 128; O’Meara, “Rhodesia/Zimbabwe”, p. 47.

33. Pringle, *Dingo Firestorm*, p. 89.

There is general consensus that the number of guerrillas in the two bases ran into the thousands, with most at Chimoio, where there also appear to have been a considerable number of civilians.³⁴ Because of the distances, an airborne assault on each base was the only option. This made it a high-risk operation, yet one that optimised and exploited the concept of vertical envelopment to the full. With their highly polished technique of fire force, the Rhodesians had built up the experience and the confidence to attempt such an airborne operation.

It would show ZANU that the Rhodesian Armed Forces could carry out two major airborne operations successfully within days of one another, deep inside their host country, on objectives some 450km apart. This would achieve Smith's strategic aims of placing himself in a position of strength in his negotiations for a settlement with the internal nationalists and simultaneously demonstrate to the British and Americans that Rhodesia was far from defeated. Tactically, it was vital to the war effort to stem the seemingly endless insurgent reinforcements that were crossing the border into Rhodesia. By then some sources estimate that there were close to 10,000 guerrillas operating inside the country, and that the entire length of the border with Mozambique was infiltrated.³⁵

The Rhodesian airborne operation commenced early on the morning of 23 November 1977 with 17 jet strike aircraft. A total of 32 Alouette III helicopters were used as gunships, troopers for assault elements and to carry technicians, spares, ammunition and medical supplies to what was known in SADF terminology as a Helicopter Administrative Area, or HAA, set up inside Mozambique. One Alouette was used for command and control. There were four armed Lynx aircraft providing close and wide reconnaissance around the objective areas during the attacks.³⁶

Seven Dakota C-47s and one Douglas DC-7 were used. One of the Dakotas served as the airborne higher command post (CP), manned by Lieutenant General Peter Walls, the Commander of Combined Operations (ComOps), orbiting at high altitude approximately 18km from where the battle was raging. He had communication back to Salisbury, to both his ComOps HQ and directly to the prime minister, Ian Smith, as well as with his subordinate Army and Air Force commanders involved in the battle. This enabled decisions of a strategic

34. Mutambara, *The Rebel in Me*, p. 128; S. Haarhoff, "Op Dingo: 2 Commando", and M. Adams, "Op Dingo: 3 Commando", in M. Adams and C. Cocks (eds), *Africa's Commandos: The Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Solihull and Rugby, Helion and GG Books, 2013), p. 185 and p. 188; Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky*, p. 132.

35. A.R. Wilkinson, "The Impact of the War", in W.H. Morris-Jones, *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe: Behind and Beyond Lancaster House* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013), p. 114; Haarhoff, "Op Dingo: 2 Commando", p. 184.

36. Pringle, *Dingo Firestorm*, pp. 170–183; Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky*, pp.123–202.

nature to be made. For instance, what action to take should there be an attempt at intervention by the Mozambican forces and whether to extend the duration of the operation if necessary (both of which would have international repercussions).³⁷

Immediately after the bombing and strafing attack, the remaining six Dakota aircraft dropped 144 paratroopers along two sides of the objective, while ten Alouette helicopters positioned another 40 troops along a third side. All the troops were positioned exactly where they were supposed to be. The “box” was completed by ten gunship helicopters, which sealed off the fourth side by flying back and forth at low level. The two commanders (Army and Air Force), who had planned the operation, controlled the battle from an Alouette helicopter flown by the Air Force commander.³⁸

The HAA, which was set up at an isolated location about 10 minutes’ helicopter flying time from the objective, enabled the helicopters to refuel, replenish ammunition, have field repairs done and bring in wounded own forces for urgent treatment as well as prisoners for initial interrogation. A parachute drop of an HAA protection element, drums of helicopter fuel and ammunition was done from the DC-7.³⁹ This was remarkable improvisation, because the DC-7 was a civilian aircraft, not designed for dropping either personnel or cargo.

The Rhodesians encountered heavy resistance at Chimoio. Almost every attack aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft or small arms fire, though only one was lost. ZANLA suffered heavy casualties and the destruction of vital infrastructure. The psychological effect of this blow to the heart of their military nerve centre was significant. Mutambara described the total destruction of the ZANLA operational centre by one of the bombs that were dropped.⁴⁰

The attack on Tembué three days later followed much the same pattern, with two important differences. Because of the much longer distance that had to be flown, no helicopter troops participated; only 144 paratroopers took part. They were then withdrawn by helicopter after completion of the attack which meant that a forward staging point on a flat-topped mountain, just south of the Cahora Bassa Dam had to be established. It was situated approximately 40km inside Mozambique and enabled the helicopters to refuel during the long, 200km flight to the objective. Rhodesian intelligence was less accurate than

37. Ibid.

38. Pringle, *Dingo Firestorm*, pp. 175–181.

39. P.J.H. Petter-Bowyer, *Winds of Destruction: Autobiography of a Rhodesian Combat Pilot* (Johannesburg, 30° South Publishers, 2005), p. 306.

40. Mutambara, *The Rebel in Me*, p. 132.

for Chimoio: far fewer guerrillas were killed and despite no Rhodesian casualties, the overall success of this attack could probably be called into question.⁴¹

Despite numerous difficulties and some shortcomings, Operation DINGO, was executed remarkably well, although the commanders ultimately ran out of time and the operation had to be extended overnight at both objectives. Although not the intention, there was sufficient flexibility in the plan to allow for it. Operation DINGO has been termed “Fireforce Writ Large”,⁴² but it was not a fire force action. It contained many of the elements of fire force (such as the use of a command helicopter to control the operation, CAS from helicopter gunships, the organisation of the troops on the ground into “stops” and small, four-man sticks rather than companies and platoons), and the operation was based on the techniques, tactics and systems that had been developed over almost four years with the fire force concept. But there was an important difference: it was a deliberate, carefully planned operation, while the very label “fire force” indicates a quickly launched attack on an opportunity target, by a well-trained force held in constant readiness.

A fire force action is characterised by an eye on the ground such as an OP, able to provide in-time intelligence and target identification. This was missing during Operation DINGO. The Rhodesian attacks were well-planned actions carried out against objectives that were identified more than a year earlier and were then studied and analysed in great detail. But there was no real time intelligence available; only aerial photographs and what had been gleaned from the interrogations of captured insurgents – there was no eye on the ground. This was a case of a conventional airborne operation being carried out in an innovative way because of huge limitations on resources. It was a deliberate attack, not a hasty, opportunity attack. According to Binda the definition of fire force given in the Rhodesian COIN Manual was “the immediate reaction to a reported terrorist presence by helicopter-mobile troops in conjunction with appropriate air support”.⁴³ There was nothing immediate about the attacks in Operation DINGO.

Nevertheless it was in several ways exceptional for a military operation and was the epitome of joint Army/Air Force co-operation. Unusually for an airborne attack, the Army troops did not carry out an assault in the normal sense; they formed stop-lines, preventing most of the insurgents from escaping while the Air Force sowed death and destruction onto the objective. The troops then proceeded to sweep towards the centre of the objective in

41. Petter-Bowyer, *Winds of Destruction*, pp. 312–314.

42. Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky*, pp. 123–202.

43. A. Binda, *The Saints: The Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Johannesburg, 30th South, 2007), p. 160.

typical fire force fashion, controlled from the command helicopter, with the Air Force providing CAS (from both helicopter gunships and jet strike aircraft) when strong resistance was encountered. This was only possible because of exceptional airmanship and the close ground-air co-operation that fire force had produced within the Rhodesian Armed Forces.

Perhaps the greatest tactical lesson to emerge from the operation was the employment of an airborne command post.⁴⁴ The use of an Alouette III gunship (K-Car) as a command platform was vital and decisive during fire force actions. But for a large airborne operation of many hours duration, it was inadequate. The Rhodesians learned the value of the French use during Operation MUSKETEER, the attack on Suez in 1956, of a fixed-wing transport aircraft, fitted with communications equipment, as an airborne CP to control the tactical battle on the ground.⁴⁵ Walls' use of such an airborne CP at the operational level proved very successful. According to Moorcraft and McLaughlin, the Rhodesians were inspired to adopt this practice by the Israeli raid on Entebbe in July 1976, Operation THUNDERBOLT.⁴⁶ But after Operation DINGO they advocated using it at the tactical level too for an operation of this magnitude.⁴⁷

In the short term, Operation DINGO returned the initiative to the security forces in the war. As for numbers of casualties, Wood maintains that the unofficial estimate of ZANLA's casualties was 5,000, but the official Rhodesian figure of insurgents killed in the raids on the two bases was put at a considerably lower 1,200.⁴⁸ ZANLA was said to have lost 20 per cent of its fighters in those few days of vicious fighting and reportedly suffered serious injury to a further 10 per cent.⁴⁹ ZANU sources put the number of members killed at closer to 2,000, claiming that many of them were defenceless women and children. There is no denial in most accounts of the raids on the bases that there were hospital and school facilities there and Walls himself admitted that there had been unarmed casualties.⁵⁰ On the Rhodesian side the casualties were extremely low with only two killed and some 15

44. Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky*, pp. 151, 202.

45. M. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle: A History of Airborne Warfare, 1918–1971* (London, William Kimber, 1971), p. 310; Weeks, *Assault from the Sky: A History of Airborne Warfare* (Newton Abbot, Westbridge Books, 1978), p. 143; R. Kershaw, *Sky Men: Real Story of the Paras* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2010), p. 269.

46. P.L. Moorcraft and P. McLaughlin, *Chimurenga! The War in Rhodesia, 1965–1980* (Johannesburg, Sygma Books, 1982), p. 193. See W. Stevenson, *90 Minutes at Entebbe: The First Full inside Story of Operation Thunderbolt, the Spectacular Israeli Strike against Terrorism* (New York, Bantam Books, 1976), pp. vii, 107, 113 and 122.

47. Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky*, p. 202.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

49. Pringle, *Dingo Firestorm*, p. 245.

50. B. Cole, *The Elite: The Story of the Rhodesian Special Air Service* (Amanzimtoti, Three Knights Publishing, 1984), p. 189; Wood, *Counter-Strike from the Sky*, pp. 200–201.

wounded.⁵¹ The ratio seems almost unbelievable. The vast difference between the casualties of the attackers and of those attacked is more credible when an analysis is made of other airborne operations in which the elements of surprise and shock action are fully exploited by the attackers, as was the case in this instance.⁵² The Rhodesians had the added advantage of employing well-trained troops who were probably the most experienced airborne soldiers in the world at the time. Nevertheless, as the Rhodesians were about to discover, the blunt reality remains: victory in an insurgent war does not depend on the number of combatants killed.

There were accusations by ZANU that refugees had been massacred. There can be no doubt that unarmed civilians were killed, and in all probability a considerable number of them; that much was admitted by some of the paratroopers who took part.⁵³ However, even critics of the Rhodesian regime conceded that the objective had been a military camp. They went on to explain that it was well known that “the guerrillas liked to have their women and children on hand”.⁵⁴ Often conveniently forgotten or ignored is the deliberate blurring of any distinction between civilians and military personnel in an insurgent base, particularly where the revolutionary warfare dictums of Mao Ze-dong are being followed.⁵⁵ The concept of a “people’s war” makes everyone a combatant. The first-hand account of the attack by a ZANU guerrilla commander who survived, is clear that although the ZANLA HQ was indeed in the complex at Chimoio and that there were large numbers of trained insurgents housed there, there were also civilians, including children, in the complex.⁵⁶

But what of the strategic value of the raids?

At 16h00 on 24 November 1977, a mere day after the attack on Chimoio began, Ian Smith, persuaded that his strategic goal had already been achieved, made his announcement on the planned settlement. Convinced that he was now speaking from a position of strength, he declared from Government House in Bulawayo that because the Anglo-American initiative had failed to achieve a settlement, he would settle with the

51. Petter-Bowyer, *Winds of Destruction*, p. 315, gives the ZANLA casualties as 3,000 trained men killed and approximately 5,000 wounded; and Rhodesian casualties as two dead and six wounded.

52. For examples of low casualties among Belgian and French paratroopers in airborne operations in Africa, and inflicting heavy casualties on adversaries, see E.G.M. Alexander, “The Cassinga Raid”, unpublished MA Dissertation, Unisa, 2003, p. 184.

53. Cocks, *Fireforce: One Man’s War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Johannesburg, 30° South Publishers, 2006), p. 145; Woods, *Counter-Strike from the Sky*, p. 160; M. Condon, “Nowhere to Hide”, in Adams and Cocks (eds), *Africa’s Commandos*, p. 184.

54. Cauter, *Under the Skin: The Death of White Rhodesia* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1983), p. 140.

55. Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works, Volume 3, The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party* (New York, International Publishers, 1955), p. 85.

56. Mutambara, *The Rebel in Me*, pp. 128 and 190–191.

internal nationalists led by Bishop Muzorewa. This led ultimately to the election of April 1979, when Muzorewa became prime minister.⁵⁷

The British Foreign Secretary, David Owen, no friend of the Rhodesians, while decrying the raids admitted that they showed Mugabe and Nkomo and their Patriotic Front “that the Rhodesian Defence Force is not on its back”.⁵⁸ Condemnation from the UN had been expected (Secretary General Kurt Waldheim stated that the raids had “greatly impaired peace efforts”), but the US ambassador to the UN, Andrew Young made the perceptive remark: “If you want to stop the fighting you have to talk to the people with guns.”⁵⁹

According to Wood, this is exactly what happened. The series of external raids that were initiated by Operation DINGO, although never on the same scale, eventually forced Mugabe and Nkomo to engage in negotiations in 1979, in which they ultimately accepted the compromise British conditions at Lancaster House in December of that year.⁶⁰ Mlambo, however, argues more plausibly that international pressures on both sides played a decisive role in bringing about the negotiations,⁶¹ while Onslow claims that both the Zimbabwean liberation armies and the Rhodesian security forces honestly believed that military victory was still possible.⁶² If the external operations by the Rhodesians did contribute, then ultimately there was strategic value for Smith in the raids. But it made no difference to the final outcome of the war.

The Rhodesians had apparently hoped to kill the ZANLA commanders, Joshua Tongogara and Rex Nhongo at the Chimoio complex, but while some sources indicate that they were not there at the time,⁶³ the memoir written by one of the senior ZANLA commanders, Agrippah Mutambara, describes Tongogara as having participated courageously in the battle.⁶⁴ Had they been killed, the strategic direction of the war could conceivably have changed, with the balance of insurgent power swinging to Nkomo.

57. Wood, *Counter-Strike*, pp. 173–174; A.S. Mlambo, *A History of Zimbabwe* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 189.

58. K. Flower, *Serving Secretly: Rhodesia's CIO Chief on Record* (Alberton, Galago, 1987), pp. 191–193. See also Pringle, *Dingo Firestorm*, p. 246.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Woods, *Counter-Strike*, p. 202.

61. Mlambo, *A History of Zimbabwe*, pp. 189–190.

62. S. Onslow, “Rhodesia/Zimbabwe Conflict 1974–1980” in S. Onslow, and A-M. Van Wyk, (eds.), *Southern Africa in the Cold War, Post-1974* (Washington DC, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2013), p. 174.

63. O’Meara, “Rhodesia/Zimbabwe” p. 47.

64. Mutambara, *The Rebel in Me*, pp. 179–184.

There was unexpected strategic fall-out that accrued to Rhodesia's benefit. Relations between Pretoria and Washington had been acrimonious since the Carter administration came to power, and when the UN made the voluntary arms embargo against South Africa mandatory in November 1977,⁶⁵ the Vorster government became more amenable to providing assistance to its Rhodesian neighbour. The military success of Operation DINGO at that juncture seems to have contributed to this. It may not have been Smith's intention (he is strangely silent about the raids in his memoirs⁶⁶), but South Africa's military assistance to Rhodesia increased substantially after the raids. Doubtless the ascension of the far more belligerent P.W. Botha to power in South Africa in 1978 played a role in this, and Jacobs sees this increase in support as taking place within the framework of the new strategy of Forward Defence adopted by Rhodesia's southern neighbour.⁶⁷

For Rhodesia at the time, morale had become a strategic matter. The white population was suffering severely from war weariness and this was affecting the country's ability to prosecute the war. Smith knew that a significant military victory would lift the morale, albeit only temporarily. As O'Meara puts it: "These offensives served the double purpose of temporarily restricting guerrilla activities and at the same time boosting the white Rhodesian morale".⁶⁸ But the claim that the Chimoio complex was neutralised as a military base for over twelve months, slowing down ZANLA infiltrations significantly,⁶⁹ is dubious – an insurgent army is not dependent on one base. By June 1978 (seven months after the raids) at least 13,000 ZANLA guerrillas were reportedly inside the country.⁷⁰ In the words of Haarhoff, one of the Rhodesian officers who participated in the operation: "In the greater scheme of things it had limited success as the terrors were still able to put more numbers across the border than the Rhodesian forces could contain and eliminate."⁷¹

Cocks feels that the operation took place a year too late to alter the course of the war,⁷² but given the overall political situation and the inevitable result of the southern African Thirty Year War, this seems far-fetched. It may have delayed white capitulation, but

65. L'Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 341.

66. I. Smith, *The Great Betrayal: The Memoirs of Africa's Most Controversial Leader* (London, Blake Publishing, 1997).

67. C.J. Jacobs, "The Forward Defence Strategy of the South African Defence Force (SADF), 1978–1989", Special edition on the Grensoorlog/Border War, 1966–1989, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3 (December 2006), p. 33.

68. O'Meara, "Rhodesia/Zimbabwe", pp. 47–48.

69. D. Cowderoy and R.C. Nesbit, *War in the Air: Rhodesian Air Force, 1935–1980* (Alberton, Galago Books, 1987), p. 83.

70. Moorcraft and McLaughlin, *Chimurenga!*, p. 194.

71. Haarhoff, "Op Dingo: 2 Commando", p. 187.

72. Cocks, *Fireforce*, p. 144.

the odds were stacked against it ever influencing the final outcome. An insurgent army's two greatest assets are that it is not constrained by time and that its resilience enables it to operate with a minimum of physical infrastructure. On 17 December 1977, less than a month after Operation DINGO, a group of sixty ZANLA guerrillas carried out an attack on the Grand Reef Forward Airfield near Umtali (Mutare). This was undoubtedly a retaliatory action, intended to show that the insurgents were still capable of operating from the very area in which the Rhodesians had destroyed their headquarters.⁷³ In typical guerrilla fashion, the attack was a stand-off bombardment, with the insurgents avoiding battle. Only one Rhodesian soldier was killed and six others wounded. It could in no way be compared to DINGO, but it was highly symbolic and the guerrillas understood that numbers killed was not what really mattered in an insurgent war.⁷⁴

For Smith and his white Rhodesians, therefore, the airborne raids held only short-term strategic value. The risks, both political and military, had been extremely high. Intervention by the Mozambican Armed Forces had been a distinct and very real possibility, because they had been located in considerable force within striking distance, and this could have backfired on Rhodesian strategy. A clash with the Mozambicans would have seriously weakened the Rhodesian position in negotiations, because it would have been seen as aggression against a sovereign state. It could also have led to heavy losses among the small, lightly armed Rhodesian force, which might well have been cut off and even annihilated. This would have been a blow from which the country and its military would quite possibly not have been able to recover.

An airborne operation is a high-risk venture and Operation DINGO showed that if an airborne force is employed in a carefully calculated manner and politicians are prepared to take the necessary strategic risks, it could achieve results out of all proportion to its size. The military decision-makers had full confidence in their airborne forces and as a result were quite prepared to take the necessary risks. Furthermore, to demonstrate the possession of such a capability, and more importantly, the will to employ it, becomes in itself a strategic deterrent. In the words of Moorcraft and McLaughlin, "the slaughter at Chimoio was to have a big impact on the collective psyche of the ZANU leadership".⁷⁵ Although an attempt was made by Mugabe and ZANU to gain political and propaganda capital from their defeat in the battle, ZANLA was compelled to rethink its operational bases

73. Zimbabwe National Assembly *Hansard*, 21 September 2011, Vol. 38, No. 3.

74. Caute, *Under the Skin*, pp. 169–170.

75. Moorcraft and McLaughlin, *Chimurenga!*, p. 194.

and their locations, and the prosecution of their war of liberation was made immensely more difficult. But ultimately, the outcome of the conflict was never in doubt.

8.4.2. Operation REINDEER (Cassinga, Angola)

There were many lessons for the SADF in Operation DINGO. Yet it will be seen that not all of them were learnt. Operation REINDEER was carried out by the SADF in May 1978, just six months after DINGO. It involved four independent attacks on different objectives in Angola, each by an approximately battalion-sized force and conducted simultaneously or within a few days of one another. One of these was an airborne assault by some 367 paratroopers supported by some 46 aircraft, on an objective named Cassinga. The name is sometimes incorrectly spelt “Kassinga” (see Appendix 65).

This assault has been called somewhat overdramatically “one of the major post-World War para drops”.⁷⁶ The South African paratrooper commander, Colonel Jan Breytenbach, described it grandiosely, but misleadingly, as “the most significant airborne assault victory since the Second World War”⁷⁷ and on the dust cover of one of his books claims that it is “believed to be the largest airborne assault anywhere since World War 2”.⁷⁸ While these statements are exaggerated, it was certainly the largest airborne operation among a considerable number carried out by the SADF during the Namibian/Angolan campaign of the war. This placed it, for the South Africans, in the same category as the Rhodesian airborne attacks on Chimoio and Tembué. As with the Rhodesian raids, there was strategic intent with the raid on Cassinga. Although claiming credit for initiating the operation, Magnus Malan, then Chief of the SADF, is extremely vague about its purpose in his autobiography.⁷⁹ However, in a declassified top-secret document addressed to the Minister of Defence in February 1978, Malan listed some salient points to justify an attack on multiple objectives housing SWAPO elements in Angola.⁸⁰

Firstly, he pointed out that SWAPO had begun a process of developing beyond a guerrilla army; it had become a conventional military capability that could act aggressively with firepower and mobility. Secondly, Malan claimed that the SADF had, by focusing on

76. J. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike! The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga, 1978* (Sandton, Manie Grové Publishing, 2008), blurb on back cover.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 476.

78. J. Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword: 32 “Buffalo” Battalion, South Africa’s Foreign Legion* (Alberton, Lemur Books, 1990), inside back dust cover.

79. Malan, *My Life with the SADF*, pp. 190–194.

80. DOD, Folder, “Cassinga”, Top Secret letter, C SADF to Minister of Defence, “Militêr Politieke Situasië in Suidwes-Afrika”, 27 February 1978.

“winning the hearts and minds” of the people in Ovamboland and the Eastern Caprivi, relinquished the military initiative to SWAPO. Also, that South Africa had, as a result of the withdrawal from Angola at the conclusion of Operation SAVANNAH in 1976, suffered a major loss of status in the eyes of the rest of Africa. Then there was the reality that the SAAF had not been used offensively in SAVANNAH, so the potential of the Air Force as a deterrent was unknown to Africa, and specifically to SWAPO. Coupled to this was the need to counter the growing threat of anti-aircraft guns and missiles being deployed in southern Angola. Then too, although it was estimated that there were only between 250 and 300 insurgents operating inside Ovamboland at that stage, the indication was that the existing total of 3,500 trained SWAPO insurgents in Angola would increase to 5,000 by the end of 1978.⁸¹

Malan then reminded the Defence minister of the tense situation on the Angolan/Namibian border because of the increasing infiltration by SWAPO insurgents and the presence of Afro-Communist forces in Angola (this was probably a reference to Cuban and Angolan forces located close to the border). Friendly UNITA forces in the Cunene province of Angola were, according to Malan, finding it difficult to operate effectively against the MPLA because of the established SWAPO bases and logistic routes in that area and because SWAPO was operating in large groups. This also impacted on the clandestine actions of the SADF’s 32 Battalion, which had previously been able to operate successfully against SWAPO north of the border, using small, 10-man sections. It was now impossible for them to operate with anything smaller than a company of over 100 men.⁸²

It was therefore vital, argued Malan, to inflict a severe blow on SWAPO by striking its logistic and base facilities prior to the planned election in Namibia, thereby crippling the movement militarily. Significantly, he referred to the recent Rhodesian operations in Mozambique as examples of what could be achieved by an airborne strike. The SADF had clearly taken careful note of Operation DINGO. Citing the Rhodesians, Malan stressed the importance of employing the Air Force in such attacks. This, he urged the Defence minister, would compel SWAPO to split its forces into smaller, fragmented bases which would in turn complicate the organisation of its logistic support, the control of its forces and its defensive measures, simultaneously lowering SWAPO’s morale. Furthermore, Cuban instructors would find it more difficult to coordinate their work by getting access to all the cadres in the

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

various camps.⁸³ He also made the point that until then the SAAF had not been utilised in an offensive role during the war, and for this to happen would signal a significant escalation.⁸⁴

In the document, Malan identified five separate SWAPO bases in Southern Angola, ranging from a few kilometres north of the border to Cassinga, 260km inside Angola. He urged the Defence minister to approve attacks on all five bases and said that the Defence Force would be able to carry them out within three to four weeks. Malan admitted that the attacks would no doubt result in an international outcry, but discounted the possibility of military reaction.⁸⁵ In this, the official document reveals something of Malan's willingness to take such a calculated risk.

From annotations made in the margins of the document, it is apparent that the minister regarded an attack on Cassinga as too risky because of the chances of aircraft being shot down. However, Constand Viljoen (who, as Army chief, would certainly have contributed to drawing up the document) would not accept that concern. Not many men would question the opinion of their superiors at that level, particularly if those superiors were John Vorster, P.W. Botha and Magnus Malan. But Viljoen had made a detailed study of the intelligence reports on Cassinga and he now submitted a memorandum to Malan in which he convincingly outlined the role of Cassinga in SWAPO's military campaign against the SADF in Namibia.⁸⁶ He attached a copy of the minutes of a meeting of the SWAPO Military Council (presumably from Military Intelligence) to substantiate his argument.

Viljoen pointed out that Cassinga housed the HQ of PLAN, that the organisation's commander, Dimo Hamaambo, was based there, and that he planned and co-ordinated all operations into Namibia from the Cassinga base. SWAPO's tactical intelligence, logistic planning, supply of bases in the eastern Cunene Province and provisioning of insurgents entering Namibia was undertaken from Cassinga, while it also served as the main medical centre where seriously wounded insurgents were treated. Furthermore, it was the assembly point and conduit for recruits on their way to Lubango and Luanda for training and for trained insurgents on their way to other bases. Refresher training was presented there and transport assets were centralised and repaired there. In all these respects the Cassinga base

83. Ibid.

84. R.S. Lord, "SAAF Fighter Involvement in the Border War, 1965–1988", *Journal for Contemporary History*, Special edition on the Grensoorlog/Border War, 1966–1989, 31, 3, (December 2006), p.254.

85. DOD, Folder, "Cassinga", Top Secret letter, C SADF to Minister of Defence, "Militêr Politieke Situasie in Suidwes-Afrika", 27 February 1978.

86. DOD, Folder, "Cassinga", Top Secret Memo C Army to C SADF, "Die Rol van Cassinga in die Militêre Aanslag teen Suidwes-Afrika", 8 March 1978.

closely paralleled the Rhodesian description of the ZANLA base near Chimoio. Viljoen also stated that the only HQ above Cassinga in the SWAPO hierarchy was the base located at Lubango. In an interview conducted in 2002, Viljoen claimed that he even threatened to cancel the whole of Operation REINDEER if the attack on Cassinga was not included. He regarded it as absolutely crucial to the success of the military strategy at the time to strike at this vital SWAPO base and felt that simply to attack the bases close to the border would have been of mere tactical value with no lasting effect on SWAPO's operational capability.⁸⁷

All this undoubtedly made Cassinga a highly strategic target for the SADF's military campaign, and from the annotations on Viljoen's memorandum it is clear that his arguments were accepted. His insistence again confirmed his commitment to operations and his belief in the concept of vertical envelopment. But it also made an attack on Cassinga of military-strategic value, in contrast to the Rhodesian operation, which was approved because of a political-strategic motive.

Although Viljoen's memorandum indicates that at that particular juncture he was considering a helicopter assault on Cassinga, a careful appreciation of distances, estimated resistance on the objective and available helicopters soon showed that the attack (like the Rhodesian attack on Tembué) could only be carried out by means of a parachute assault. These decisions were being made at the same time that Viljoen was issuing instructions for the establishment of a parachute brigade, and he would undoubtedly have realised that the organisation for planning and conducting a large parachute operation was not yet in place. But he was fully aware of the Rhodesian operation, because he maintained cordial relations with his Rhodesian counterparts and on occasion visited their operational HQs.⁸⁸ He must have believed the SADF could execute an equally successful airborne operation, even without a formal airborne headquarters.

The arguments raised by Malan and Viljoen in favour of attacking these localities, especially Cassinga, are strongly at odds with those proffered by authors who favour the SWAPO version of subsequent events. Shigwedha, for example, quoting a SWAPO survivor, claims that Cassinga was a civilian settlement and that the few PLAN fighters who were there were merely in transit and were mostly unarmed.⁸⁹ Deutschmann also follows the line

87. Interview, Gen Constand Viljoen, Bet-El Farm, Ohrigstad, 2 May 2002.

88. Moorcraft and McLaughlin, *Chimurenga!* p.165.

89. V.A. Shigwedha, "Enduring Suffering: The Cassinga Massacre of Namibian Exiles in 1978 and the Conflicts between Survivors' Memories and Testimonies", PhD thesis, UWC, 2011, pp. 113–114.

accepted by most SWAPO apologists, referring to Cassinga as a refugee camp.⁹⁰ But Saul and Leys, in their book on the Namibian liberation struggle, maintain that Cassinga housed the PLAN Command Headquarters, although they insist that those killed during the SADF attack were civilians.⁹¹ Baines discusses the apparently insoluble quandary of whether Cassinga was a key military target or a refugee camp in a probing paper.⁹² Most historians, journalists and other writers, however, bent on propagating a particular version, or on achieving a balanced interpretation of opposing versions, fail to analyse the nature of Cassinga within the framework of Maoist revolutionary warfare doctrine. This was the model being applied by SWAPO (the same model that was applied by ZANU at Chimoio), and it does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in the struggle; in fact, it propagates the view that everyone is a soldier and a civilian.⁹³ Beaufre ties this to the class struggle and basic Marxist principles: “the marrying of political, economic, and diplomatic factors to military factors in order to carry out actions based on a series of rigorous dialectical arguments deduced from basic principles”.⁹⁴ Such an approach erases the quandary, which seems to have been created largely to feed specific agendas on both sides or to conform to particular narratives. See Appendix 66 for aerial photos of Cassinga at the time.

Malan and Viljoen were debating at the military strategic level. But at the higher, political strategic level, Vorster, having committed himself to the operation, was probably persuaded that a far greater impact could be gained from hitting SWAPO at what was identified as a nerve centre, rather than simply at the bases close to the border. Certainly, it would illustrate South Africa’s ability to project force and hopefully it would regain the lost status and help his government recover from the humility of what the international community perceived as a defeat in Operation SAVANNAH. By then the talks facilitated by the big five Contact Group had broken down irretrievably when Foreign Minister Pik Botha

90. D. Deutschmann (ed.), *Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia* (Melbourne, Ocean Press, 1989), photographs between pp. 42 and 43; A. Heywood, *The Cassinga Event* (Windhoek, National Archives of Namibia, 1994), pp. 15–18. See also D. Herbstein and J. Evanson, *The Devils are Among Us: The War for Namibia* (London, Zed Books, 1989).

91. Leys and Saul, *Namibia’s Liberation Struggle*, pp. 53–54; and in the same work, Brown, “Diplomacy by Other Means”, pp. 29–30.

92. G. Baines, “The Battle for Cassinga: Conflicting Narratives and Contested Meanings”, www.researchgate.net/profile/Gary_Baines. Also Baines, *South Africa’s “Border War”: Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014).

93. Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works, Vol.3., The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*, p. 85.

94. Beaufre, “The Dimensions of Strategy”, p. 82

walked out in protest against the demands being made by SWAPO.⁹⁵ Vorster probably felt the time was now ripe to show strength.

Of course, there were tactical aims too; purely military aims that the SADF hoped to achieve by attacking Cassinga.⁹⁶ From a military perspective, the raid was not seen as decisive in the overall campaign; rather, that it would inflict a severe setback on SWAPO and allow the SADF to regain the initiative in the insurgency war. And from the military strategic viewpoint, it was regarded as vital to regain that initiative.

Like the Rhodesians, South Africa had a manpower shortage to contend with when it came to executing an airborne operation. Whereas the Rhodesians had sufficient paratroopers among their regular troops but had to withdraw them from other operations to be used for DINGO, the South Africans had to resort to calling up their CF paratroopers. Although the full-time 1 Parachute Battalion had three rifle companies, one was still under training, one was deployed at Ondangwa in Namibia as the resident fire force and only one was available in Bloemfontein for deployment.⁹⁷ Estimates of the number of insurgents at Cassinga (the SADF gave the total as “varying between 300 and 1,200 terrorists and an unknown number of armed women terrorists”⁹⁸) required a force of considerably more than a company of paratroopers to carry out the attack. At the very least, according to conventional military doctrine, a battalion would be needed.

Both 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions were mobilised and reported for duty on 6 March 1978.⁹⁹ They trained and rehearsed in the Northern Transvaal, but a security breach resulted in the operation ostensibly being cancelled and all the paratroopers being sent home.¹⁰⁰ However, Constand Viljoen, was certainly not going to allow this setback to scuttle his plans. He involved himself in the debriefing that followed the demobilisation of the paratroopers and gave telling inputs to improve the administration, equipping and training for future such call-ups.¹⁰¹ This made it apparent that Viljoen fully intended initiating another call-up.

95. For insight on this colourful politician, see T. Papenfus, **Pik Botha en SyTyd* (Pretoria, Litera, 2011).

96. DOD, SAAF HQ Gp, Top Secret Op Order: Op REINDEER, Ref. LMH/TS/309/4, 24 April 1978; Aanvullende Dokumente, Box 31, File “Op REINDEER”, Top Secret SA Army HQ Op Instruction H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER, 21 April 1978.

97. DOD, OFS Comd Gp 9, Box 475, Secret OFS Comd/308/1/1 Vol. 1, Encl. 14, 29 May 1978.

98. DOD, HS Ops (5), Box 121, Top Secret CS OPS/310/4/REINDEER Vol. 2, Encl. 40, “Waardering: Vernietiging van SWAPO Basisse”.

99. Secret Debriefing Minutes, Army HQ, 20 March 1978, Ref. H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 ALG, 28 March 1978; Diary, Cmdt Lewis Gerber, 6–17 March 1978, entry 6 March 1978.

100. Interviews, Col Jan Breytenbach (retd), Sedgfield, 29 December 1990; and Lt Gen Ian Gleeson (retd), Pretoria, 16 January 2003; Diary, Cmdt L.Gerber, 6–17 March 1978.

101. Secret Debriefing Minutes, Army HQ, 20 March 1978, Ref. H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 ALG, 28 March 1978.

A very large, conventional exercise of division-size, scheduled for the month of May 1978, fortuitously provided the cover to call up the paratroopers again.¹⁰² From 22 April 1978 they assembled at the De Brug military training grounds, outside Bloemfontein. The appreciation and plan that had been made by Jan Breytenbach, appointed as the tactical commander, limited the size of the force that could be dropped onto Cassinga to approximately 380 men. This was determined not by the number of C-130/C-160 aircraft available to deliver them (there were sufficient of these aircraft to drop over 1,000 paratroopers), but by the number of helicopters available to withdraw them after the operation. The distance involved was considered too great to use Alouette helicopters and the SAAF could only muster a total of 19 medium helicopters for the operation: six Super Frelons and 13 Pumas.¹⁰³ (See Appendix 67 for photos of the aircraft types used during the operation.) Allowing for one Super Frelon and one Puma to be held back as reserve aircraft, the remaining 17 helicopters would be able to lift only 230 people. An HAA would have to be established near the objective for the refuelling of the aircraft and for relaying the withdrawal of the paratroopers. It was essentially the same procedure used by the Rhodesians during Operation DINGO. The people manning the HAA and the protection element would also need to be transported,¹⁰⁴ as would any prisoners who might be brought back, placing further demands on the helicopters available. Even this would mean that two lifts would be needed to extract everyone, further increasing the risks of the operation.

The force was constituted into an under strength, composite parachute battalion, using elements from the three parachute battalions (largely CF paratroopers from 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions, but with two platoons of national servicemen from 1 Parachute Battalion). The composite battalion comprised: A battalion HQ that included two forward air controllers (FACs), signallers and a medical team; three CF rifle companies, each of only two platoons; one CF rifle company of only one platoon; two independent rifle platoons, (one of CF and the other of national servicemen); one national service 60mm mortar platoon of two fire groups; and one CF anti-tank platoon of two sections, equipped with tank mines and hand-held, shoulder-fired RPG-7 rocket launchers.

Although a decision had already been made at that stage to establish a parachute brigade, it did not yet exist. However, for the operation, a small brigade tactical HQ was

102. DOD, CS Ops (5), Box 121, Top Secret CS OPS/310/4 REINDEER Vol. 1, Encl. 2, 14 April 1978.

103. Ibid., Encl. 63, SAAF Debriefing Record of Events: Operation REINDEER, LMH/S/309/4/REINDEER, 6 June 1978 (hereafter referred to as "SAAF Record of Events").

104. Alexander, "The Cassinga Raid", p. 104.

formed. There was also a brigade reserve of one rifle company consisting of three full platoons.¹⁰⁵ The national service parachute company based at Ondangwa would be used to provide a protection element for the HAA and a fire force available for deployment by helicopter to act as an airmobile reserve for 32 Battalion, which was attacking different objectives as part of Operation REINDEER.

After several delays and false starts, the composite battalion, having completed several days of refresher training and rehearsals, departed on 3 May 1978 and was flown the 1,300km to the town of Grootfontein in northern Namibia. Here the SADF had its principal logistic base for the war beside a large airfield.¹⁰⁶ It was the staging airfield for the parachute operation. But while all this was taking place in the greatest secrecy, the political and diplomatic game continued to be played out in the international arena. On 25 April, South Africa accepted the proposals of the Western Five Contact Group.¹⁰⁷ It was an about-face seen by many as an attempt to embarrass SWAPO and force them to reject the proposals, making them appear unreasonable. This was certainly how it was interpreted by SWAPO.¹⁰⁸ In the light of this, it is perhaps surprising that the raid went ahead at this particular juncture. Possibly, it was an indication of Vorster's weakening grip at a time when the information scandal was about to break and the military was becoming more assertive; soon his hawkish Defence minister, P.W. Botha, would replace him.

In overall command of Operation REINDEER was Major General Ian Gleeson, the Army's Chief of Staff Operations, who set up a tactical HQ at the airfield at Ondangwa in Ovamboland. Under him were three "sectors", each with a commander. The Western Sector, under Colonel André "Kat" Liebenberg, comprised a mechanised battle group and three motorised combat teams; the Eastern Sector, under Commandant Gert Nel, comprised 32 Battalion and two hawk groups from 1 Parachute Battalion. Both these sectors were responsible for attacking various SWAPO bases close to the border. The third, or Central Sector, was under Brigadier M.J. du Plessis (the commander designate of the yet to be formed parachute brigade) and comprised the composite parachute battalion, a

105. DOD, Folder on Cassinga, Hand-written Top Secret Composite Parachute Battalion Opso 1/78, OPS/309/1/B/1 REINDEER, 28 April 1978 (hereafter referred to as "Comp Para Bn Opso 1/78"), Appendix C, Extraction Plan; Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, pp. 416, 431, 434 and 435.

106. DOD, CS Ops Gp 5, Box 121, Secret CS OPS/310/4 REINDEER Vol. 1, Encl. 63.

107. D.S. McLellan, "Cyrus Vance" in R.H. Ferrell (ed.), *The American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy, Volume 20* (Totowa, NJ, Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), p. 98.

108. D. Soggot, *Namibia: The Violent Heritage* (London, Rex Collings, 1986), pp. 226–227 and 231.

reserve parachute company and two hawk groups from 1 Parachute Battalion.¹⁰⁹ According to the archival documentation for this operation, Du Plessis was tasked for Operation REINDEER as the brigade commander and as such he issued the necessary written orders.¹¹⁰ He was also, during debriefing conferences for the operation, consistently referred to as the Sector Commander in overall command of the parachute operation.¹¹¹ Breytenbach, the battalion commander, in his memoir, *Eagle Strike!* (2008) denies the existence of a parachute brigade HQ during Operation REINDEER and denies that there was any role for such an HQ.¹¹² However, this is contradicted by his hand-written orders (which appear in his book), where he refers to the Brigade Opso 1/78, the brigade reserve parachute company and to the Brigade HQ.¹¹³ In the Extraction Plan (which does not appear in his book), Breytenbach allocates by name, in his own handwriting, the brigade HQ personnel for extraction from LZ HARRIS in the second lift of helicopters.¹¹⁴

Breytenbach is adamant that Du Plessis played no role at all other than being a “buggerance factor” and is scathing about his involvement. Yet Du Plessis refutes this and he would not have been involved during the rehearsal and would not have participated in the operation had he not received the sanction of the Chief of the Army. Certainly, Viljoen confirmed that he wanted to expose his senior officers like Du Plessis to operational conditions.¹¹⁵ However, whether Du Plessis played any part in the planning of the operation appears unlikely, and whether the brigadier, who was reticent by nature, would have been able to exercise any control over a subordinate personality as powerful and charismatic as Breytenbach, is equally open to question; but importantly, provision was made in the signals plan of the operation for a brigade headquarters, with call-signs and frequencies allocated.¹¹⁶

109. DOD, Aanvullende Dokumente, Gp OD–1968, Box 83, Top Secret D OPS/309/1 REINDEER, Encl. 8, Opso 4/78, 2 MA, 26 April 1978; Secret KMDMT SWA/309/1 REINDEER, Encl. 4, “Notule, Konferensie, Leër HK, 18 Mei 78, Nabetracting, Op REINDEER”, 22 May 1978 (hereafter referred to as “Nabetracting, Op REINDEER”), especially Appendix C.

110. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Secret H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER, May 1978 Appendix A: Bound Copy of Debriefing Reports, Top Secret 1 Valskerbrigade Opso 1/78, Ref. OPS/309/1/B/1 REINDEER, April 1978.

111. DOD, Nabetracting, Op REINDEER (especially Appendix C).

112. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!* pp. 545–547.

113. *Ibid.*, pp. 416 and 434, (pp. 1 and 19 of his orders), p. 431, (p. 16 of his orders) and p. 435, (p. 20 of his orders).

114. Comp Para Bn Opso 1/78, Appendix C.

115. Interview with Gen C.L Viljoen, Bet-El Farm, Ohrigstad, 2 May 2002.

116. Comp Para Bn Opso 1/78, Appendix B: Amendment to Signal Order 1/78. The Signal Plan is not included in Breytenbach’s book.

The Air Commander was Colonel C. de Swardt, who was with Gleeson in his tactical HQ. A Mobile Air Operations Team (MAOT), under command of Commandant James Kriel, controlled the aircraft in the vicinity of the objective, but was located some distance from the objective at the HAA and there was no Air Force representative with Breytenbach during the operation. Neither of these Air Force commanders, it seems, were involved in the initial planning with Breytenbach. Ground/air co-operation, both the planning and the execution, was therefore nowhere near as tight or as tidy as it had been with the Rhodesians during Operation DINGO. There were good reasons for this: the Rhodesians only attacked one objective at a time so air assets were concentrated; their Armed Forces were small so the officers of the different services had a very close and informal relationship; and the fire force technique had honed joint service co-operation to an absolute peak, while the SAAF had yet to be employed offensively.

The designated parachute brigade commander, Brigadier Du Plessis, was specifically tasked in the Operational Instruction from Army HQ, signed by Major General Gleeson, to control the operation parachute from a command aircraft.¹¹⁷ This was in line with what the Rhodesians had done. Du Plessis himself admitted that the Chief of the Army had expected him to exercise his command from an airborne command post.¹¹⁸ It is not clear why he disobeyed this instruction, but Breytenbach claims Du Plessis only wanted to get a “red entry” in his parachute log book for having done an operational jump. Breytenbach accused the Director of Operations, Brigadier Hannes Botha, who also tagged along, of the same thing,¹¹⁹ although he moderated his views on Botha when he subsequently published his memoir, *Eagle Strike!* (2008).

The airborne assault on Cassinga took place on 4 May 1978, ironically enough for a parachute descent, when South African Christians were celebrating Ascension Day. The events of that day are carefully documented in the official SANDF archival sources,¹²⁰ and include reports by commanders of the paratroopers who participated at every level, written immediately after the operation.¹²¹ These sources are used extensively in this description

117. DOD, Aanvullende Dokumente Gp, Box 31, File Op REINDEER, Op Instruction H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER, 21 April 1978.

118. Interview, Maj Gen M.J. du Plessis (ret'd), Bloemfontein, 28 June 1995.

119. J. Breytenbach, “Gevechtssprung auf Cassinga”, *Barret Internationales Militärmagazin*, 3 (May/June 1993), p. 22.

120. DOD, CS Ops, (5), Box 121, Top Secret CS OPS/310/4 REINDEER Vol. 1, Encl. 32, Secret C SADF Operational Comd and Contr Centre Ops Log (hereafter referred to as “C SADF Ops Log”) and SAAF Record of Events.

121. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Secret H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER, May 1978 Appendix A: Bound Copy of Debriefing Reports.

and analysis of the operation, as have Interviews conducted with participants from both sides, including Breytenbach and Du Plessis from the SADF, and Major General Martin Shalli, who was a senior member of PLAN and subsequently Namibian Army Chief, from SWAPO.¹²²

The MAOT was flown out by Puma helicopter to establish the HAA, some 22km to the east of Cassinga in a clearing in the remote bush. Drums of fuel and a protection element of 40 paratroopers from 1 Parachute Battalion under command of Major James Hills were also flown out by helicopter. Seventeen helicopters flew into Angola from Namibia, a distance of about 270km, to await the signal to withdraw the paratroopers after the battle.¹²³ Significantly, the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen, accompanied the paratroopers to the HAA.¹²⁴

An Air Force DC-4 Skymaster, equipped as an electronic warfare aircraft, maintained a holding pattern at high altitude above the border cut-line, providing a capability to monitor MPLA, Cuban and SWAPO radio traffic, to jam their radio frequencies, to receive early warning of their air interdiction attempts and to relay radio messages from the forces on the ground to higher HQ and back again. A light Cessna 185 aircraft that would orbit above Cassinga at much lower altitude, providing a radio-relay point and an observation platform from which to transmit in-time information to the paratroopers once they were on the ground, and to assist in navigation if necessary.¹²⁵

Shortly after 08h00, during the Cassinga morning muster parade, four English Electric Canberras and four Blackburn Buccaneers bombed the objective. The bombers had taken off from Air Force Base Waterkloof in Pretoria, some 1,700km away. Two Mirage IICZ strike aircraft then attacked, carrying out strafing runs with 30mm high explosive cannons. Because of their relatively short ranges, the Mirages had been pre-positioned at Ondangwa, just over 300km away. After the air strike, they returned to Ondangwa, while the Canberras and Buccaneers landed at Grootfontein. All the aircraft immediately re-armed and refuelled so that they could carry out a strike on the second objective to be attacked that day (Chetaquera, close to the border and the object of a mechanised attack) or to be on standby if needed.¹²⁶

122. Interviews, Col Jan Breytenbach, (ret'd), Sedgfield, 28, 29 and 30 December 1990; Pretoria, 16 and 17 February 1993; Salem, 26 January 2003; telephone conversation, 15 February 2003. Interview, Maj Gen M.J. du Plessis, (ret'd), Bloemfontein, 28 June 1995. Telephonic interview, Maj Gen Martin Shalli, Namibian Army Commander, 13 February 2003, and questionnaire completed 16 April 2003.

123. SAAF Record of Events; C SADF Ops Log; Interview, Col James Hills (ret'd), Potchefstroom, 1 January 1996.

124. Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 48. Confirmed by Hills, interview, 1 January 1996.

125. SAAF Record of Events; C SADF Ops Log.

126. SAAF Record of Events; C SADF Ops Log.

Minutes after the air strike on Cassinga, the paratroopers were dropped. Six aircraft, four C-130B Hercules and two C-160Z Transalls had taken off from Grootfontein before dawn, and four of them now approached from the north at 100 feet (30 metres) above ground level, while two approached from the east.¹²⁷ Flying at this low altitude to avoid detection, they pitched up to the dropping height of between 600 and 800 feet (186 and 248 metres) when a minute and a half out from their DZs. Three aircraft from the north overflew their DZ in a “V” formation and dropped the assault group of two under strength companies, the mortar platoon and the battalion HQ (as well as the brigade HQ) on the western side of Cassinga, while the fourth dropped another under strength company on the eastern side to form a stop-line. The remaining two aircraft approaching from the east barely a minute later dropped their paratroopers respectively to the north and south of the objective to also form stop-lines.¹²⁸ The plan was for the assault to go in from the west to the east, with the insurgents effectively boxed in by the stop lines on three sides.¹²⁹

But there were crucial mistakes in the parachute drop. The pilots of the transport aircraft carrying the assault companies had never come under fire before; they were thrown into confusion by the smoke, dust and diving jets, and as a result the green light signal to commence the drops was given too late.¹³⁰ The paratroopers landed several kilometres further south than they should have and many came down on the wrong side of the Culonga River, which flowed past the western side of Cassinga, while others landed among rocky hillocks even further south. The aircraft dropping the troops for the eastern stop-line also dropped them late, which meant that many insurgents escaped before that side of the “box” was eventually closed. The northern and southern stop-lines were dropped somewhat more accurately. Many of the paratroopers in these groups encountered resistance shortly after landing and some even while still descending, so skirmishing and fire fights broke out in the bush surrounding Cassinga. There was also the ominous sound of anti-aircraft gunfire. SADF intelligence reports had said nothing about such guns being deployed at Cassinga.¹³¹

Although those paratroopers who had been dropped north, east and south of the main objective managed to sort out their difficulties, overran the peripheral buildings that

127. Interview, Col Harry Gilliland (retd), Pretoria, 5 July 1995. Gilliland was the OC 28 Sqn, SAAF and controlled the drop of the assault force from the leading aircraft, of which he was the captain.

128. SAAF Record of Events; C SADF Ops Log.

129. Comp Para Bn Opso 1/78.

130. Interview, Col Harry Gilliland (retd), Pretoria, 5 July 1995.

131. DOD, N Tvl Comd, Group 8, Box 857, Top Secret STAM HK KMDMT N TVL/309/1/R1 REINDEER, Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER (hereafter referred to as “Debriefing Reports Op REINDEER”).

had been allocated to them and formed the required stop lines, there was a far greater delay in the case of the actual assault troops to the west. It took in the region of an hour and a half for Breytenbach to restore order after their scattered drop, to rescue those who had landed in the river, to get those who had landed on the western bank across the river, to establish exactly where they were, and to form up for the assault. There was still confusion, however, because Breytenbach did not fully realise how far south his force had been dropped, and took the wrong road for his axis of attack. The Cessna aircraft that should have been providing him with this sort of information had been forced to leave the area because of anti-aircraft fire, so there was no “eye in the sky” to aid the paratroopers.¹³²

Breytenbach therefore had to change his axis of attack from west-east to south-north once he realised his mistake. In the process, two of the paratrooper companies fired on one another in the thick bush, fortunately without inflicting casualties. A fifth Buccaneer, having refuelled at Grootfontein, had been in the air high above Cassinga since 08h30. It was armed with seventy-two 68mm rockets for close air support of the paratroopers on the ground. However, it was not called in to deal with the anti-aircraft guns because their positions had not yet been identified. But it was called in by an FAC to carry out a strike on a collection of buildings. Failure to clear and co-ordinate the strike with the battalion commander, however, resulted in several paratroopers being wounded in this attack by their own aircraft.¹³³

As Breytenbach’s assault force advanced into the objective, the resistance increased. Despite many occupants having escaped, most of the trained PLAN fighters were making a stand. Buildings and trenches had to be cleared and the assaulting troops encountered sniper fire and were eventually brought to a standstill by the heavy calibre bullets of an anti-aircraft gun. That there were civilians, both among the victims of the air strike and among survivors in the ruins of the base, has been confirmed by participants,¹³⁴ but the very fact that the battle lasted for several hours is an indication of the level of resistance encountered and the number of trained fighters in the base. This resistance was now concentrated around the anti-aircraft gun and several heavy machine-guns that were effectively pinning down the paratroopers. The dispersal of the paratroopers and their proximity to the firing guns made it too risky to call in an air strike by the circling Buccaneer. Two C-160 aircraft were on standby, carrying another company of paratroopers as the

132. Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (Retd), 29 December 1990; L. Gerber, Diary Report and Observations.

133. SAAF Record of Events; Interview, WO1 L.C. Pietersen, 14 October 1991.

134. Debriefing Reports Op REINDEER, Report by D-Coy Cmdr.

brigade reserve. One of these was airborne, waiting to be called upon to drop its paratroopers at short notice if needed, while the other remained on the tarmac at Ondangwa with its paratroopers. The two relieved one another so that there was always one airborne.¹³⁵ It seemed that Du Plessis considered calling them in at one stage and the paratroopers prepared for action inside the airborne aircraft, but then the brigadier decided that Breytenbach had the situation under control and the drop was aborted.¹³⁶

The battalion commander was in the forefront of the fighting and was wounded in the wrist by sniper fire while holding his radio handset to his ear. The heavy SWAPO gunfire was eventually silenced by a combination of 60mm mortar fire from the paratroopers, the systematic clearing of the trenches with grenades and rifles in the vicinity of the guns and the bald reality of the gunners running out of ammunition.¹³⁷ According to Breytenbach, the trenches were crammed with SWAPO, both armed insurgents and civilians, including women and children.¹³⁸ All perished in the vicious close-quarter fighting, as did one of the paratroopers. Another paratrooper died in the battle that raged around the trenches. But the back of the resistance had been broken and only sporadic fighting continued once the heavier guns had fallen silent. The exhausted paratroopers were able to commence with mopping up of the objective, collecting prisoners, gathering weapons for destruction and sorting through documentation (an intelligence officer had jumped with them for this purpose). Hundreds had died on the SWAPO side, many during the initial air strike. Three paratroopers had been killed, two had been critically wounded, nine others (including Breytenbach) had been lightly wounded and six had been injured during the parachute drop. It was subsequently discovered that one other paratrooper was missing and he was never found. It was presumed that he landed in the river and drowned during the drop.¹³⁹

Ammunition had been stockpiled at Ondangwa to replenish the paratroopers in case this proved necessary. Fortunately it was not, because although another C-160 aircraft had been made available to drop this ammunition, a failure in planning meant that no provision had been made to prepare it for air supply.¹⁴⁰ The objective had not yet been fully taken by the paratroopers and intermittent skirmishing and sniper fire continued. The attack had already taken far longer than had been planned, and to exacerbate the situation, a radio

135. SAAF Record of Events.

136. Interview, Maj Wesley de Beer, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

137. Shigwedha, "Enduring Suffering", p. 115.

138. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, p. 300.

139. Nabetracting, Op REINDEER, Appendix C.

140. Nabetracting, Op REINDEER.

intercept and a message from the circling Buccaneer now warned of a Cuban armoured column approaching from the town of Techumatete, 16km to the south of Cassinga. It was at this critical juncture that command and control appeared to break down. The brigade commander decided to call in the helicopters to commence with the extraction. The battalion commander apparently opposed this vehemently. Nevertheless, it happened, and by all accounts there was (for whatever reason) considerable confusion on the ground as some elements were extracted out of sequence. The wounded were loaded into the first lift of helicopters when they should have gone with the second, as were the sapper officers responsible for demolitions. Also coming into Cassinga with that first lift was General Viljoen, apparently determined to see the objective for himself. This did not make Breytenbach's job any easier.¹⁴¹

The first lift flew the troops it had collected back to the relative safety of the HAA to await later extraction back to Namibia, and the helicopters stood by in the HAA to be called in to collect the second lift of troops. They were to be flown directly back to Namibia. The helicopters would then return to the HAA, refuel and carry out the final withdrawal of the troops waiting there. But when the wounded arrived at the HAA with the first lift, there were no medical personnel to tend them, because the Regimental Aid Post had been flown from the HAA to be set up inside Cassinga.¹⁴²

The small anti-tank platoon, tasked with delaying the Cuban counter-attack, had assistance from only one or at most two strike aircraft at a time. These were alternatively a Mirage IIICZ or a Buccaneer. Because the South African mechanised attack on Chetaquera several hundred kilometres to the south had by then commenced, it too required CAS.¹⁴³ Unlike the Rhodesians, the South Africans had not planned a "cab-rank" of ground-attack aircraft to be on hand above the objective. The SAAF, according to Viljoen, were therefore at first not prepared to place their helicopters at risk to the Cubans for the final extraction, and it was decided that the remaining paratroopers would withdraw on foot to the east.¹⁴⁴ However, this decision was rescinded shortly afterwards. By the time the second lift could be carried out by the helicopters, the Cubans had made contact with the Anti-Tank Platoon, and skirmishing was in progress. Had it not been for the strikes by a Mirage and then a Buccaneer, destroying a substantial portion of the counter-attacking column, the

141. Nabetracting, Op REINDEER; SAAF Record of Events; Gerber, Diary Report and Observations; Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), 29 December 1990.

142. SAAF Record of Events.

143. SAAF Record of Events.

144. Interview, Gen Constand Viljoen, Bet-El Farm, Ohrigstad, 2 May 2002.

paratroopers may well have been trapped and been annihilated or captured. As it was, the last of the South Africans were extracted under fire from the Cubans. According to several people who were there, this extraction was chaotic.¹⁴⁵ The battalion 2IC, Commandant Lew Gerber, described it as “virtually every man for himself”.¹⁴⁶ Another paratrooper quipped in an understatement, “obviously, the system wasn’t working as planned”.¹⁴⁷ The Chief of the Army was himself among those involved in this hazardous extraction and also subsequently commented on the confusion, the breakdown in discipline and lack of fitness among the paratroopers.¹⁴⁸ Commandant Monty Brett, the OC 2 Parachute Battalion, who was commanding C-Company for this operation, wrote in his report of the action: “The withdrawal became confused . . . the command structure was not there.” In his report Brett also lamented the lack of battle discipline, dearth of battle fitness and poor radio procedures and radio discipline among the paratroopers.¹⁴⁹ The orderly withdrawal that had been planned had apparently fallen apart. However, except for the one paratrooper who had disappeared during the drop, all were safely extracted and flown back to Namibia.¹⁵⁰ Under the circumstances, this was a remarkable achievement. In retrospect, it was probably fortuitous that the wounded were flown out with the first lift, because it is questionable whether this would have been possible in the confusion of the final extraction, when they were supposed to be evacuated.

Breytenbach had specified in his orders for the attack that documents of value were to be recovered and worthwhile prisoners were to be taken back during the extraction. Furthermore mines were to be planted, SWAPO weapons, ammunition, mines and explosives were to be destroyed and an assessment made of the damage inflicted on SWAPO.¹⁵¹ However, it was impossible, under the confused circumstances, to bring any prisoners back. Apart from this however, most other tactical objectives of the operation had been accomplished. Cassinga was effectively destroyed and would never again be used as a base by SWAPO. Tactically, the operation was an unquestionable success, despite having hovered on the brink of disaster during the Cuban counter-attack.

145. Interviews, Cmdt Charlie Luyt (helicopter pilot), 12 November 1993; Cmdt Piet Nel (mortar platoon commander), 14 October 1991; WO1 L.C. Pietersen (platoon sergeant), 14 October 1991.

146. Lewis Gerber, Diary Report and Observations.

147. Anon., “Cassinga, Episode 2”, Newsletter, SA Paratrooper Association (Johannesburg Canopy), October 1990, p.6.

148. Interview, Gen Constand Viljoen, Bet-El Farm, Ohrigstad, 2 May 2002.

149. Debriefing Reports Op REINDEER, Report by C-Coy Cmdr.

150. SAAF Record of Events.

151. Comp Para Bn Opso 1/78.

On the strategic level, however, the success was distinctly more questionable.

That South Africa suffered a strategic setback in the propaganda field cannot be denied, largely because of the immediate SWAPO claim that the attack on Cassinga was a deliberate massacre of refugees, and SWAPO's success in the international propagation of this claim. The Cassinga raid will therefore always be an emotive issue. Conclusive evidence verifying the SWAPOs claim has never come to light. Instead, circumstantial indications, accusations and counter-accusations have prevailed, with emotion dominating most of what is said. What is indisputable is that there were trained guerrilla insurgents at Cassinga, and that there were also civilians there. Graphic photographs have been variously interpreted and described, but with little substantiation or verification, while eyewitness accounts by both sides have revealed sharply opposed versions. Jacobs contends that neither the South African government nor the SADF understood the importance of propaganda in war.¹⁵² Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that neither directed their propaganda at the right target. White South Africans were bombarded with propaganda during the war, but this propaganda either did not reach, and/or never convinced the wider world and those seen at the time as the enemy.

The political importance to Namibian national identity of a particular portrayal of Cassinga has clouded any attempt at objectivity in a calculated need to build a liberation mythology that will ensure continued SWAPO dominance in a democratic dispensation. But equally, the importance to the former soldiers of the old SADF of maintaining an image of military excellence in a milieu where they are almost universally denigrated for defending the apartheid system compels them to reject any inference that they were guilty of an atrocity. In this fog of disputation, with the armed conflict long past, both sides perhaps conveniently ignore the dictums that their respective leaders studied so ardently at the time. Whether for purposes of insurgency or counter-insurgency, the writings of Mao, McCuen and Thompson make it clear that for the insurgent there was no clinical separation of the military from the civilian. For very different reasons, politicians and soldiers tend to favour simplistic rather than complex narratives: the politician needs an easily understood version to persuade the masses to support him, while the soldier has to reduce a situation to an unencumbered picture in order to focus on and carry out a sometimes daunting mission. Accordingly, in the case of Cassinga, neither is prepared to move into the grey area that lies between their two opposing versions.

152. Jacobs, "The Forward Defence Strategy of the SADF, 1978–1989", p. 39.

Williams has attempted, somewhat unconvincingly, to advance the arguments that many of those youths who were wearing uniforms at Cassinga had simply donned them because they were donations from Cuban soldiers; that parades and marching by uniformed ranks of people were merely a means of maintaining order amongst the civilians in the camp; and that in photographs of uniformed women bearing clearly identifiable rifles they were actually carrying cleverly carved wooden replicas – presumably simply “toys”.¹⁵³ Yet the gist of his dissertation highlights the plight of those SWAPO exiles whose experience has been suppressed or manipulated by the liberation movement for political gain – thereby emphasising the need to consider prevailing narratives with a degree of circumspection.

Possibly one of the most pithy and succinct responses to the continuing claim by SWAPO and others that the attack on Cassinga had been a deliberate, callous and brutal act of genocide, the extermination of a group of defenceless and innocent civilian refugees, has been made by L’Ange. In his book, he certainly shows no sympathy for the apartheid government, but is constrained to comment: “No explanation was offered as to what Pretoria or the SADF would have gained from the massacre of Namibian women and children.”¹⁵⁴ Heywood has attempted to provide a reason, claiming that “ the massacre was planned with brutal cynicism to forestall a breakthrough in negotiations with the United Nations which might have led to free and fair elections in Namibia”.¹⁵⁵ But at a time when, according to media reports, South Africa held the diplomatic initiative, this seems unlikely. The political and military risks of carrying out that particular part of Operation REINDEER were enormous and as has been shown, the documentary evidence indicates that Viljoen had to work hard to convince his superiors that the raid should take place at all.

It is inconceivable that such risks would have been taken to attack an objective of no military value that was guaranteed to bring the ire of the entire world to bear on South Africa. If Vorster had indeed been gambling on SWAPO withdrawing from the negotiations as a result of the attacks and hoping to thus strengthen his own hand, it certainly did not happen. And he would surely have realised that his position would be significantly weakened had he sanctioned an attack on a refugee camp in the midst of such delicate negotiations. An attack on a military target, he might conceivably have felt, could be justified to the world; but this would have been impossible in the case of an attack on

153. C.A. Williams, “Exile History: An Ethnography of the SWAPO Camps and the Namibian Nation”, PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2009, pp. 40 (note 78), 299 (note 3), 314 (note 7), 317 (note 8).

154. L’Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 345.

155. Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, p. 70.

civilians. As it was, there are strong indications of reluctance on the part of some in his cabinet to go along with the decision to carry out the attacks,¹⁵⁶ and had there been any cause for doubt on his part he would almost certainly not have authorised military action.

Equally, given the high risks from a military perspective, the generals would have been insane to take such risks for any other reason than that they were convinced that the target they were attacking was a key military installation; that its destruction was vital to the prosecution of the war. Viljoen insists that the decision to attack Cassinga was based purely on military strategy and that it was never intended as a means of provoking SWAPO to withdraw from negotiations.¹⁵⁷ It is difficult to accept that a military action of such significance could have been undertaken independently of the political implications; but the generals may have manipulated Vorster, because (mistakenly) they expected SWAPO to play down the attack to avoid showing up the organisation's vulnerability and military incompetence.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, the South Africans did not anticipate their action being masterfully turned by SWAPO into a "deliberate massacre". The documentary evidence points to the generals being surprised at the number of civilians at Cassinga. They should not have been – given SWAPO's Maoist approach to guerrilla warfare.

Inevitably, the attack did result in civilian deaths, whether these were many or few. The word "massacre" is defined as "an indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of people". The bombs that rained down on Cassinga were indiscriminate, and the fighting in the trenches where many women had taken shelter, was brutal. That is the nature of war. The resistance by the PLAN fighters at Cassinga was heroic by any standards and the paratroopers were trained to fight aggressively; in places the fighting was indeed intense. With women and children in the base, as was the case with ZANLA at Chimoio, the only way that killing them could have been avoided would have been to refrain from launching the attack at all. There is absolutely no evidence that the killing of civilians was deliberately planned and it appears that SWAPO exaggerated the numbers of civilians who died as part of their very effective propaganda campaign. Whatever the actual numbers of civilian dead, this became the single greatest failure of the operation for the South Africans, both from a tactical and a strategic

156. C. Saunders, "Cassinga", *Southern African Review of Books*, September/October 1994; A.J. van Wyk, *Dirk Mudge: Reënmaker van die Namib* (Pretoria, Van Schaik, 1999), p.115; Interview, Gen C.L. Viljoen, Bet-El Farm, Ohrigstad, 2 May 2002.

157. Interview, Gen Constand Viljoen, 2 May 2002.

158. DOD, Folder titled "Cassinga", Top Secret letter C SADF to Minister of Defence, "MilitêrPolitiekeSituasie in Suidwes-Afrika", 27 February 1978.

point of view. It was this that enabled SWAPO to turn the South African military victory into a propaganda defeat, and this had a strategic impact.

Saunders has described the raid on Cassinga as the use of military power by South Africa “deep inside Angola to weaken Swapo in the interests of maintaining South African control in Namibia”.¹⁵⁹ This is almost certainly so, from the political point of view. Vorster and the Foreign Affairs minister, “Pik” Botha wanted to delay a settlement in order to negotiate the most favourable conditions for South Africa. Strategically, however, the South African raid could be seen to have backfired. Prior to the raid, it was SWAPO that had been seen as intransigent and inflexible during the negotiations facilitated by the Contact Group; after the raid, South Africa was seen as the belligerent aggressor, antagonising the Western Five by its reckless action, jeopardising its future credibility and providing SWAPO with unassailable justification for withdrawing from the negotiations. The whole process of a settlement for Namibia was on a knife-edge with South Africa seen as the direct cause of the threatened shipwreck. In the event, according to Katjavivi, SWAPO deduced that the raid was intended to force them to turn their backs on the Contact Group’s proposals, so they did precisely the opposite, and accepted them.¹⁶⁰

The attack on Cassinga can be seen as bringing some military strategic success; but even this was limited. There was an immediate and significant decrease in SWAPO insurgent activity in Ovamboland after Operation REINDEER, with no incidents at all taking place by the middle of June 1978. But by July the incidents began to pick up again, and by September they had reached a high point that was maintained until and even after the elections that South Africa insisted on holding without UN involvement in December of that year.¹⁶¹ On 23 August 1978, less than four months after the destruction of Cassinga, SWAPO launched a co-ordinated stand-off bombardment attack simultaneously on several SADF installations along the northern Namibian border, in which ten national servicemen were killed at Katima Mulilo in the Caprivi Strip.¹⁶² It was exactly what ZANLA had done at Grand Reefs after the attack on Chimoio, but SWAPO achieved far greater success. So while Operation REINDEER did pass the initiative in the war back to South Africa temporarily, this did not last long. Those within the SADF hierarchy who understood the nature of an insurgency war, including

159. Saunders, “Cassinga”.

160. P.H. Katjavivi, *A History of Resistance in Namibia* (London, James Currey, 1988), p.119.

161. DOD, HS OPS, (5), Box 121, Secret HS OPS/310/4 REINDEER Vol. 2, Encl. 30, Top Secret “RSA teen SWAPO Basisse”; “Guerilla Influx in Ovambo Increases”, *Star*, 29 July 1978; “Growing Number of South Africans Affected by Swapo Violence”, *Star*, 20 April 1979.

162. Steenkamp, *SA’s Border War*, p. 83.

General Ian Gleeson, the overall commander of the operation, expected no more, and the original estimate by the SADF was that the operation would set SWAPO back by about six months.¹⁶³ It has been said in connection with the effect of the Cassinga raid, “a guerrilla army is a resilient organisation that relies not so much on infrastructure as on people and ideas”.¹⁶⁴ The SADF could destroy the SWAPO infrastructure, but they could not annihilate the people or destroy their ideas of freedom. As a military organisation, the only way for the SADF to recover and maintain that initiative, therefore, was by increasing the frequency and the scope of cross-border strikes, which in turn escalated the war.

At a political level, the raid was a strategic setback for South Africa. Perhaps its greatest strategic significance lay in the fact that Operation REINDEER heralded a new approach to the conflict by South Africa – one of increasingly fighting the war across the border. In L’Ange’s words,

In the peaceful atmosphere of Vorster’s holiday cottage at Oubos on the Cape coast, South Africa’s military leaders in December 1977 took a fateful decision that would help tip the limited “border war” into the biggest military conflict fought in Africa since the Second World War.¹⁶⁵

Although Jasper has stated that the appointment of P.W. Botha as prime minister in 1978 is considered to be the turning point in the change of government strategy,¹⁶⁶ from a military point of view, it was Operation REINDEER and perhaps more specifically the attack on Cassinga that heralded the strategic change. Certainly, P.W. Botha was instrumental in introducing this change, but that happened even before his accession to the highest position of political power in the country.

8.4.3. Comparative Thoughts on the Rhodesian and South African Operations

Both Operations DINGO and REINDEER had the same effect on the tactics of the insurgents against whom they were directed: their camps were thereafter increasingly better sited and their defences improved to the extent that it was no longer feasible to think in terms of a purely airborne operation to attack them. Haarhoff, referring to the Zimbabwean insurgents, writes that “the terr camps had become so well defended that airborne forces without traditional ground support were unable to dislodge the enemy without the risk of

163. Interview, Lt Gen Ian Gleeson (ret'd), Pretoria, 16 January 2003.

164. Alexander, “The Cassinga Raid”, p. 176.

165. L’Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 343.

166. R.S. Jaster, *The Defence of White Power: South African Foreign Policy under Pressure* (London, Macmillan, 1988), p. 79.

heavy casualties.”¹⁶⁷ In the case of the South Africans, they found that not only were the insurgent defences significantly improved after the attack on Cassinga, but also their bases were never again concentrated into such a small area, making future airborne attacks extremely difficult to plan and execute successfully. The first example of this adaptation by SWAPO was seen by the SADF two years after the attack on Cassinga. The movement’s new operational HQ, known as QFL, formed a complex of 13 bases spread across an area of 15km by 3 km, making it an almost impossible objective for an airborne force alone to attack.¹⁶⁸

A peculiarity of both the battles at Chimoio and Cassinga was the presence of senior officers that had no business being there. This was less pronounced in the Rhodesian operation, where the Commanding Officer of the RLI, Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Rich, was helicoptered into the battlefield in the role of a trooper, incongruously placing himself under the command of his own subordinates and fighting alongside his son, who was a second lieutenant.¹⁶⁹ The commander of the troops fighting in that battle was a major, one rank below that of Rich, but apparently Rich himself did not interfere with the running of the battle. In the South African operation the Army’s Director of Operations, Brigadier Hannes Botha, one rank above Colonel Breytenbach, did much the same thing, parachuting into Cassinga with the assault element. Breytenbach claims that Botha also acted as a rifleman,¹⁷⁰ but in the extraction plan he is listed as part of the brigade HQ¹⁷¹ and there is no evidence that he placed himself under anybody’s direct command, although he apparently in no way interfered with Breytenbach’s running of the battle. However, In press reports after the operation, Botha the rugby Springbok was feted as “the commander” and apparently basked in this glory, despite it being absolutely untrue.¹⁷² He could only have been presented in this role for purposes of propaganda directed at the rugby-loving white South African population.

There was also the anomaly of both Brigadier Du Plessis and General Viljoen being at Cassinga. Although according to archival documentation, Du Plessis was a part of the operation, it was not part of the plan that he should jump into Cassinga with the paratroopers and Breytenbach accuses him, somewhat unfairly perhaps, of having been

167. Haarhoff, “Op Dingo: 2 Commando”, p. 187.

168. DOD, Aanvullende Dokumente, OD 1968 Group, Box 81, Confidential “Verslag Operasie SCEPTIC”.

169. Haarhoff, “Op Dingo: 2 Commando”, pp. 184–186.

170. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, pp. 188–189.

171. Comp Para Bn Opso 1/78, Appendix C.

172. “Swapo Terrorists Fight to the Death as Parabats Swoop down”, *Sunday Tribune*, 7 May 1978; “Duisend is Dood,” *Rapport*, 7 May 1978; “The One-Day War”, *Sunday Tribune*, 7 May 1978.

almost single-handedly responsible for the near-disaster when the ambiguous command and control arrangements caused confusion. Viljoen, as Chief of the Army, probably enjoyed the prerogative of deciding where he wanted to be during an operation; nevertheless, it was not only irregular, but also highly risky and irresponsible for him to place himself in such a vulnerable position. In the event, he was among those paratroopers who got out by the skin of their teeth when the Cubans counter-attacked. Had he been killed or captured it would have been a serious strategic propaganda setback for the South Africans and they could conceivably even have lost their narrow tactical victory. Viljoen claimed that he favoured exposing his senior officers to operational situations, as most of them (including himself) had never had the opportunity to see combat.¹⁷³ This, of course, is in keeping with the traditional and sometimes admirable, heroic and romantic notions of the warrior leader, but it is questionable whether there is place for such thinking on the modern battlefield. However, it was a tradition that was not easily eclipsed in the military thinking of the Afrikaner. General Louis Botha, South Africa's first prime minister, had probably been the last head of a government in the world to take to the field of battle at the head of his troops when the Union Defence Force invaded and captured German South West Africa in 1914.

In sharp contrast to the South Africans, many of the Rhodesian general officers had seen combat in Malaya, so they understood the folly of exposing themselves where death or capture would mean a strategic victory for the insurgents. As for the Rhodesian officer, Lieutenant Colonel Rich, a former Commander of the Rhodesian SAS, he had no shortage of combat experience. He had seen action in both the Korean War and the Malayan Emergency.¹⁷⁴ So in his case the argument could hardly be used that he "needed to be exposed to operational conditions under fire". But there is nothing out of the ordinary for an officer of his rank to be in the thick of fighting, although it seems that in this case it was simply a desire to go into action with his son that prompted him to impose himself on the tactical commanders. In any case, Breytenbach himself negated the argument to justify senior officers trying to get combat exposure when, only two years later, as a colonel and one of the most experienced combat commanders in the SADF, he accompanied the paratroopers as a rifleman on fire force call-outs, placing himself under the company commander, a mere captain.¹⁷⁵ For a dedicated soldier who has chosen the profession of arms, the scent of battle is hard to resist!

173. Interview, Gen Constand Viljoen, Bet-El Farm, Ohrigstad, 2 May 2002.

174. M. Rich, "Op Dingo: Father and Son", in Adams and Cocks, *Africa's Commandos*, p. 191.

175. Interviews, Cmdt Piet Nel, P.E., 14 October 1991; Lt Morné Coetzer (retd), Pretoria, 19 June 1995.

Any attempt to draw a straight comparison between Operation DINGO and the airborne assault on Cassinga during Operation REINDEER would be fruitless, because the differences are significantly too great. However, the similarities are sufficient for certain comparisons to be made on issues of principle. The greatest of these are concerned with command and control of an airborne operation.

The Rhodesians adopted a very clear and unambiguous command and control system, based on their extensive experience of much smaller airborne operations of the fire force kind. At the strategic level, the prime minister and minister of defence were located in Salisbury, the capital. At the operational level, the Commander of ComOps was located in an airborne command post in a Dakota aircraft that orbited at high altitude, far enough from the objective area to not be exposed to anti-aircraft fire or attack by enemy interceptors, yet near enough to be guaranteed constant and excellent radio communication with both the HQ in Salisbury and the tactical commanders on the battlefield. In fact, he was able to monitor the tactical radio nets. General Walls, in the airborne CP, did not at any stage interfere with the running of the tactical battle, but he was able to make critical decisions such as authorising the tactical commanders to extend the operation through the night and giving additional guidelines and time limits. He remained very much in feel with the battle throughout, which made him better able to make such decisions. At no time was there any break or failure in radio communications and Walls always knew exactly what was happening in the ground.

Importantly, one step lower down at the tactical level, the Army and Air Force commanders were at all times next to one another and were able to make joint decisions with no time lapse. Both these commanders, Group Captain Norman Walsh and Major Brian Robinson, were given total operational command over the respective Air Force and Army assets and neither had to seek other authority to employ them. They were in complete control of all the troops and all the aircraft participating in the operation. However, the decision to place these two commanders in a helicopter "command post" that was piloted by the Air Force commander and was orbiting the battlefield at low altitude had mixed benefits. While it did allow them to view the progress of the battle they were controlling, to maintain excellent communications and to make vital decisions at crucial times, it also made them vulnerable, and when their aircraft was hit and had to withdraw, the momentum of the battle was lost for a considerable period of time.

The South Africans, running a far bigger operation over much longer distances and

attacking several objectives on the same day, had a very different arrangement for command and control. At the strategic level, the military supremo (in this case General Malan) was in Pretoria at Defence HQ, close to both his Defence minister and the prime minister. At the operational level, a headquarters had been set up in Ondangwa, where the overall operational commander, Major General Ian Gleeson, was located with his Air Force commander, Colonel Blackie de Swardt. They could report directly back to Pretoria. A tactical commander for the airborne part of the operation (the attack on Cassinga) was meant to be in an airborne CP, serving as a link between the ground commander and the overall commander in Ondangwa and able to make tactical decisions, such as whether, when and where to drop the airborne reserve or whether to call for unscheduled air strikes in the event of outside interference by the Cubans or the MPLA. But there was no airborne brigade HQ element in the air because Brigadier Du Plessis decided to jump onto the objective with the attacking troops. This placed him in a position where he could have no influence on the operation, and where he began to interfere with the running of the battle, which was not his task.

Viljoen and Gleeson clearly understood the value of the concept of an airborne CP (hence their instructions to Du Plessis to use one), but Du Plessis apparently did not. From Breytenbach's book on the operation, it appears that he also did not, but this is irrelevant, because it was not his responsibility. While the Rhodesians had a great deal of experience of controlling a battle from the air and had worked on modifying an aircraft to be equipped as an airborne command post, the South Africans had no experience of such a concept. Du Plessis, whose responsibility it would have been to ensure that such a capability was available for the operation and who should have made it his business to work closely with the Air Force to do so, did nothing. Whatever the reason for this, the fact is that there was, throughout the attack, poor communication between the force of paratroopers on the ground and the HQ back at Ondangwa. At times Gleeson had no idea what was happening at Cassinga.¹⁷⁶ Du Plessis proved to be a millstone around Breytenbach's neck instead of being able to provide him with support, communications and crucial decisions such as arranging for the redirecting of air resources during the Cuban counter attack, monitoring the bigger picture around Cassinga or consulting with him on the employment of the brigade reserve.

176. Interview, Lt Gen Ian Gleeson, Cape Town, 13 September 2013. Gleeson confirmed that for long periods during the battle he had no communication at all with either Du Plessis or Breytenbach, and when he did have contact it was very poor. This left him largely in the dark at crucial times during the operation.

A major difference in approach between the Rhodesian and the South African operations was their control of air assets. Breytenbach had no Air Force commander with him, and neither was there apparently any intention to provide Du Plessis with such a person had he used an airborne CP. Instead, there was a MAOT located at the HAA, some 22km away from Cassinga, and an overall Air Force commander at Ondangwa, almost 300km away. With the added complication of the available SAAF strike aircraft having targets several hundred kilometres apart (the Rhodesians concentrated all their air assets on one target at a time), there was therefore no immediate joint decision-making that could take place close to the action. Instead, a lengthy chain of requests would have to be followed and the final decision taken by someone not on the battlefield. This resulted in at least one occasion when it seems a strike aircraft pilot had to make the decision himself on which attacking force to support¹⁷⁷ and in the case of the helicopters, confusion resulting before and during the extraction. Of course, there were good reasons for the South African system that was in place, but there can be little doubt that the Rhodesian system was more streamlined and better suited to airborne operations.¹⁷⁸ It also needs to be borne in mind that at the time the Rhodesians were at the pinnacle of their experience in joint operations; co-operation between the Army and Air Force had therefore been honed to a sharpness only ever achieved through ongoing combat exposure over an extended period of time. The South Africans, on the other hand, were here embarking on their first real joint offensive Army/Air Force operation. It must be said, however, that as their war progressed, so the ground/air co-operation in the SADF improved quite markedly. Barnard, quoting an interview with Brigadier Theo de Munnink, the first commander of Western Air Command, states that this command was established in 1979 to better enable the SAAF to support the Army.¹⁷⁹ Real-time command and control, according to Lord, was only introduced at 310 Air Force Command Post in Oshakati at HQ Sector 10 in 1983, allowing proper utilisation of the SAAF fighter force.¹⁸⁰

The Rhodesians were also well ahead of their South African counterparts in terms of operational parachute dropping. Their transport aircraft pilots had dropped paratroopers

177. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!* pp. 329–330.

178. Gleeson himself admitted that the Rhodesians had a far better command and control system than the SADF (Interview, Lt Gen Ian Gleeson, Cape Town, 13 September 2013).

179. L. Barnard, "The Role of the South African Air Force (SAAF) during the SADF's Cross-Border Operations in Angola, 1978–1981: A Historical Exploration", *Journal for Contemporary History*, Special edition on Grensoorlog/Border War, 1966–1989, 31, 3 (December 2006), p.267.

180. Lord, "SAAF Fighter Involvement in the Border War, 1965–1988", p. 265.

under fire on many occasions, whereas this was the first time that SAAF transport pilots did so. Previous operational drops by the SAAF had taken place at night or onto unopposed DZs. By the admission of the SAAF squadron commander in charge of the drop, who was the pilot in the leading aircraft, this had a direct bearing on their steadiness¹⁸¹ and must certainly have contributed to the inaccurate drop. The Rhodesians, on the other hand, dropped their paratroopers exactly where they were meant to be. The Rhodesians also, acting on their experience with the fire force technique, dropped their paratroops in stop lines that required the aircraft to fly in a line-astern formation and for each aircraft to commence its drop in succession, whereas the South Africans used a “V” formation to drop the assault companies simultaneously. The Rhodesian option, flying in a “stream”, was far simpler and much easier to execute.

The Rhodesians had learned this lesson from fire force: the paratroopers were dropped to form a stop line, not an assault force. There was no time spent in assembling or in forming up – they simply contacted the next paratrooper to confirm their positions, faced the enemy and waited for them to run towards them in trying to escape the Air Force bombardment; a bombardment which, together with the strafing by the jets and the gunfire from the helicopters, seems to have been viewed as the assault. Certainly, it continued after the paratroopers had been dropped, whereas at Cassinga it was over by the time the paratroopers jumped. At Chimoio it was only much later, when the objective had been bombed into a degree of submission, that the paratroopers began to advance into it to carry out a sweep. In addition, the Rhodesians made a great deal of use of helicopter gunships, controlled from the joint command post in a helicopter, to take out pinpoint targets, and there was always a “cab rank” of strike aircraft orbiting above the objective to call on for close air support.¹⁸² This was support the South Africans did not have.

The South Africans planned a conventional infantry assault on their objective after the jump, which called for more time to form up the assault force and greater control and co-ordination to execute the movement. The distance of the objective from the SADF bases in Namibia prevented the South Africans from utilising helicopter gunships and the dissipation of the air effort meant that there were times when there was no air cover at all over Cassinga. However, had the SADF adopted the solution for the range limitation of the Alouette helicopters that the Rhodesians implemented during the attack on Tembué (the

181. Interview, Col Harry Gilliland (ret'd), Pretoria, 5 July 1995.

182. Pringle, *Dingo Firestorm*, p. 137; Cowderoy and Nesbit, *War in the Air*, pp. 78–79.

establishment of a refuelling point along the way), gunships would have been available at Cassinga and these could have provided crucial support when it was needed. The Rhodesians were never without immediate close air support throughout the offensive phases of their attacks. The SAAF had far more strike aircraft at its disposal than did the Rhodesian Air Force, but whereas the Rhodesians had been prepared to throw every available aircraft into the fray, the South Africans at Cassinga, still new at this game and cautious of the international repercussions, did not use the aircraft most suited for the task of ground attack in terms of range – the Mirage F1AZ.¹⁸³

Both the Rhodesians and the South Africans used the “box” positioning of their airborne troops to attempt to seal off the objective and systematically reduce it. The Rhodesians, far more experienced in the technique than the South Africans, achieved what they intended because of the accuracy of their drops; the South Africans, on the other hand, dropped their paratroopers inaccurately, resulting in large numbers of the insurgents escaping. Both Rhodesians and South Africans were subjected to fire from friendly forces as a result of the “box” positions in the densely vegetated areas where their objectives were located. This was almost inevitable, with all the assault troops firing inwards from three different directions. In the case of the Rhodesians, where the sweep lines were converging on one another, this resulted in a significant number of wounded casualties to their own forces: one 24-man stop group of the RLI took six casualties – one in four – all from friendly fire.¹⁸⁴ But the South Africans suffered casualties from friendly fire because of poor ground-air co-ordination – something the Rhodesians had developed to a higher level.

All of the Rhodesian soldiers used during Operation DINGO were battle-hardened veterans, professionals who were pulled out of ongoing operational deployments to undertake the two successive raids. Many of them had already executed a dozen or more combat parachute jumps and as full-time soldiers, the war was a way of life to them.¹⁸⁵ Only a small percentage were conscripts. The officers and senior NCOs were all highly trained regular soldiers whose lives were totally focused on their military profession and who had long been commanding soldiers in combat, in most cases for years. The vast majority of those South African soldiers used during the assault on Cassinga, on the other hand, were part-time CF men who had been conscripted and who were called up for a “camp” as part of their conscript liability. For many, it was to be their first taste of action and only a small

183. Lord, “SAAF Fighter Involvement in the Border War, 1965–1988”, p. 263.

184. Adams, “Op Dingo: 3 Commando”, p. 190.

185. M. McDonald, “Op Dingo: View from Behind a MAG”, in Adams and Cocks, *Africa's Commandos*, p. 194.

handful of those who had seen action had ever parachuted operationally. Except for two platoons of national servicemen and the PF officers and NCOs who participated, all the others (over 75% of the total) were civilians who had been pulled away from their normal occupations, given a brief but concentrated period of refresher training, done a rehearsal and were then thrown into the cauldron of Cassinga. This made the success of their operation quite remarkable and speaks volumes of the high standard of training that was initially given to paratrooper conscripts of the SADF when they reported for duty as 18-year olds at 1 Parachute Battalion. The officers and NCOs, though by most accounts displaying tremendous enthusiasm and dedication, necessarily lacked the training, experience and exposure of their full-time Rhodesian counterparts. Breytenbach himself was later to write in a letter to the three parachute battalion commanders, the year after the attack on Cassinga,

Since I have been at the brigade, and especially after experience in combat situations with paratroopers, I have come to the conclusion that our leader corps need an awful lot of improvement . . . There is nothing much wrong with the troops and the few things which are wrong must be put right by the leader group at various levels.¹⁸⁶

But using citizen soldiers made security difficult, as was evident from the initial cancellation of the operation due to a security leak. The Rhodesians were far more easily able to impose a security clampdown with their regular troops.

The Rhodesians had a more flexible plan, evidenced by their ability to extend their operations into the next day at both their objectives. But although there were Mozambican forces, including fighter aircraft, within striking distance, they were reasonably sure that they would not counter-attack. Cassinga, on the other hand, was located in an area where there were many concentrations of mechanised and armoured forces, both Cuban and MPLA, and there was little doubt that they would counter-attack once the initial element of surprise had been lost. In fact, Constand Viljoen passed a rare word of criticism when he expressed the view that Jan Breytenbach had taken the armoured threat from Techumatete far too lightly during his appreciation and planning, underestimating their ability to react and intervene.¹⁸⁷ He implied that more should have been done to neutralise this threat.

Nevertheless, in the end, both the Rhodesian and South African operations were tactical successes. The extent to which the strategic goals were or were not met was

186. Letter, Col J.D. Breytenbach, HQ 44 Para Bde to OCs 1, 2 and 3 Para Bns, Ref. 44 Para Bde/501/7/2, 15 August 1979.

187. Interview, Gen Constand Viljoen, Bet-El Farm, Ohrigstad, 2 May 2002.

dependent on the politicians and their decisions both before and after the raids. Even after almost four decades, there is controversy about this, but there can be no doubt that these raids each had a strategic intent and that it was only by means of an airborne assault that they could have been carried out. Yet they certainly did not change the final result of the war. For soldiers, regardless of how detailed a study they may have made of insurgency as a form of war, it is extremely difficult to accept that military successes rarely influence the ultimate outcome of the conflict. In this regard, the profound truth of the statement attributed to Niccolò Machiavelli is particularly relevant: “Success in war is determined by the political advantages gained, not by victorious battles.”¹⁸⁸ Brian Robinson, co-victor of the battles at Chimoio and Tembué, acknowledged this after the war, with a tinge of bitterness but with absolutely realistic honesty:

We had lost the war! This provocative statement will surely incur the wrath of all who subscribe to the view that we never ever lost a battle so how could we possibly have lost the war. My answer to that question is to ask which government and which president now sit in the Zimbabwe seat of power.¹⁸⁹

However, Jan Breytenbach, victor of the battle at Cassinga, has never acknowledged that he was on the losing side and in his memoirs he rails in anger at those who made strategic and political decisions, apparently convinced that the war might have had a different outcome if he had been able to dictate policy on the operational and strategic levels.¹⁹⁰ But a battlefield genius on the tactical level is seldom a good strategist.

8.4.4. Operation MELBA: Failed Strategy (Rhodesia)

At this point it is appropriate to take a brief look at another airborne operation of strategic import that the SADF came close to carrying out. The fact that it was not executed is an indication of how dependent the strategic application of an airborne capability is on political developments and decisions. During the final months of the Rhodesian campaign there was a last-minute change of plan while the paratroopers were employed in the tactical fire force role. For the last rotation of paratrooper companies at Fire Force Yankee, where the CF paratroopers were deployed, C-Company, 2 Parachute Battalion, which had been undergoing fire force training at Madimbo, was preparing to relieve C-Company, 3 Parachute Battalion. But the company was instead suddenly flown from Madimbo to

188. M.N. Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Washington DC, Government Printing Office, 2009), p. 1-35.

189. J. Pittaway (ed.), *Special Air Service, Rhodesia, the Men Speak* (Durban, Dandy Agencies, 2010), p. 583.

190. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!* pp. xvi–xviii and 477.

Ondangwa in Ovamboland to take over the fire force duties there. G-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion arrived at Madimbo to take their place.¹⁹¹ There can be little doubt that the reasons behind this decision were based on a planned combined Rhodesian/South African attack on the insurgent assembly points that had been established inside Rhodesia in terms of the Lancaster House agreement. The greater security risk that would have been involved by using CF troops in the run-up to this highly sensitive operation probably motivated the decision to replace them with national servicemen. The two parachute companies from 1 Parachute Battalion deployed in Rhodesia were no longer being called out for fire force duties at that stage, and they both now spent most of their time doing additional training in techniques such as trench and house clearing.¹⁹² This was significant.

Operation MELBA (the SADF part of the planned attack on assembly points, known as Operation QUARTZ by the Rhodesians), was not, as many thought, an intended *coup d'état* to prevent the insurgents from taking power in the election. The intelligence services had indicated that Muzorewa would win the election and that Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF would then immediately leave the assembly points to return to the bush and continue the war. By attacking them while they were still concentrated in the assembly points, it would be possible to wipe out large numbers of trained insurgents and (in the hopes of those who had authored the strategy) destroy the organisations' ability to wage war.¹⁹³ Assembly Point JULIET, in the south-western corner of Rhodesia, on the eastern bank of the Umzingwane River where it is crossed by the road between the Zezani Mission and the tiny village of Makado, was the objective given to 1 Parachute Battalion to attack. It was to be the only assembly point in Rhodesia that would be attacked by South African forces.

Commanded by Commandant "Archie" Moore, the HQ of 1 Parachute Battalion would deploy with four rifle companies and a mortar platoon. The fact that it was to be an operation by 1 Parachute Battalion could be another reason why the CF company was replaced. Assembly Point JULIET consisted of two separate camps, one accommodating 1,000 ZANLA insurgents and the other 600 ZIPRA insurgents, with indications that there might have been about 270 members of the ANC's Umkhonto weSizwe in the camp occupied by ZIPRA¹⁹⁴ (perhaps the justification of SADF intervention). The Assembly Point

191. DOD, C Army Op Bowler Gp, Box 1, C Army to FF Yankee, 1 Para Bn and 44 Para Bde, 16 January 1980.

192. Operational/War Diary of G-Coy, 1 Para Bn 25 January–6 March 1980; Interviews, Cmdt P. Nel, 14 October 1991, Lt Col Chris Grové (retd), 13 June 1995.

193. J. Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts: Inside Story of a Rhodesian Special Branch Officer* (Alberton, Galago, 2006), p. 301.

194. Hand-written draft of Army HQ Design for Battle, Op MELBA, by Col J.D. Breytenbach, February 1980.

was protected by trenches, and besides their personal weapons, the insurgents had 14.5mm heavy machine-guns positioned in their defences.¹⁹⁵

The plan was to bomb and strafe the assembly point with eight Mirage F1AZ aircraft of the SAAF at first light after the election results were known. They would take off from the Air Force Base at Pietersburg (now Polokwane). Immediately after that, four C-130/C-160 transport aircraft from the SAAF would drop B and C-Companies to form stop-lines, hemming the insurgents in against the river. These two companies, still busy with their COIN training, were waiting to emplane on the airfield at Madimbo and had already carried out a rehearsal for the operation, parachuting into the thorn forest around the airfield. While these companies were being parachuted into position around the assembly point, six Puma helicopters of the SAAF would bring in F-Company (Fire Force Zulu) to launch a helicopter assault, with four SAAF Alouette III gunships and a Rhodesian Lynx ground attack aircraft to provide close air support and prevent insurgents escaping across the river. The Pumas would then fetch G-Company (Fire Force Yankee) to reinforce F-Company in fighting through the objective. The mortar platoon was pre-positioned by road via the tiny village of Makado to deliver supporting fire during the attack. A Cessna "Skyshout" light aircraft was to be used to induce ZIPRA to surrender while the attack on the ZANLA camp was in progress. All the paratroopers participating in the operation would be wearing Rhodesian camouflage uniform, although it would have been impossible to hide the fact that almost all the aircraft used were South African.

It was an ambitious plan, and it relied on surprise, speed, shock action and the vulnerable concentration of so many insurgents in a relatively small area for the approximately 450 paratroopers to overrun the objective. As things turned out, the intelligence services were completely off the mark – Muzorewa made a pathetic showing in the election and Mugabe's ZANU-PF swept to victory. Operation MELBA was cancelled; it also signalled the end of the Rhodesian War for the South African paratroopers.

MELBA would have been an operation of strategic import. Unlike the fire force actions, which influenced only the local tactical situation of the area in which they were carried out, the intended attack on Assembly Point JULIET, in conjunction with the simultaneous attacks by Rhodesian forces on other assembly points, was seen as possibly turning the tide of the war by militarily defeating the two insurgent movements by their virtual annihilation. It would also signal direct, offensive participation in the Rhodesian war

195. Hand-written orders of B-Coy Cmdr, 1 Para Bn for Op MELBA, 28 February 1980.

by the SADF. The intention with the planned operation, however, showed a woeful misreading of the essence of insurgency: the killing of people does not destroy a cause – on the contrary, it reinforces it! Had Muzorewa won the election and Operation MELBA/QUARTZ gone ahead and succeeded, it is doubtful that the war would have ended. The insurgent movements would certainly have suffered a serious setback, but as is the nature of an insurgency where the government has lost the moral high ground, it would merely have been a temporary setback. Fortunately, sanity prevailed and the Rhodesian military authorities, under the powerful leadership of Walls, in deed if not in word, conceded political defeat.

Strategically, South Africa was again compelled to step back. Yet the tactical planning for MELBA indicated that since Cassinga, less than two years earlier, many lessons had been learned. The tactical plan, hemming insurgents in against a physical obstacle like the river, made far more sense than dropping the assault force over the river, as had been done at Cassinga. The Rhodesian practice of using paratroopers to form stop lines was followed, and the assault force made use of the far more flexible and timesaving technique of positioning the assault force by helicopter. Importantly, command and control by the battalion HQ would have been exercised from a helicopter, and the most suitable ground attack aircraft would have been employed, both jet strike aircraft and helicopter gunships.

8.5. DEDUCTIONS

The collapse of the Portuguese Empire and their withdrawal from Africa had a profound effect on both Rhodesia and South Africa. Mozambique and Angola respectively now became the primary area of operations for the two white states in their efforts to stem what they saw as the insurgent onslaught. The political situations that both countries found themselves in led their political and military leaders to regard it as imperative that a telling blow be dealt to the insurgents they were engaging. By striking them in bases vital to their war effort but also far from the border in areas regarded until then as safe, it was felt that three goals could be achieved. Firstly, their military capacity could be curtailed; secondly, they would be made aware of their vulnerability, even in areas previously thought to be secure from attack; and thirdly, their credibility and reputation would suffer a setback, undermining support from their sponsors. This would compel them to take counter-measures that would be time-consuming, expensive and difficult to implement, and they would be faced with the demanding task of regaining lost prestige.

For an attack on bases of this type to succeed, surprise was essential. The Rhodesian Armed Forces and the SADF saw this as possible only through an airborne assault. Both countries had the political will to carry out such operations in the 1970s. In Rhodesia, Prime Minister Ian Smith had a strategic need for a victory over Robert Mugabe and his ZANU. Negotiations with external parties had floundered, but it was imperative that he should reach a settlement of sorts. He saw such a settlement with the more moderate internal nationalists as the solution. However, he wanted to negotiate from a position of strength, and he wanted to send out a message to the world that Rhodesia was still able to hold her own. He believed that the attacks on Chimoio and Tembué would enable him to do this.

On the other hand, South Africa's prime minister, John Vorster, was facing growing political crises at home, and was still smarting from the forced withdrawal of the SADF from Angola at the end of Operation SAVANNAH.¹⁹⁶ It was probably partly his need to re-establish his now-tarnished image as a strongman that allowed him to be persuaded by his generals and his defence minister to adopt a new strategy of striking SWAPO bases deep inside Angola.¹⁹⁷ Cassinga was the first of these and the success of the Rhodesian operation convinced the South African generals that an airborne strike was a viable way of doing this.

Both the Rhodesian and the South African operations, despite the controversy that followed them, were classical examples of an airborne strike with limited resources, making use of innovative planning to overcome difficulties and relying on outstanding leadership for ultimate success. For the Rhodesians, their operation was the acme of years of experience in vertical envelopment; while the SADF operation reflected inexperience in this form of manoeuvre and a failure to learn from the lessons of the Rhodesians. This applied particularly to command and control, as well as joint Army/Air Force co-operation. The aborted Operation MELBA illustrated the importance of having a viable political strategy on which to base the employment of an airborne force.

Although both the Rhodesian and the South African operations were tactically successful, they had mixed strategic results, particularly in the political field. However, they did prove the value of an airborne capability in carrying out an operation of strategic import. Because a strike at the objectives that had been identified as being of strategic value entailed the surprise movement of forces across long distances over hostile terrain, only an airborne force could be considered for such a strategic task.

196. T. Eksteen, *The Statesmen* (Cape Town, Don Nelson, 1978), pp. 134–135.

197. L'Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 344.

CHAPTER 9

A STRATEGIC TOOL: ESTABLISHMENT OF A PARACHUTE BRIGADE

9.1. INTRODUCTION

The decision to establish a parachute brigade was made before the raid on Cassinga took place. In fact, it formed part of a significant expansion of the SADF in the wake of shortcomings identified during Operation SAVANNAH in 1975/1976. These included an extension of the period of conscription and the development of a modern battle school for the Army at Lohattha in the Northern Cape.

The announcement of the intention to create the new airborne formation was made on the eve of Operation REINDEER, which included the attack on Cassinga. Indeed, the Cassinga operation subsequently drove the thinking of those involved and in this chapter the establishment of 44 Parachute Brigade as a strategic airborne capability is critically examined, showing how early efforts proved unsuccessful because of personality clashes.

9.2. THE DECISION TO FORM A PARACHUTE BRIGADE

Confirmation that the paratroopers were regarded as an important part of the more aggressive strategy for the COIN war in Namibia and Angola came on 17 April 1978. The announcement was made in parliament that day by the Defence minister, P.W. Botha, during his budget speech that the Defence Force was to be expanded. This included the establishment of a parachute brigade at Bloemfontein:

With a view to the important part played by practical mobility in a large country such as South Africa, it is necessary to expand the parachute capacity of the South African Army. Recent reorganisation and retraining of Citizen Force parachute battalions was the first step in this direction. It must be possible for paratroopers to be called up at short notice and to act effectively when that happens. In order, on the one hand, to establish a large full-time parachute capacity and, on the other hand, to obtain a larger Permanent Force involvement, 1 Parachute Battalion at Bloemfontein is being expanded... Furthermore, it is intended to establish a full-time parachute brigade headquarters at Bloemfontein as formation headquarters for this mobile reaction force of the South African Army.¹

1. *Hansard*, Monday 17 April 1978, columns 4816 and 4817.

This development had been initiated by the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen, more than a month before Botha's announcement.² This once again reflected Viljoen's exceptional grasp of operational concepts and his thorough understanding of the requirements for successful airborne operations with strategic intent.

Two days after Botha's speech, an announcement was made that the Officer Commanding Orange Free State Command, Brigadier M.J. du Plessis, in addition to his current appointment, would become the first commander of the new parachute brigade.³ The three existing parachute battalions (2 and 3 Parachute Battalions were until then under command of 1 SA Corps.⁴) would henceforth be brigaded to form the nucleus of his new command.⁵ A spokesperson from Defence Headquarters was quoted as saying:

The SADF is involved in a counter-insurgency struggle characterised by border infiltrations of the enemy. Thus it has become necessary for the SADF to have at its disposal a force that can curb border violations immediately and at the place at which they occur. The establishment of a parachute brigade headquarters is part of the Defence Force's scheme to enhance its strategic mobility and to shorten the reaction time of its forces.⁶

On 11 April 1978 the Chief of Army Staff Operations, Major General Ian Gleeson, addressed a memorandum to Brigadier Du Plessis, the Officer Commanding Orange Free State Command. The minute was headed "Planning Directive: 1 Parachute Brigade". It spelled out the need for a parachute brigade to form an Army element capable of rapid action anywhere inside and, if necessary, even outside South Africa. It would be an independent formation (meaning it would not be part of one of the divisions), falling directly under the Chief of the Army. The role of the new brigade was given as "rapid deployment against enemy actions, bases and/or lines of communication, especially in isolated areas". It would be a unique conventional formation in that it would include both a national service battalion and two CF battalions, with 1 Parachute Battalion held permanently in a state of operational readiness. It was envisaged that artillery, anti-aircraft and engineer units would in time be added to the brigade.⁷

2. Secret Minutes, Debriefing Conference, Army HQ, 20 March 1978, H LEëR/D OPS/309/1/3 ALG, 28 March 1978.

3. "New Officer for Parachute Brigade", *Friend*, 19 April 1978; "Reorganisation for Parabats", *Citizen*, 21 April 1978.

4. SANDF Archives (hereafter DOD), Verslae Gp, Box 226, Report 87/43, DBB/235/74, " Verslagoor die Reorganisasie van die SA Leër se Konvensionele Taakmag: Stigting van Korps, Divisie en Brigade Hoofkwartiere", 31 July 1974; Memo, OC 44 Para Bde to BGS, 44 VALSK BDE/514/2/9/1, 4 March 1985.

5. "New Parabats Taking off for Exercise", *Friend*, 21 April 1978.

6. "Para Brigade for the Army", *Cape Times*, 21 April 1978.

7. Confidential, unreferenced Memo from C Army S Ops to Brig M.J. du Plessis, 11 April 1978.

This was a major step forward for the airborne forces. For the first time there was clarity on what was expected of the paratroops and they were being given an organisational structure that would enable them to develop their potential. When the Chief of the Army made a formal submission to the Chief of the SADF in August that year requesting the establishment of the formation, it was named 44 Parachute Brigade.⁸

The new brigade had a rather wobbly start and it was six years before it really began to reach its potential. The primary reasons for this were personality clashes, a lack of vision among senior paratrooper commanders and a failure in leadership at the highest levels of the Army. See Appendix 68 for photos of some of those personalities who played an important part in the early years of the parachute brigade.

9.3. ESTABLISHMENT OF 44 PARACHUTE BRIGADE

Despite its very real shortcomings, the airborne attack on Cassinga had proved the viability of deliberately planned and carefully executed parachute operations of battalion-size or even larger, as opposed to the platoon or company-sized operations (including fire force), which until then had been carried out at short notice and with very little planning.

In the SA Army Operational Strategy, issued in October 1978, the envisaged employment of 44 Parachute Brigade was spelled out as the provision of an immediate reaction force, and the execution of airborne assault and other parachute operations as instructed, during both COIN and conventional operations. The brigade would form part of the Chief of the Army's Reserve, together with two mechanised battle groups composed of full-time national service soldiers.⁹ For the first time since the demise of the Mobile Watches fifteen years earlier, the SA Army would be fielding designated regular forces for immediate and sustained operational employment, rather than relying on the often disruptive and invariably time-consuming system of mobilising the Citizen Force.

The designated commander of the new parachute brigade, Brigadier Mike du Plessis, was a former Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion. But to appoint him and expect him to simultaneously continue his duties as Officer Commanding Orange Free State Command,¹⁰ was an unfathomable decision on the part of those who made it at Army HQ. His position at the territorial command absorbed all his time and energy, leaving him unable

8. Confidential Submission, C Army to C SADF, C ARMY/D PLAN/502/1/1/D511, 14 August 1978.

9. DOD, C Army Gleeson Gp, Box 2, Secret Document C ARMY/BGS/303/3/1, October 1978.

10. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Annual Historical Report for 1979, 44 Para Bde, DD929; Memo from OC 44 Para Bde to BGS, "Gesiedenis: 44 Valskermbrigade", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/514/2/9/1, 4 March 1985.

to focus on the urgent requirements of the new brigade if it was to fill its potential as a truly potent force. Whoever was responsible for persuading the Chief of the Army to agree to such an anomaly in command and control must bear a great deal of responsibility for what subsequently went awry. Under such an unworkable arrangement, it was almost inevitable that the officer appointed as Du Plessis' second-in-command, Colonel Jan Breytenbach, would effectively run the fledgling brigade at this time.

Herein lay the seeds of dissention and discontent. Breytenbach, who had successfully commanded the assault at Cassinga, had a reputation for clashing with those in authority and was known for bucking of the system and taking short cuts. He makes this abundantly clear in his own writings, where he appears to relish recounting his many clashes with those in the military system whom he considered to be mundane and bureaucratic in their behaviour and actions.¹¹ He was an independent thinker and outspoken officer, at best a highly controversial figure who generated resentment and suspicion among certain of his superior officers. The eldest sibling in a gifted family, one brother is the celebrated author Breyten Breytenbach and another is the well-known photographer, Cloete Breytenbach. Jan Breytenbach had chosen a military life, including six years spent in the Royal Navy.¹² A highly decorated soldier with extensive operational experience, he was a key player in establishing the parachute brigade. Furthermore he is also the only person who has published an account of the assault on Cassinga and the establishment of the parachute brigade. This is in his book, *Eagle Strike!* (2008). In this thesis his account of what happened is weighed up against documentary evidence from the Department of Defence Archives, as well as interviews conducted with others who were involved in the operation and statements made by Breytenbach himself in interviews conducted with him long before the publication of his book. Other sources are also consulted and certain personal observations are noted.

Du Plessis and Breytenbach had a history of confrontation stretching back some 25 years. They had very different military experience and exposure¹³ and according to Breytenbach's writings, favoured vastly different political poles.¹⁴ But Du Plessis apparently

11. See his three books, *They Live by the Sword: 32 "Buffalo" Battalion, South Africa's Foreign Legion* (Alberton, Lemur Books, 1990); *Eden's Exiles: One Soldier's Fight for Paradise* (Cape Town, Queillerie, 1997); and *Eagle Strike! The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga, 1978* (Sandton, Manie Grové Publishing, 2008).

12. I. Uys, *South African Military Who's Who, 1452–1992* (Germiston, Fortress Publishers, 1992), p. 30.

13. E.G.M. Alexander, "The Cassinga Raid", MA dissertation, Unisa, 2003, pp. 96–102.

14. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, pp. 1–3 and 456.

wielded the greater influence at an important level: According to Wilkins and Strydom in their book, *The Super-Afrikaners* (1980) he was a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond. If this was indeed so, he would presumably have been considered solid and reliable by the political bosses.¹⁵ Breytenbach, on the other hand, was very antagonistic towards the Broederbond. Whether this had anything to do with the appointments made and the early difficulties that beset the brigade will probably always be open to conjecture.

Matters almost came to a head during the Cassinga operation, apparently with open confrontation between the two officers during the planning, rehearsal and execution of the attack. It is a mystery why Constand Viljoen, who was the Chief of the Army at the time and who must have been well aware of the existing antagonism between Du Plessis and Breytenbach, could have sanctioned the appointment of such a volatile combination to establish the brigade at this crucial stage in the development of South Africa's parachute forces. It certainly had a detrimental effect on the brigade and stalled its growth for the best part of three years.

Viljoen may have been faced with political pressure to appoint Du Plessis, and therefore could have made Breytenbach his deputy in the belief that this would make up for any shortcomings in Du Plessis' military aptitude. Equally, he might have been perfectly comfortable with Du Plessis' military capability (despite Breytenbach's scathing opinions) and he may have felt the brigadier's experience, innate courtesy and administrative skills would balance or even complement the operational emphasis and abrasiveness of Breytenbach. But this remains no more than speculation, because in the interview held with Viljoen he would not be drawn into expressing opinions on the comparative abilities of either officer, nor would he comment on the reasons behind the appointments made so long ago.¹⁶ Suffice to say that Du Plessis and Breytenbach had been in the same Cadet Officer class at the SA Military College in the early 1950s and Breytenbach had passed out as the top Cadet in 1953, winning the Sword of Honour. Viljoen had passed out the following year, junior to both Breytenbach and Du Plessis, but also winning the Sword of Honour.¹⁷ Each of the three was therefore very likely to have had a good idea of the other's capabilities, as they had known one another throughout their officer cadetship and during

15. I. Wilkins and H. Strydom, *The Super-Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1980), p. A65.

16. Interview, Gen C.L. Viljoen, Bet-El Farm, Ohrigstad, 2 May 2002.

17. SADF, Commemorative Publication, *Militêre Akademie/Military Academy, 1950–1975*, (Simon's Town, SA Navy Press, 1975), pp. 8 and 79–80. See also the Honours Boards at the SA Army College, Thaba Tshwane.

their early military careers at a time when the UDF of the 1950s had comprised only a small Permanent Force component.

For whatever reason, Du Plessis appeared to abdicate his responsibility towards the brigade to Breytenbach, who, by all accounts, had the charisma, the energy and the vast knowledge and operational experience that were required. However, indications are he was acerbic with his seniors and lacked the tact necessary to promote a concept that was viewed with scepticism by some. A dedicated militarist, he had already been the first commanding officer of two legendary units: 1 Reconnaissance Commando (the Special Forces or “Recces”) and 32 Battalion, the specialist guerrilla unit. Both these units had been low profile and clandestine, with 1 Reconnaissance Commando involving only a small number of people,¹⁸ while 32 Battalion comprised black Angolan troops who were apparently considered expendable by the military authorities.¹⁹ They were both very unconventional units and entirely suited to a man as unorthodox and non-conformist as Breytenbach. Yet even there, he had frequently clashed with his superiors and his writings reflect his total disdain for anyone who did not share his views.²⁰ In his memoir, *Eagle Strike!*, Breytenbach is particularly contemptuous and dismissive of some of the senior officers he had to work with during his career.

A brigade was going one level higher than Breytenbach’s prior experience. His responsibilities were a great deal more complex because the position called for the integration of artillery, engineers and other elements with the infantry, and this meant a wider span of command. There is little doubt that Breytenbach, who was both combat experienced and staff trained, had the ability to run a brigade, but his temperament did not appear to be suited to doing the groundwork for establishing such an airborne formation in the conventional environment for which it was intended. And at the time there was another wildcard in the paratrooper pack: Commandant D.J. “Archie” Moore, Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion since January 1978. He was hostile towards both Du Plessis and Breytenbach and was determined to oppose all attempts to place his unit, the only full-time parachute battalion, under command of the new brigade.²¹ Parachute units have always tended to attract powerful personalities and clashes between individuals in such organisations are common. Such strong-minded individuals, correctly managed, may well

18. P. Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969–1994* (Alberton, Galago, 1999), p. 55.

19. Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword*, pp. 73–74. This view was also propagated by the ANC, see “SADF Special Forces and the Killing Fields”, *Mayibuye*, September 1991, p. 25.

20. Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp. 57–58 and 60.

21. Personal observations during 1979, when I was a company commander at 1 Parachute Battalion.

contribute towards a dynamic and forceful organisation. Unfortunately, in the period 1978 to 1981 the forces at work in the parachute community were mismanaged and the infighting blighted Constand Viljoen's desire to see a parachute brigade take shape. Viljoen himself, as the Chief of the Army during the period in question, has to bear the primary responsibility for allowing this to happen.

In the wake of the Cassinga operation and after submission of the proposal to establish a parachute brigade, a four-man SADF delegation paid a visit to Israel during October/November 1978 to attend a parachute brigade exercise. The purpose was to learn as much as possible from the Israelis about their particular approach to the organisation and employment of such a brigade, with an eye to the brigade that was being formed in South Africa. The delegation comprised Major General I.R. Gleeson (the Chief of Army Staff, Operations), Brigadier M.J. du Plessis (designated Officer Commanding 44 Parachute Brigade), Commandant "Speedy" De Wet, SAAF (designated Staff Officer Operations, 301 Air Component) and Major A.L. van Graan (designated Staff Officer Operations, 44 Parachute Brigade).²²

It is noteworthy that Jan Breytenbach was not included in this group. In an interview, he claimed to have been behind the arrangements for the visit and then summarily excluded from it.²³ The visit lasted eight days, and although the two-day exercise was of limited value, because it focused on mechanised rather than airborne operations, the delegation was given valuable briefings and visited the Infantry School, a reserve parachute brigade and its mobilisation stores, the Section Leaders' School and the Parachute Training Centre. A comprehensive report with photographs was drawn up after the visit.²⁴

At about this time, a committee under the chairmanship of the Officer Commanding 8 Armoured Division, Brigadier C.J. Swart, compiled a careful study on the offensive capability of the South African Army. In it, considerable emphasis was placed on the need to build up 44 Parachute Brigade and to appoint a specific brigade commander who was not also a territorial command OC.²⁵ Viljoen had commissioned an investigation into the establishment of the parachute brigade in March of that year and it was completed on 14 December 1978. The findings were finally approved by the Minister of Defence on 5 April

22. DOD, Gp K79/45 Verslae, Box 65, Secret "Verslag: Besoekaan Argus vir Valsk Bde Oef, 29 Oktober tot 5 November 1978", Ref. H Leër/520/3/4/6, November 1978.

23. Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (retd), Sedgefield, 30 December 1990.

24. DOD, Gp K79/45 Verslae, Box 65, Secret "Verslag: Besoekaan Argus vir Valsk Bde Oef, 29 Oktober tot 5 November 1978", Ref. H Leër/520/3/4/6, November 1978.

25. DOD, C Army Gleeson Gp, Box 3, Secret Document 8 DIV/306/5, 15 March 1979.

1979, from which date the brigade could be regarded as formally established.²⁶ Both 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions had already been transferred from 1 SA Corps to under command of the brigade on 4 January that same year.²⁷ Located within the lines of Orange Free State Command in Bloemfontein, the HQ consisted of only five people.²⁸

With this small HQ, Breytenbach and Commandant Anton van Graan ran the brigade, for the most part taking companies of CF paratroopers up to the Rhodesian border for training in the fire force technique, and later deploying some of them inside Rhodesia. It was good training and excellent operational exposure for the troops, but it merely served to reinforce the tactical as opposed to strategic thinking of the paratroop officers. His intimate involvement with the CF paratroopers along the Rhodesian border and again when they were deployed inside that country, gained for Breytenbach their lasting admiration and most of them simply accepted that he was the brigade commander. This was not surprising, because they apparently never saw Du Plessis. Breytenbach continued living in Pretoria and commuted to Bloemfontein, only going home at weekends if he was not working.²⁹

During this time, amid the dissent between the senior officers, an under-strength battalion parachute operation on a SWAPO base in Zambia was planned as part of Operation SAFRAAN (discussed later in this thesis). It deems mentioning that the operation was planned for 1 Parachute Battalion, as part of 44 Parachute Brigade,³⁰ but was aborted seconds before the paratroopers were to jump.³¹

At the time, 1 Parachute Battalion was going through what was arguably the busiest period of its history in terms of parachute training. At the same time, its burgeoning operational commitment was placing a huge strain on the unit. The number of parachute operations being carried out in Angola and Namibia had increased drastically and up to three company-sized fire forces were being manned simultaneously towards the end of 1979 – one in Ovamboland and two in Rhodesia. Hard-pressed to deal with the problems of

26. DOD, Reports K87/65, Box 230, "Organisasie en Personeeltabel: 44 Valskerbrigade", H LEËR/D ORG S/503/2/1/0511, 14 December 1978. Also Flag A of Secret Report: *Die Rasionalisering van die Samestelling en Bevel en Beheer van die SA Leër se Valskermmagte*, Ref. 1 VALSK BN/ 503/2/1, 22 October 1984.

27. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Memo from OC 44 Para Bde to BGS: "Geskieiedenis: 44 Valskerbrigade", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/514/2/9/1, 4 March 1985.

28. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Annual Historical Report for 1979, 44 Para Bde, DD929.

29. Correspondence with Maj Gen Anton van Graan (ret'd), Pretoria, 18 and 23 December 2013.

30. Handwritten Top Secret 44 Para Bde Warning Order by Cmdt A.L. van Graan: Waarskuwingsorder No 2/79: Op SAFRAAN, 44 ValskBde/309/1/3, 22 February 1979; see also two handwritten Top Secret Operational Orders exist, namely Opso 1/79 and OPS 2/79, both dated March 1979.

31. DOD, Supplementary Documents, OD 1968 Gp, Box 3, Top Secret Opso: Op SAFRAAN, 13 Sub-Area, 1 March 1979, in War Diary, Operation SAFRAAN, 5–11 March 1979; Top Secret 1 Para Bn Opso 1/79, March 1979; Diary, B-Coy Cmdr, 1 Para Bn, 2–7 March 1979.

the present, the commander of 1 Parachute Battalion was not amenable to lofty thoughts about strategic employment under the umbrella of 44 Parachute Brigade. The battalion was riding a wave as one of the most prominent and successful units in the Army. There was little enthusiasm for being relegated under the brigade to the same status as 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions and losing its exclusive parachute training capability to the brigade.³²

Ultimately, Archie Moore, towards the end of this first year of the brigade's formal existence, succeeded in wresting 1 Parachute Battalion out of its fold, despite it having been Viljoen's initial intention for it to form part of the brigade.³³ See Appendix 69 for the intended organisation of 44 Parachute Brigade, which was envisaged as including a Parachute Centre, 1, 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions, an Engineer Squadron and a Signal Squadron.

9.4. DEACTIVATION OF THE BRIGADE

It would seem that Viljoen lost patience with those to whom he had delegated the responsibility of establishing the parachute brigade, because the Brigade HQ was deactivated towards the end of 1979 or early in 1980 after just a year of existence, and Breytenbach was appointed as Senior Staff Officer Parachute Operations at the Directorate of Operations in Army HQ.³⁴

Close perusal of the official records could not establish beyond doubt what prompted the decision to deactivate the Brigade HQ, but the indications are that the personality clashes and infighting had a great deal to do with it. It was a major setback for the paratroopers. The inability of Breytenbach and Moore to work together and the failure of Du Plessis to provide firm and decisive leadership at this crucial time had effectively split the parachute community into two factions. On the one hand there was 1 Parachute Battalion, comprising Permanent Force officers and NCOs with national service soldiers, junior officers and NCOs undergoing their two year stint of full-time conscription. And on the other, the temporarily de-activated 44 Parachute Brigade, composed of part-time Citizen Force units comprising soldiers who had completed nine months, one year or two years of full-time conscription and were now being periodically called up for their obligatory "camps".

32. M. Alexander, Report, "The Establishment of South Africa's 44 Parachute Brigade", c. 1994.

33. Confidential Submission from C Army to C SADF, C ARMY/D PLAN/502/1/1/D511, 14 August 1978.

34. DOD, Miscellaneous Documents, Memorandum from Officer Commanding 44 Para Bde to BGS: "Gesiedenis: 44 Valskermbbrigade", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/514/2/9/1, 4 March 1985.

This crippled the parachute organisation and for several years effectively marked the end of parachute units or even sub-units being employed operationally under an airborne HQ. For the most part, companies of paratroopers were attached to non-airborne HQs for operations, restricting their employment to the tactical role. Strategic airborne operations could hardly be considered under this arrangement.

Breytenbach claims credit for “moving the brigade to Pretoria”, but provides no evidence to support this, and fails to mention that the HQ was de-activated so there was effectively no longer a brigade to move.³⁵ However, it does seem that Breytenbach lobbied among his mentors in Pretoria for the brigade headquarters to be separated from Orange Free State Command and to be relocated to Pretoria. Meanwhile, Moore lobbied among his mentors for 1 Parachute Battalion to be removed from under command of 44 Parachute Brigade and to be placed directly under command of Chief of the Army again. Incredibly, both of them ultimately succeeded and Du Plessis, the brigade commander, too busy with the affairs of his territorial command to become personally involved in the brigade, found himself undermined by two subordinates, both working towards different objectives. He was left bemused, surprised and outside of the airborne organisation.³⁶

Moore, in the meantime, used the heavy training and operational commitment of 1 Parachute Battalion to motivate the unit’s expansion outside of the brigade. Within a year he had persuaded those in authority at Army HQ that the unit should be enlarged into two four-company “wings” (in effect, two battalions), one for training conscripts during their first year and the other for deploying them operationally during their second year. The Parachute Training Wing also continued to function as a part of this enormous unit. Each of the other two wings had a separate headquarters and was commanded by a commandant (lieutenant colonel).³⁷ This meant that the Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion would become a full colonel, and Moore was promoted into the post at the beginning of 1981.³⁸ This fact alone, casts doubt on Moore’s motive for keeping his unit out of the brigade’s organisation. Although the unit’s name was not changed, it was no longer a battalion, and should more correctly have been termed a regiment of two battalions and a parachute

35. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, p. 455.

36. Alexander, “The Establishment of South Africa’s 44 Parachute Brigade”.

37. Decision Brief prepared by Cmdt D.J. Moore: “Verslagoor Bevel en BeheerStruktuur: 1 Valskermataljon”, Ref. 1 VALSK BN/503/2/1 September 1980, Copy enclosed as Flag B in Secret Report: *Die Rasionisering van die Samestelling en Bevel en Beheer van die SA Leër se Valskermmagte*, Ref. 1 VALSK BN/ 503/2/1, 22 October 1984.

38. Alexander, “The Establishment of South Africa’s 44 Parachute Brigade”.

school. Unfortunately, the new organisation meant that it focused on the training of riflemen, and no great effort was made to train paratroopers in the use of support weapons such as anti-tank guns or missiles and battalion mortars.³⁹ As 1 Parachute Battalion was the prime feeder source for 44 Parachute Brigade, this had serious repercussions for the two CF parachute battalions that each needed to maintain a support company.

In his writings, Breytenbach blames many people for the failure of the early efforts to establish a brigade, but absolves himself of all culpability, despite having been the key figure involved in the brigade at the time.⁴⁰ In his defence, however, there is ample evidence that he did try hard to re-activate the brigade and make it workable. In his new post as SSO Para Ops, he lost no time in lobbying those in authority. He set out the requirements for the brigade's reactivation in a memorandum distributed to all the principal sections of Army HQ, including the whole General Staff.⁴¹ From the wording, he gives the impression that he had the approval of the Chief of the Army to do so. In the absence of anyone else tackling the project, Breytenbach produced an admirable and highly detailed blueprint for an operational parachute brigade. Unfortunately, he appears not to have consulted with others while preparing the document, and his arbitrary intentions for the reorganisation and relocation of 1 Parachute Battalion were bound to raise hackles and produce opposition to his proposals. Inevitably, there was no general acceptance of this "blueprint" plan and Breytenbach struggled to implement even some of the most basic of his ideas because of the opposition he created.

Nevertheless, the document is a remarkable one, and is the first detailed outline of what the parachute brigade should comprise, how it should function and what its role should be. It laid the foundation for later organisational development and the formulation of airborne doctrine. In this, Breytenbach must be acknowledged for the pioneering role he played through his grasp of the airborne concept, his study of its implementation and for committing to paper the considerable amount of thought he put into airborne operations. He addressed issues such as the composition of the brigade HQ, as well as air supply, pathfinders, airborne artillery, engineers and an anti-aircraft capability. He discussed signals, medical and logistic sustainment, and he stressed the need for an improved anti-tank

39. The Annual Reports of 1 Parachute Battalion from 1981 to 1985 indicate that no Support Company existed over this period.

40. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, pp. 455–456 and 474.

41. Confidential Memo from Col J.D. Breytenbach, Ref. 44 PARA BDE/502/6, with attached "Plan for Activating, Training and Employing 44 Parachute Brigade", Ref 44 PARA BDE/502/6, 30 December 1979.

capability. Significantly, he also propagated the training of a black paratrooper company, with a view to expanding it in time to a full battalion of black paratroopers.⁴²

Despite his part in the internal tensions that thwarted Vijoen's intention while the brigade HQ had been located in Bloemfontein, it would also seem that Breytenbach did make some attempts to align the two factions that had developed within the parachute community. In February 1980 he addressed a memorandum to the Director of Infantry and the Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion, setting out the operational tasks of the brigade. He also outlined shortcomings he had observed in the training of the paratroopers that needed to receive attention if the brigade was to fulfil its tasks. The letter shows a clear grasp of the concept of vertical envelopment as it applied to the war that was being waged at the time. Breytenbach listed what he felt should be included in the training curriculum for national servicemen to enable them to prepare better for fire force duties, and for parachute and helicopter assault operations.⁴³ No response to this memorandum could be traced and it seems likely that Moore, now no longer under command of the brigade, simply regarded it as interference in his unit and ignored it.

Breytenbach stated in an interview that he had been told by Viljoen to get the brigade off the ground, but complained that as a staff officer he had no authority to do so.⁴⁴ Characteristically, this did not deter him from continuing with the training of the two CF parachute battalions, and having found a suitable military training area to the north of Pretoria, he established himself in an old farmhouse known as Murrayhill, and began working from there.⁴⁵

On 1 November 1980, Lieutenant General Jannie Geldenhuys took over as Chief of the South African Army, succeeding Constand Viljoen, who had been promoted to full general and appointed Chief of the SADF.⁴⁶ Geldenhuys was not a paratrooper, but he did understand the need for a viable airborne force and realised that the experiment with the parachute brigade had been mismanaged and to be revived would have to be set on the right track. Breytenbach had been provided with a small staff and he admitted in an interview that Geldenhuys did give him some delegated authority, but like Viljoen, would

42. Ibid.

43. Memo SSO Para to D Inf and OC 1 Para Bn, "Training Syllabus, 1 Para Bn", 44 PARA BDE/103/1/8, 7 February 1980.

44. Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgfield, 30 December 1990.

45. "Haakdoornfontein", Unreferenced, undated document apparently by Cmdt J.E. Rabie (circa 1985).

46. J. Geldenhuys, *At the Front: A General's Account of South Africa's Border War* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2009), p. 135.

not appoint him as the brigade commander.⁴⁷ Yet, contrarily, Breytenbach claims in his memoir that he was the brigade commander.⁴⁸ In a *de facto* sense, perhaps one could say he was – *de jure* he was never given that status, with the delegation, authority, responsibilities and legal obligations that this would entail. Breytenbach's account comes across as one of resentment and bitterness at his alleged treatment, and it cannot be denied that the parachute brigade had become something of a stepchild that was being ignored by most of those in the rest of the Army.

Breytenbach nevertheless persisted in his training of the only two units that comprised the brigade at the time, and worked to get them involved in the war. In the face of considerable adversity he was, during this time, able to provide the CF paratroopers with a home and a sense of belonging. Until then the CF parachute battalions had rarely felt that they belonged anywhere. They had been shunted from one headquarters to another and their *alma mater*, 1 Parachute Battalion (they had all passed through the hands of the PF paratroopers at 1 Parachute Battalion), had shown little interest in them and at times had treated them very shabbily. But now for the first time there was somebody in the regular Army who was focusing all his attention on them, and that person was a highly decorated and at the time probably one of the most experienced combat officers in the Army.⁴⁹

During March/April 1980, Breytenbach carried out tests with the artillery, dropping 120mm mortars by parachute and training the gunners to jump with steerable parachute canopies so that they could land close to their mortars and ammunition.⁵⁰ It was the first time the SADF had dropped artillery ordnance by parachute and the gunners who participated were the first national servicemen from the artillery corps trained as paratroopers.⁵¹ Breytenbach also conducted the first-ever SADF parachute battalion group exercise (Exercise CROSSBOW) at Mabiligwe on the Zimbabwe border, using five C-130/160 aircraft to drop 2 Parachute Battalion and an artillery battery from 14 Field Regiment in successive lifts.⁵² This was a remarkable feat and a huge step forward in terms of capability.

47. Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgefield, 30 December 1990.

48. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!* pp. 456, 473 and 477.

49. Interviews, Cmt'd Gerrie Steyn (ret'd) (telephonic), 8 January 1992; Capt Tommie Lamprecht, (ret'd), Pretoria, 7 July 1995; Capt "Pip" Du Plessis (ret'd), Westonaria, 28 March 1992; Capt Dolf Du Plessis (ret'd), Hartebeespoort Dam, 14 June 1995; and Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgefield, 30 December 1990.

50. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Box 54, Development 44 Para Bde, Ref. 504/4, Encls 40 and 41, Confidential Signals from C Army (SSO Para) to Svcs Sch, 14 Fd Regt and 1 Para Bn, 9 and 21 April 1980.

51. Correspondence with Col Herman van Niekerk, HC (ret'd) of Knysna, 18 and 26 December 2013.

52. Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgefield, 30 December 1990.

It was the largest parachute drop and exercise yet held in the almost 20 years that the SADF had disposed of its own paratroopers.

Over the period 21 July to 3 August 1980, the SA Army again sent a four-man group to Israel to attend a parachute brigade exercise and to visit airborne establishments.⁵³ This time the focus of the exercise was on airborne operations, including a last light drop of a complete parachute battalion and night helicopter operations en masse. Yet not one of the visiting group of colonels was a paratrooper! It seems incomprehensible that Breytenbach was not included and one can only surmise that there must have been a good reason for it. Given the confusion that reigned in the airborne organisation, it was an indictment of the paratroopers that they were excluded from such a visit.

Breytenbach appeared to be unconcerned about his exclusion and immersed himself in training and operations with the stalled 44 Parachute Brigade. One of the things he busied himself with was the establishment of a controversial Pathfinder Company, composed of professional foreign soldiers, mostly veterans of the Rhodesian insurgent war. These pathfinders were never employed as such, and Breytenbach was, by mid-1981, accompanying them on vehicle operations in Angola,⁵⁴ much to the chagrin of some other commanders in the field.⁵⁵

Breytenbach also embarked on several projects to equip the paratroopers with suitable weapons, vehicles and equipment. For this endeavour he frequently managed to have Captain P.L. Jäckel, commonly known as “Jakkals” (Jackal), the commander of the Light Workshop Troop (LWT) at 1 Parachute Battalion, brought to Pretoria to assist him. Jäckel was a qualified paratrooper despatcher and air supplier with considerable operational experience, and an officer in the Technical Service Corps. He was able to oversee the dropping of the 120mm mortars for Exercise CROSSBOW and the testing of captured East Bloc light anti-aircraft guns in an airborne role.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, Breytenbach’s impatience with prescribed procedures and abhorrence of time consuming staff work meant that none of his projects were formally registered, so the fruit of his efforts largely disappeared when he was later transferred away from the brigade.

53. DOD, Reports, K80/53, Box 95, Secret “Rapport, Besoek aan Taper, 21 Julie 1980 tot 3 Augustus 1980”, 18 August 1980.

54. Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach, Pretoria, 17 February 1993.

55. L. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2013), p. 124; Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, pp. 462–463; R. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm: Strength Lies in Mobility* (Tyger Valley, Naledi, 2013), pp. 463–465, 469–471 and 486.

56. E-mails between Col Philip “Jakkals” Jäckel (retd), Kleinmond and Brig Gen Jos Rabie (retd), Hermanus, 13 and 14 June 2014.

There can be no doubt that Breytenbach was an innovative, dynamic and competent airborne commander and that there were few senior officers in the SADF with his combat experience at the time. He was an inspirational leader and displayed remarkable physical courage. Most soldiers who had served with him operationally would unquestioningly follow him anywhere. Furthermore, he had a grasp of the potential of airborne operations and probably understood vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre better than any other officer in the SADF except perhaps Constand Viljoen. And yet, two successive Army Chiefs had refused to appoint him as the parachute brigade commander. One of them was Viljoen himself, who knew him well. Breytenbach's prowess as a combat soldier was formidable; but his reputation as a controversial, abrasive and outspoken officer who defied the system and whose conduct bordered on insubordination, was equally well known.⁵⁷ And this was to be his downfall. Despite his accomplishments with few resources and even less support, he was removed from the brigade. From his own account, it appears that there were numerous complaints on the way he went about things, such as his wilful disregard of orders and his surreptitious and unauthorised acquisition of equipment and vehicles for the brigade, as well as his disdain for regulations and procedures. All of this eventually caught up with him.⁵⁸

Geldenhuys, the new Army Chief, was not one to make rash, unfounded decisions. Once he had settled into his new post and acquainted himself with the functioning of the arm of service that he now commanded, he formulated a list of what needed to be addressed within the Army.⁵⁹ He launched an investigation into the organisation and functioning of the conventional forces, under the chairmanship of Brigadier G.J. Viviers, then the Officer Commanding 7 Infantry Division and a former OC 1 Parachute Battalion. The report that emerged from this work group on 29 June 1981 came to be known as the Viviers Report and its recommendations formed the basis for the subsequent re-organisation of the conventional forces of the SA Army.⁶⁰

These recommendations included very relevant points directly applicable to the parachute brigade. The most significant were that the parachute brigade's strategic movement capability should be exploited to the maximum. This implied that all its elements should be air-transportable. I was felt that the brigade should be expanded to include a

57. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, pp. 471–474.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 472–473.

59. Folded, laminated card "ONS MAAK DIE SA LEËR MEER DINAMIES".

60. Secret Report, "Verslag van 'n Werksgroepoor die Org en Funksionering van die Konvensionele Magte", Ref. 7 Inf Div/305/1/1/3, 29 June 1981.

fourth parachute battalion; a full-time parachute battalion group should be formed from Permanent Force leaders and national servicemen in order to achieve a faster reaction time; that the parachute brigade should come directly under the command of the Chief of the SA Army; and that its tactical HQ should be capable of deploying an airborne command post during operations.⁶¹

Furthermore, it was recommended that specialised combat support for the brigade should be developed. This included an anti-tank company, falling directly under the brigade commander, with a light, air-droppable vehicle to enable armoured counter-attacks on an airhead to be met and delayed long before reaching the airhead. In addition a pathfinder group was required and this group should include Permanent Force, national service and CF elements; the anti-aircraft capability of the brigade should consist of a mix of heavy machine-guns and shoulder-launched missiles; and a maintenance company should be established, with an air-supply capability of delivering 100 tonnes of equipment and supplies per day.⁶² These recommendations were clearly designed to provide the brigade with a strategic capability, and for the first time this was clearly spelled out on paper.

Geldenhuis also listed the formalising of 44 Parachute Brigade as one of his goals. The new Army chief was obviously troubled by the confused state of affairs that reigned among the paratroopers as a result of the personal vendettas and backbiting that prevailed. The problem was addressed by convening yet another investigation, this time into the future and the reactivation of the brigade. Colonel C.J. du Plessis, assisted by Commandant A.L. van Graan, carried out the investigation. Both were experienced paratroopers. They consulted widely, including holding discussions with General Du Plessis, Brigadier Liebenberg (the Army's Director of Operations), Colonels Breytenbach and Moore and senior Air Force officers.⁶³ Their recommendations were submitted at the end of July 1981, and included: that a brigade commander be appointed with immediate effect; that the brigade HQ be reactivated and located in Bloemfontein; that the brigade organisation as recommended by the Viviers Report be retained; and that a third CF parachute battalion be established. It was also recommended that 1 Parachute Battalion come under command of the brigade and be divided into a separate parachute training centre and two separate

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Secret Investigation, "Ondersoek en Staftoets na die Toekoms en Heraktivering van 44 Valskermmbrigade", Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/503/2/1, 30 July 1981, Flag C, Secret Report: *Die Rasionalisering van die Samestelling en Bevel en Beheer van die SA Leër se Valskermmagte*, Ref. 1 VALSK BN/ 503/2/1, 22 October 1984.

battalions, one for training and the other for operations; and that the continued existence of the pathfinder group of mostly foreigners be reconsidered.⁶⁴

It was apparent from the tone of this investigation that Breytenbach and his pathfinders were not being seen in a favourable light. Du Plessis was instructed to reconsider certain aspects of his investigation and his final recommendation was that the brigade HQ be reactivated as soon as possible in Pretoria as an interim measure, but that it be moved back to Bloemfontein by March 1983, with 1 Parachute Battalion coming under its command.⁶⁵

9.5. BREYTENBACH'S DEPARTURE AND THE FORMALISATION OF THE BRIGADE

Although, in the light of subsequent events, not all the recommendations of these investigations were implemented, they did provide the Chief of the Army with the information he wanted to enable him to take some informed decisions. In late 1981 or early 1982, Jannie Geldenhuys, accompanied by members of his General Staff, paid a visit to the HQ that Breytenbach had established at Murrayhill. The "Brown Man" (as Breytenbach was generally known because of his tanned and swarthy complexion) was informed that his time with the paratroops had come to an end.⁶⁶ It seems that the old warrior had become an embarrassment to the establishment. He was "exiled" to the Caprivi, far from where he could cause trouble, yet close to the war. There his skills and experience were tapped by giving him the task of setting up a Guerrilla School (officially known as the Special Tasks School, falling under the jurisdiction of the SADF Chief of Staff Intelligence) at which members of rebel movements in neighbouring countries were trained. Part of South Africa's total strategy, which included supporting movements like UNITA in Angola and RENAMO in Mozambique, it was to be his last posting before his retirement in 1987.⁶⁷

Colonel Frank Bestbier, an experienced paratrooper, replaced the "Brown Man" and was formally appointed as OC 44 Parachute Brigade. But Breytenbach was not the only casualty in the purge of the paratroopers carried out by Geldenhuys: at the end of 1981 Colonel "Archie" Moore was transferred away from 1 Parachute Battalion to a staff post at OFS Command and replaced by the newly promoted Colonel Anton van Graan. The year 1982 therefore saw an injection of new blood into both organisations.⁶⁸

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid., Flag D.

66. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, pp. 471–474.

67. Ibid., pp. 475–476.

68. Facsimile of information from Communication Section, 44 Para Bde to Gen Alexander, 18 June 1999.

Breytenbach was understandably bitter about the way he was treated while serving as SSO Parachute Operations, yet in actual fact running the parachute brigade. In his anger he makes some rash and unfounded accusations. He states, for instance, referring to being relieved of his position, that “the generals on Army HQ staff and their directors had killed off Viljoen’s concept of a parachute brigade half way through its childhood”.⁶⁹ However, both Viljoen and Breytenbach must shoulder responsibility for the early problems experienced by the parachute brigade, as must Archie Moore. Du Plessis, from available documentary evidence, appears not to have taken up the challenge with due enthusiasm when he was appointed, and demonstrably favoured his other appointment as a territorial command OC over that of brigade commander. He was certainly not in the mould of the dynamic Willem Louw, who had established 1 Parachute Battalion in 1961, and he lacked both the drive and the vision to make something of the parachute brigade when he was tasked to set it up. But it is simplistic, unfair and disingenuous to place all the blame on Du Plessis, or even on other members of the General Staff. Viljoen appointed Du Plessis as brigade commander, yet he must have known that he and Breytenbach were incompatible. If Breytenbach’s presence was regarded as necessary because there was no confidence in Du Plessis, then why was Breytenbach not appointed as the commander in the first place? And surely Viljoen could have called Moore (a mere commandant at the time) to order for refusing to accept the arrangement with 1 Parachute Battalion under command of the brigade? Moore’s actions were tantamount to rank insubordination. As for Breytenbach, if he had been less devious in his dealings with Army HQ (as he admits he was in his writings), it is possible that he might have been appointed as the brigade commander and have been left to build the brigade into what he envisaged it should be.

Breytenbach is also incorrect in claiming that the concept was “killed off” with his transfer away from the paratroops. On the contrary, under the successive commanders who followed him, the brigade went from strength to strength, reaching a level that far exceeded anything dreamed of in his time.⁷⁰ This is described in subsequent chapters of this thesis. It was only ten years after his departure that the decline of the airborne forces commenced. And this was after the cessation of hostilities in Angola and Namibia in 1989, the subsequent drastic reduction in defence spending, the concomitant reorganisation and downscaling of the SADF and ultimately, the advent of a democratic government in South Africa in 1994.

69. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, p. 474.

70. Breytenbach himself begrudgingly admits as much in his *Eagle Strike!* p. 474.

The brigade was first moved back to Bloemfontein, lost most of its non-infantry units, was integrated into the new SANDF and then downgraded to a regiment. And these developments were imposed by Army HQ as a consequence of changing circumstances, cuts in the defence budget and political decisions. These issues are also dealt with later in this thesis. Breytenbach's gripe, therefore, appears to be based more on his personal resentment at not being allowed to build up the brigade as he had planned, than on the brigade's eventual capability. Despite his undeniable abilities and operational expertise, there is a distinct sense of rancour evident in Breytenbach's memoirs. This is most unfortunate, as he has turned what should have been a valuable first-hand observation of the war into an angry and emotional personal vendetta and this appears to have negatively influenced its accuracy. Nevertheless, despite the acrimony that clouded the early years of the parachute brigade's existence, the four senior officers involved were all exceptional men who made a deep impression on the South African airborne forces.

Constand Viljoen was a visionary who understood vertical envelopment and appreciated the role it could play in conducting operations of both strategic and tactical value. He, probably more than anyone else, realised that strategic potential could only be realised by having an independent and self-sustaining parachute brigade with a dedicated HQ, a balanced composition and a flexible organisation. But he had a whole Army to run, and the Army was at war. He had to leave the details to his subordinates⁷¹ The subordinates proved incapable of rising above their personal differences.

Du Plessis, who had helped establish the fledgling 1 Parachute Battalion in the early sixties when he was still a junior officer, later commanded the unit, founded the Civil Defence College (later the SA Army Women's College) and was the commander of two different territorial commands (Eastern Province and Orange Free State). He retired as a major general and went on to play an active role in the Red Cross organisation as a civilian.⁷²

At the time, Breytenbach was probably the officer with the most operational experience in the SA Army. Also a founder-member of 1 Parachute Battalion, he had served as the first commander of two highly successful operational units, had proved his leadership

71. For information on Viljoen, see Uys, *SA Military Who's Who*, p. 256 (Addendum); H. Hamann, *Days of the Generals: The Untold Story of South Africa's Apartheid-era Military Generals* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2001); and D. Cruywagen, *Brothers in War and Peace: Constand and Abraham Viljoen and the Birth of the New South Africa* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2014).

72. Interview with Maj Gen M.J. du Plessis (retd) on 28 Jun 95; Alexander, "The Cassinga Raid", pp. 98–100.

in combat on many occasions and had an unparalleled grasp of airborne tactics.⁷³ Moore, who later commanded 44 Parachute Brigade, was a consolidator who created order where chaos had reigned. An exceptional administrator with a knack for selecting the right people to get things done, 1 Parachute Battalion had flourished under his command, as would 44 Parachute Brigade. He oversaw the doubling of the size of 1 Parachute Battalion to eight rifle companies and the unit won more trophies and deployed in more operations during his command tenure than it had ever done before.⁷⁴

All four men were paratroopers who had the interests of the airborne forces at heart. They were all officers with excellent attributes. But between them they were unable to form a team and their relationships with one another were tinged with acrimony. As a result, the brigade lurched through its first years like a wounded soldier, isolated and alone on the battlefield.

9.6. DEDUCTIONS

Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen, who had played a motivating role in the establishment of Special Forces, in the decision to make the first operational parachute drop and the acceptance of the fire force concept in Ovamboland, initiated and was the driving force behind the decision to form a parachute brigade. But his efforts were thwarted by infighting among his subordinates in the parachute community. The attempts to establish a balanced, sustainable airborne capability that could be called on to carry out strategic missions came to naught and the fractious airborne organisation fell back into small-scale tactical thinking.

However, Colonel Jan Breytenbach, one of the key figures in the development of airborne thinking, despite antagonising many people, played a foundational role in the formulation of a document that served as a blueprint for future parachute organisation. The new Chief of The Army, Lieutenant General Jannie Geldenhuys, instituted investigations into the airborne capability that led to the replacement of contentious individuals and the reactivation of the parachute brigade. This set it on a firm course for the future. The greatest attribute of airborne forces was thus acknowledged: an effective strategic capability.

73. Much has been written about the career of the controversial Breytenbach. Besides works already cited, see also C. Louw, "Profiel van 'n Vegsoldaat", *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, December 1992/January 1993; and Uys, *SA Military Who's Who*, p.30.

74. 1 Para Bn: Unit History File, Annual Historical Report/ Jaarlikse Geskiedkundige Verslag, 1978, 1979, 1980 and 1981; "A Concise History of the South African Parachute Forces", bound volume, *44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure*, 1991.

CHAPTER 10

TACTICAL APPLICATION: AIRBORNE SUPPORT TO GROUND FORCES

10.1. INTRODUCTION

In contrast to an independent airborne operation with a strategic aim, dealt with in Chapter 8, there is the airborne operation carried out in conjunction with ground forces, generally providing some form of tactical support to the ground forces. This is by far the more common application of airborne forces and the aim is purely tactical. For soldiers fighting on the ground, the bigger picture in any operation is seldom clear. They are more concerned with what is taking place on their immediate front, where what they do is a very personal matter of kill or be killed. Even the commanders in a battle are focused on tactical rather than strategic issues, and it is these issues that tend to dominate their thinking and colour their memories of combat. Perhaps this is why most soldiers see only the tactical value of airborne forces, and why they were used primarily in this role during the Thirty Year War.

To illustrate how tactical as opposed to strategic thinking came to dominate the approach to airborne operations in the SADF, this chapter examines the application of fire force in Ovamboland, considers some small-scale airborne operations and cross-border incursions into Angola and Zambia as well as inside Namibia (some of which were carried out by special forces, but were better suited for paratroopers), and analyses two major tactical airborne operations, one in Angola and the other in Namibia.

10.2. FIRE FORCE OR MOBILE RESERVE (Ovamboland, Namibia)

The fire force concept and how the technique was used by the Rhodesians was addressed in earlier chapters, as have the lessons learnt in this regard by the South African paratroopers. It is now necessary to examine the application of this concept by the SADF in its campaign in Namibia, and to some extent also in Angola. It was the most common role in which the SADF employed airborne elements in support of other ground forces and between 1976 and 1989 an almost constant airborne force of company strength was maintained as a fire force, for the most part based beside the airfield at Ondangwa in Ovamboland,¹ where SWAPO

1. The various Parachute Company Operational/War Diaries cited in this thesis provide a record of the presence of the fire force at Ondangwa.

was most active in its insurgency campaign.² This force was under operational command of what was initially 2 Military Area and later became Sector 10.³ Although the paratroopers, with their exposure to the Rhodesian operations, invariably called it a fire force, the official SADF label was initially Reaction Force, and later Mobile Reserve.⁴ See Appendix 70 for photos.

But the South African military authorities, unlike the Rhodesians, never saw the fire force as a primary instrument of offensive counter-insurgency operations. It was always seen merely as a mobile reserve, to be activated as a last resort. It was only when a patrol of soldiers ran into trouble that the fire force was activated.⁵ The paratroopers saw themselves as carrying out an envelopment manoeuvre; but their superiors saw them simply as another infantry element that could be rapidly transported by air as reinforcements wherever they were required. Employing paratroopers by helicopter and by parachute was seldom understood by non-airborne senior officers as a means of manoeuvre and rarely practised by them as such. Whereas the Rhodesians had seen fire force as a means of taking the war to the insurgents and the South African paratrooper officers, with their experience, were convinced of this, they had to watch their offensive potential wasted, being consigned instead to a waiting role as a reserve.⁶ It was a classic example of the attritionist approach frustrating those with a mobile mindset.

This was reflected in the command directive issued by the Officer Commanding Sector 10 to the Mobile Reserve commander. It did not even list fire force operations as one of his responsibilities.⁷ Officially speaking, therefore, the paratrooper company based at Ondangwa was not a fire force at all. Nevertheless, in paratrooper parlance it was always referred to as the “fire force” and many others in the SADF also used this term. It is the term employed in this thesis, as it best describes the type of airborne action under examination. The companies deployed at Ondangwa did carry out many typical fire force actions, though this was due more to the initiative of the parachute company commanders than the Sector

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2. S. Brown, “Diplomacy by Other Means: SWAPO’s Liberation War”, in C. Leys and J.S. Saul (eds), *Namibia’s Liberation Struggle: The Two-Edged Sword* (London, James Currey, 1995), p. 23.
 3. In 1979 the designation was changed from 2 Military Area to Sector 10, see P.H.R. Snyman, *Beeld van die SWA Gebiedsmag* (Pretoria, Openbare Betrekkinge, SA Weermag, 1989), p. 30.
 4. SANDF Archives (hereafter DOD), 1 Para Bn (2MA) Gp 2, Boxes 1, 2 and 3, containing Intelligence Summaries, Operational Orders, Log Orders, Signal Instructions, Operational Summaries, Situation Reports and Minutes of OC’s Conferences.
 5. W. Steenkamp, *South Africa’s Border War, 1966–1989* (Gibraltar, Ashanti, 1989), p. 202.
 6. See the various Operational/War Diaries for the companies of 1 Para Bn employed in the fire force role. Also J. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike! The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga, 1978* (Sandton, Manie Grové Publishing, 2008), pp. 469–470.
 7. Restricted Sector 10 Document, Bevelsvoorskrif, Bev Mob Res, Kapt E.G.M. Alexander, 1980.

HQ.⁸ Occasionally, when the action picked up further afield, the fire force would be moved to one of the outlying bases, such as Ombalantu or Nkongo, where it would be placed under the operational command of one of the four battalions deployed in the Sector 10 area.⁹ Because of the time lost due to distance and the fact that Fire Force in Ovamboland did not form an integrated, joint system as it had in Rhodesia, call-outs often deteriorated into “follow-ups”.¹⁰ This happened when the paratroopers arrived on the scene after contact had been broken and the insurgents had fled into the bush.

The paratroopers would immediately begin following the *spoor*, or tracks of the insurgents and the fire force commander would use the helicopters to leapfrog his men ahead in an attempt to cut off the insurgents, coordinating the movements from his command helicopter. Such follow-ups could extend into several days of hunting and evasion in the bush, demanding a high level of fitness from the paratroopers, as the tough and extremely fit insurgents would run for hours without stopping. The helicopters would need to return to base frequently to refuel, leaving the paratroopers without the means of leapfrogging – their only means of manoeuvre during the chase. As they closed in on the insurgents and their quarry realised they were losing the race, the guerrillas would lay an ambush or set up a POMZ personnel fragmentation mine with a trip wire, and if the hunters were over-anxious in their efforts to run them down they could get caught in the killing ground and suffer severe casualties.¹¹

For the most part, the SADF fire force became a defensive instrument, allocated a very low priority and sometimes stranded with insufficient air support to even become airborne.¹² This was because the Sector HQ frequently re-allocated the fire force helicopters to carry out mundane transport tasks or to convey visitors. Because the initiative had been relinquished to SWAPO, there would be no call-outs of the fire force if the insurgents simply avoided contact with the security forces. If contacts took place too far from Ondangwa, the time factor or the limited range of the helicopters would prevent the fire force from being

8. Operational Debriefing Report for D-Coy, 1 Para Bn for period 28 December 1978 to 29 April 1979 in 2 Military Area, SWA by Capt D.I. Blaauw, LWM (hereafter D Coy Operational Report).

9. War Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), 14 and 19 March 1980. According to the Mobile Reserve Command Directive cited above, it had to be ready to operate with these and other units within the Sector 10 area at short notice.

10. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), 1 Para Bn/308/3, “Opl Verslag, Julie 1976 Inname, 1 Valsk Bn, B Komp”, Appendix T, “Voorgestelde Mobiele Reserwe Konsep”, 30 June 1977; D Coy Operational Report; Diary, B-Coy Cmdr, 1 Para Bn, 14 November to 29 December 1978; A.J. Venter (ed.), *The Chopper Boys: Helicopter Warfare in Africa* (Halfway House, Southern Book Publishers, 1994), p. 142.

11. Diary, B-Coy Cmdr, 1 Para Bn, 3 December 1978.

12. Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (retd), Sedgfield, 29 December 1990.

activated or it would arrive too late.¹³ Consequently, fire force duty in Ovamboland was rarely as busy as it was in Rhodesia and the paratroopers found themselves sitting around for long periods with nothing constructive to do. This occasionally resulted in a breakdown in discipline. The bored paratroopers found other targets to vent their aggression, sometimes over-indulging in alcohol and attacking the troops from other, non-airborne units in the base.¹⁴

There were some parachute company commanders who, in an effort to overcome this problem, sought operational work of any kind, whether or not it was of an airborne nature. One such officer was Major James Hills, who's B-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion was almost constantly employed and consequently had little time to cause a ruckus at the base. But there were few actual fire force call-outs for them.¹⁵

Jan Breytenbach, as the second-in-command of the newly established 44 Parachute Brigade, made an attempt to implement the Rhodesian approach in Sector 10 in order to regain the initiative by finding the insurgents, fixing them and then destroying them. Initiating discussions with the SAAF and the special forces 5 Reconnaissance Commando, he successfully implemented the concept in 1980. But typically, Breytenbach, made all the arrangements and conducted the operation without consulting the Officer Commanding Sector 10, Brigadier "Witkop" Badenhorst. The brigadier was furious with Breytenbach and immediately withdrew the helicopters from Ondangwa and allocated them to an infantry battalion.¹⁶ This was an example of the dearth of co-operation and petty, often churlish infighting that characterised the relationship between paratroopers and non-paratroopers in Sector 10, to the detriment of the fire force concept. There were many other instances.¹⁷

A variation of fire force duty that sometimes relieved the monotony was Search and Rescue (S&R). The SAAF Impalas, Mirages or other aircraft frequently carried out bombing, strafing, visual reconnaissance or photo-reconnaissance missions inside Angola on targets identified by intelligence sources. When this happened, the paratroopers would be placed on standby for S&R. Eighteen paratroopers in two Puma helicopters would be positioned at a base close to the border, such as Ombalantu or Eenhana, from where they could be flown

13. D Coy Operational Report.

14. DOD, OD 1968 Gp, Box 206, War Diary, Sector 10 Maintenance Unit, Book 3, 14 September to 31 December 1979, entries for 5 and 17 November 1979.

15. War Diary of B-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), Book 1, March/April 1978.

16. Interviews, Col Jan Breytenbach (ret'd), Sedgefield, 29 December 1990; Brig A.L. van Graan, Oudtshoorn, 3 September 1992; and Cmdt P. Nel, Port Elizabeth, 14 October 1991.

17. Interview, Brig Chris le Roux, Nelspruit, 20 July 1993.

into Angola by helicopter to find and rescue aircrew if an aircraft was shot down during the mission. When this did occur, the missions turned into running battles with insurgents or Angolan forces intent on capturing the aircrew and preventing the South Africans from blowing up the downed aircraft.¹⁸

During 1978 and 1979 1 Parachute Battalion began incorporating parachuting into fire force actions.¹⁹ In March and April 1980, E-Company carried out two company-sized parachute operations in Ovaboland with mixed results, jumping from C-160 Transall aircraft.²⁰ But a lack of good intelligence continued to plague the paratroopers in their efforts to make fire force work in Ovamboland.²¹ Major Leon Groenewald of E-Company experimented unsuccessfully with ways to overcome this through both aerial and ground observation and placing his paratroopers in a Dakota aircraft.²²

Ironically, when 32 Battalion established its Recce Wing to conduct tactical reconnaissance, they experienced a need for a rapid response to their sightings of insurgents. They formed their own fire force with helicopters and obtained many successes.²³ This was possible because they usually deployed inside Angola and enjoyed far more autonomy than most units; the paratroopers (who could have provided this capability to 32 Battalion) did not enjoy that degree of independence.

In fact, 32 Battalion quickly became the airmobile unit of the SA Army. Its innovative employment of helicopters in offensive operations saw it increasingly employing vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre. With the Recce Wing providing them with excellent, up-to-date intelligence on the ground, in the same way that the Selous Scouts had provided it for the Rhodesian fire forces, such manoeuvre became feasible for 32 Battalion. One of their commanders, Colonel Deon Ferreira, developed what came to be known as Butterfly Operations. Conducted in the shallow area across the border inside Angola, heliborne troops would be deployed by Puma helicopter, supported by Alouette gunships, to immediately attack targets, once they had been identified from the air. During an advance

18. War Diary of A-Coy, 1 Para Bn (January 1979 Intake), Serials 145 and 146; War Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), 23 March 1980, including Top Secret Signal from 301 Air Component to Sector 10, 18 October 1979; A.J. van Wyk, *Honoris Crux: Ons Dapperes/Our Brave* (Cape Town, Saayman & Weber, 1982), pp. 100–103; and I. Uys, *Cross of Honour* (Germiston, Uys Publishers, 1992), pp. 63–65.

19. War Diary of B-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1977 Intake), Book 2, May/June 1978, 7 June 1978, pp. 98–99; War Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), 11 July 1979.

20. War Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), 11 July 1979, 16 March and 25 April to 30 May 1980.

21. D Coy Operational Report.

22. E-mail letter, Col Leon Groenewald (ret'd), 11 December 2013.

23. J. Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword: 32 "Buffalo" Battalion, South Africa's Foreign Legion* (Alberton, Lemur Books, 1990), p. 211.

through the bush by a company or larger element of 32 Battalion (on the first occasion that it was done, Ferreira deployed a full battalion²⁴), the gunships would be sent ahead to flush out insurgents known to be in the area, and the Pumas, leap-frogging to keep up with and just behind the advancing company, would then rapidly deliver troops to attack the insurgents.²⁵ Essentially, it was a modification of the fire force technique, where the force was moving with the operations rather than tied to a base, and it had good intelligence available on where the insurgents were located.

The paratroopers, even before 32 Battalion had developed its technique, had attempted what they termed Eagle Operations (*Valkoperasies*). These were sometimes also referred to as Butterfly Operations. Based on often-scanty information, one or two helicopters would be sent out to position troops around a suspicious kraal, *cuca* shop²⁶ or vehicle, to question possible suspects and then arrest them for further interrogation. But these attempts too, did not prove particularly successful. Occasionally, a cache of arms would be discovered or some insurgents would be flushed out and shot or captured. Three or four such Butterfly Ops, flitting from one target to another, could be carried out before the helicopters would have to return to Ondangwa to refuel.²⁷

Occasionally, when the special forces unit based at Ondangwa (51 Commando of 5 Reconnaissance Regiment) conducted an operation in a “frozen” area – an area that no other troops would be allowed to enter for a specified period of time – the concept of fire force did come into its own.²⁸ When the special forces, impersonating the insurgents, had positively identified a SWAPO group, the paratrooper fire force would be called in to attack them. A former special forces commander recalls:

I spent many an hour in a Bosbok Telstar co-ordinating, from a discrete distance of around 10kms and height of about 3000 metres, the actions of our SF team on the ground and the incoming Fireforce and gunships ... it didn't always work but when successful it was rewarding.²⁹

There was also a brief period when the fire force technique was used very successfully in operations initiated by the paratroopers themselves inside Angola. But this

24. P. Nortje, *The Terrible Ones: A Complete History of 32 Battalion, Vol. 1* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2012), p. 557.

25. P. Nortje, *32 Battalion: The Inside Story of South Africa's Elite Fighting Unit* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2003), pp. 160–163; Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword*, pp. 180–183 and 196.

26. See other terminology in Appendix 1.

27. War Diary of B-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), Book 1, May/June 1978, Reports for Valkops Nr 1 en 2, pp. 150–155; War Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), 28–29 September and 2 October 1979.

28. Letter from a former OC 51 Recce Comdo to Lt Col Tinus de Klerk (retd), 17 December 2012.

29. Correspondence with a former OC 51 Recce Comdo, 27 December 2014.

was preceded by an unfortunate airborne action in the region of the town of Evale in southern Angola. It illustrated the dangers of embarking on any helicopter action without applying the proven principles of fire force regarding good intelligence, competent airborne commanders and co-ordinated fire support. At the time, the SADF, exploiting the huge success of Operation PROTEA in 1981, was effectively occupying that portion of southern Angola that bordered on Ovamboland.³⁰ The HQ of Sector 10, based in Oshakati in Namibia, established a forward operational base at the town of Ongiva, 70km inside Angola, with a tactical HQ (Tac HQ) set up in September 1981 to run the operations inside Angola.³¹ The airfield at Ongiva, damaged during the ongoing years of war, was repaired and made fully serviceable by the SAAF in 1983.³² This lengthy period of occupation by the SADF preceded the Lusaka Agreement of February 1984 resulting in the establishment of a Joint Monitoring Commission and a withdrawal of forces by the SADF in 1984.³³

Operation MAKRO (sometimes referred to by the name VLINDER and sometimes MISPEL, while in other sources it is recorded as a part of Operation MEEBOS³⁴) took place early in the occupation. In December 1981 a company from 2 Parachute Battalion was deployed in Angola and based at Ongiva, under command of the Tac HQ,³⁵ The company attempted an attack on what it thought was a small detachment of SWAPO guerrillas in the vicinity of the little town of Evale, some 60km north of Ongiva. No reconnaissance was done beforehand³⁶ and about 80 paratroopers were inserted by four Puma helicopters and supported by six armed Alouette helicopters operating from an HAA established 30km away.³⁷ They unexpectedly came up against a FAPLA battalion³⁸ and had to fight an intensive day-long battle, during which one paratrooper was killed, three were seriously wounded,

30. L. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War, 1966–1989* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2013), p. 156. Although Scholtz is at pains to point out that this was a domination of the area and not an occupation, it is difficult to describe the way the SADF operated in this period as anything other than an occupation.

31. R. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm: Strength Lies in Mobility* (Tyger Valley, Naledi, 2013), pp. 509 and 579.

32. D. Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle* (Johannesburg, 30° South Publishers, 2008), p. 240.

33. J. Geldenhuys, *At the Front: A General's Account of South Africa's Border War* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2009), p. 169; De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm*, p. 578.

34. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p. 162.

35. There is some contention on whether the Sector 10 tactical HQ was already deployed at Ongiva at the time. De Vries, who arrived the day after the action, indicates clearly in *Eye of the Firestorm*, p. 585, that it was, but Jennings, one of the paratrooper hawk group commanders, is adamant that there was no Tac HQ at Ongiva. See his e-mail, 26 January 2014. No documentation in the SANDF Archives covering this period produced conclusive evidence and no War Diary for the Sector 10 Tac HQ was traced.

36. "Toestandskets 2: Gevegte by Evale Desember 1981", Document of Lessons Learnt, undated (circa 1983).

37. Interview, Col Ben Arnoldi (who was MAOT Cmdr), Pretoria, 8 November 1995; "Toestandskets 2: Gevegte by Evale Desember 1981", Document of Lessons Learnt, undated.

38. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm*, p. 584.

another six or more were lightly wounded and a helicopter was destroyed.³⁹ The parachute company commander claimed that the losses inflicted on FAPLA were approximately 50 killed and 20 vehicles destroyed.⁴⁰ Four Impala ground attack aircraft were called in to provide CAS, but the paratroopers had no FAC to direct their strikes and they were unable to destroy the guns and missile launchers because they could not be pinpointed.⁴¹ There was a failure of leadership by both the company commander and the battalion commander, but fortunately, the initiative and courage of the lieutenants who were commanding the hawk groups made the extraction of the troops under fire possible before nightfall by the four available Puma helicopters.⁴²

The action failed to achieve its objective and left many questions unanswered. Some of these issues were dealt with in analyses of the operation that took place afterwards.⁴³ The operation was launched in an area known to have a strong enemy presence, yet without any confirmed intelligence of the situation on the ground. During the operation, the company commander had left the scene of the fighting when the helicopter he was using had to refuel. He should have transferred to another helicopter so that he could maintain control of the battle; this was accepted fire force practice. The battalion commander, high above the conflict in a Bosbok light aircraft, with no role to play and out of touch with events on the ground, interfered with the battle and issued orders that added to the confusion. The absence of an FAC to control the strike aircraft undermined their effectiveness in supporting the paratroopers. In short, the operation reflected serious command inexperience in the conduct of an airborne action and showed the dangers of deploying paratroopers under a non-airborne Tac HQ.

A few months earlier, another operation had been conducted in the area further west in Angola. Known as Operation EXERCE, it was a search and destroy action and the force used included E-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion. The company carried out a number of helicopter assaults over the period 12 to 30 September 1981 on localities identified

39. DOD, 44 Para Bde (1), Box 137, Confidential 44 VALSK BDE/308/3/1 "Opleidingsverslae oor Opleidingskampe en Bivakke" Vol. 1, Encl. 8, "Verslag oor die Operasie te Evale 29/12/81", 13 May 1982, Report by Lt P. Jooste, 8 January 1982; Lord, *Fledgling to Eagle*, pp. 496–497; Uys, *Cross of Honour*, pp. 87–89; A.J. van Wyk, *Honoris Crux II: Ons Dapperes* (Cape Town, Saayman & Weber, 1985), pp. 3–6.

40. Handwritten "Remarks in Conclusion", by company commander from report on Operation at Evale, undated.

41. Ibid.

42. Group of Documents including handwritten statements by the participants: Lt P. Jooste, 2Lt F.J. Louw, Sgt M.J. MacPhail, Cpl P.J. Kok, Cpl S.P. Crous, LCpl R. Sonne, Rfn S.P.J. Visagie, E.P. Serfontein, J.J. van der Merwe, G. Hauptfleisch, P.J. Els, M.P. Fouché and Du T. Neethling, all either 6 or 8 January 1981.

43. "Toestandskets 2: Gevegte by Evale Desember 1981", Document of Lessons Learnt, undated; Handwritten "Remarks in Conclusion" by the company commander from a report on the Operation at Evale, undated.

through radio intercepts and ground reconnaissance. Though not spectacular in terms of numbers of insurgents encountered, the intelligence proved good, and a total of two SWAPO insurgents and 16 FAPLA soldiers were killed, with two FAPLA soldiers being captured. There were no casualties among the paratroopers.⁴⁴ This was in marked contrast to what happened at Evale, largely because the command element was experienced in the fire force technique.

It was over this time of occupation in southern Angola, during an extended period from sometime in late 1981 to 1983, that a parachute battalion Tac HQ deployed across the border for almost a year. This was when the fire force technique came into its own against SWAPO. Under an experienced paratrooper, Commandant James Hills of 1 Parachute Battalion, at least two parachute companies and often also infantry companies from 32 Battalion formed his force.⁴⁵ With dedicated helicopters at their disposal, they were able to finally implement the fire force technique without restriction and the paratroopers saw a great deal of action in the fire force role during this time.⁴⁶

Lunar operations were a later innovation of the fire force technique. As the war in northern Namibia dragged on, the SWAPO guerrillas increasingly resorted to night movement in order to thwart the security forces' efforts. It was an effective way of neutralising the fire force. In Rhodesia, the fire forces had only operated by day, as there had been sufficient insurgent activity to keep them fully occupied while it was light.⁴⁷ But in Ovamboland, SWAPO was now operating almost exclusively at night. However, the curfew that was imposed throughout Ovamboland gave security forces *carte blanche* to act against anyone moving about at night. Towards the end of 1982, Sector 10 HQ commenced night surveillance patrols with Alouette III gunships, flying reasonably high on moonlit nights,⁴⁸ and the paratroopers began experimenting with adapting the fire force technique for night employment. Thus evolved lunar operations, relying on moonlight for success – and they did prove to be surprisingly successful. The aim of the operation would be to enforce the curfew by arresting curfew breakers, but if necessary, should they resist or attempt to avoid arrest,

44. DOD, Group OD 1968, Box 690, "Operasionele Verslag, E Kompanie, Julie 1980 inname".

45. Interview, Col James Hills (retd), Jubel I Farm, Potchefstroom District, 1 January 1996.

46. Correspondence via Facebook with former Rifleman Ivan Faught, Potchefstroom, 19 January 2014.

47. Secret Report, 1 VALSK BN/309/1, "Afgedeelde Ops Diens Rhodesiese Leër: Maj A.L. van Graan", 30 December 1977.

48. Venter, *The Chopper Boys*, p. 191.

shooting them.⁴⁹ Sector 10 was uncharacteristically, enthusiastic about the idea, and for the first time the paratroopers were able to take the initiative in Ovamboland.⁵⁰

These operations could only be carried out during a period of approximately 10 days while the moon was sufficiently bright; but for the insurgents too, this was the period in which they were most active at night because of the good visibility. Initially, helicopters were not used because of their limitations at night. The Alouette did not have the instrumentation for night flying, and with no artificial horizon the pilot could easily become disorientated, with fatal consequences.⁵¹ Although they had been used for surveillance at night, a fire force action in the dark was a completely different matter. For helicopters to circle at low level with no artificial horizon on their instrument panels and with no night-vision equipment for the pilots would be inviting disaster. The Puma helicopters, although equipped for night flying, were extremely vulnerable when landing troops on an unsecured landing zone (LZ), particularly because at night they were compelled to switch on their landing lights at the last minute. And without the Alouette gunships, an unmanned LZ could not be secured. The solution lay in using fixed-wing aircraft.

Accordingly, after last light the parachute company commander would take off from Ondangwa as a passenger in a light aircraft such as a Bosbok or Kudu.⁵² The aircraft would fly a pre-determined pattern, high above the identified area, with the company commander straining to spot the headlights of any vehicle that might be moving below. In the meantime, a Dakota carrying 20 paratroopers would also have lifted off from Ondangwa and would hold over an uninhabited area in the vicinity.⁵³

As soon as the company commander in the light aircraft spotted headlights, he called in the Dakota. The paratroopers would be dropped ahead of the moving vehicle and would set up a vehicle checkpoint to halt it, search it and arrest the occupants. Occasionally, the encounter would erupt into a fire fight, with cornered insurgents shooting at the paratroopers as soon as they realised what was happening; but for the most part the

49. Interview, Cmdt Chris Grové (retd), Pretoria, 13 June 1995.

50. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 7, HS Ops/309/4/REKSTOP/SAFRAAN Vol. 10, SITREPs, 1984; Parachute Training Centre Jump Record Book held at Parachute Training Centre of 44 Parachute Regiment in Bloemfontein; B.O. Newham, "Tarred Roads, Moonshine and Protea", in J. Geldenhuys (compiler), *We Were There: Winning the War for Southern Africa* (Pretoria, Kraal Publishers, undated), p. 102.

51. Venter, *The Chopper Boys*, p. 191.

52. These were the names used by the SAAF for the Italian Aeronautica Macchi AM-3CM (Bosbok) and the South African designed and produced Atlas C-4M (Kudu). See H. Potgieter and W. Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force* (Cape Town, Struik, 1981), pp. 144–145.

53. Interview, Cmdt Chris Grové (retd), Pretoria, 13 June 1995.

outcome would simply be the arrest of the surprised suspects.⁵⁴ In time, the technique was refined, particularly once night vision equipment was made available. The Alouette was a far more versatile and suitable aircraft than the light fixed-wing aircraft to use as an airborne command post for lunar operations, despite the limitations imposed by the nocturnal conditions. Night vision equipment also meant that gunships could be employed, bringing the whole operation more in line with a daytime fire force.⁵⁵ The gun itself was fitted with a laser designator, the beam of which could be seen through the night vision goggles. This made the conduct of lunar operations more sophisticated and effective. It also meant that gunships could halt a vehicle by firing in front of it.⁵⁶

After dropping its paratroopers during a lunar operation, the Dakota would return to Ondangwa, where another hawk group was waiting, with parachutes fitted, to board it. The Alouettes also refuelled so as to go out again. Up to four such lunar operations could take place in one night, using a different hawk group for each. According to one of the company commanders at the time, some paratroopers carried out as many as 14 jumps on lunar operations during a deployment of three months at Ondangwa.⁵⁷

Throughout the second half of 1985 and during the three years that followed, up to and including the middle of May 1988, many lunar operations were carried out almost every month on the nights when the moon was brightest.⁵⁸ It was over this period that a parachute battalion, styled “2 SWA Specialist Unit”, was built up as a part of the South West Africa Territory Force (SWATF). Companies from this unit, commanded by seconded PF officers from 1 Parachute Battalion, were increasingly utilised as the resident fire force at Ondangwa and became particularly proficient in lunar operations.⁵⁹ These operations required a high level of co-operation between the Air Force and paratroopers because there was much that could go wrong. But the technique was developed very successfully into a highly refined and proactive improvement of the traditional fire force.

54. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 7, HS Ops/309/4/REKSTOP/SAFRAAN Vol. 10, Signal from C Army 31 to C SADF 3 (ZWL), 9 June 1984 and SITREP, 8–9 October 1984.

55. Newham, “Tarred Roads, Moonshine and Protea”, pp. 102–103; A.J. Venter, *Gunship Ace: The Wars of Neall Ellis, Helicopter Pilot and Mercenary* (Pretoria, Protea Book House, 2012), pp. 105–108.

56. Newham, “Tarred Roads, Moonshine and Protea”, p. 103.

57. Interview, Cmdt Chris Grové (retd), Pretoria, 13 June 1995.

58. Parachute Jump Record Book, for example, entries for 25 June 1985, 1 August and 27–31 August 1985, 20–24 April 1986, 21–26 May 1986, 15 and 17 June 1986, 22–23 June 1986, 14–16 July 1986, 16–18 August 1986, 8–13 April 1987, 8–14 May 1987, 6–9 June 1987, 5 October 1987, 28–30 May 1988 and 3 June 1988.

59. *Ibid.*, Box 7, 302/1, Encl. 1, 11 October 1988 and Encl. 2, Strength Return for November 1988; Box 8, 309/1 Vol. 2, Encl. 15, 14 February 1989; Box 12, 513/7 R, “Letters of Thanks and Appreciation”, Encl. 2; Box 14, Confidential 101/1 Vol. 2, “Pers Requirements”, Encl. 23, 15 August 1988 and Confidential 101/7, “Employment of Pers”, Encl. 5, 22 August 1988; Box 14, Confidential 101/7/1/1/12, “Employment of Pers”, Encl. 7, 8 December 1988 and Confidential 101/9/1, “Ops Scheduling”, Encl. 1, 21 November 1988.

An effort was also made by the paratroopers during the last five years of the conflict in Namibia to make their employment in the daytime more viable. They did this through a technique that came to be called “Bakkie Ops”. A bakkie is the common term used in South Africa for a light pick-up truck. Popular in southern Africa, particularly among the farming community, bakkies were common in Ovamboland and could often be seen parked at a kraal. The technique involved the parachute company commander, in a light aircraft, usually a Bosbok, identifying a suspicious-looking bakkie (suspicious in terms of the load or the passengers being transported on the back) from the air. Troops placed on standby were then flown in by Dakota or by Puma helicopter and parachuted or landed near the vehicle, essentially doing the same thing that was done during lunar operations. The Bosbok, armed with rockets, could fire high explosive or smoke shells at the vehicle should its occupants show aggression. Alouette helicopters were rarely used in these operations.⁶⁰ Though some successes were obtained, “bakkie ops” did not prove as useful as lunar operations.

The traditional fire force concept in Namibia, however, was at its most successful when employed further south, outside the Sector 10 area. When insurgents succeeded in penetrating the so-called white farmlands, and operations were conducted in the Tsumeb, Grootfontein, Otavi and Otjiwarongo areas, the fire force would be moved from its static base at Ondangwa and be attached to the HQ that was conducting the operation (usually Sector 30 or 61 Mechanised Battalion Group). The fire force would then either operate from a local airfield (such as Tsumeb or Otjiwarongo), or it would simply base itself on the nearest farm, as close as possible to where the insurgents had been traced. Utilising Alouettes and Pumas, it would not be necessary to use an airfield, and the fire force became highly mobile, shifting its base at a moment’s notice.⁶¹ Up to 1981 the counter-insurgency operations in these areas were known as Operation CARROT, but from 1982 the name was changed to Operation YAHOO. During both operations the fire force technique was employed.

There can be no doubt that the use of fire force in its various forms by the SADF did not constitute a strategic action. It was tactical in its concept and its application. In this it was, when used judiciously, very effective. However, unlike the Rhodesians, the South Africans never fully optimised the capability. Nevertheless, the way fire force was applied, particularly in its lunar operations version, meant that several hundred young national

60. Interview, Cmdt Chris Grové (retd), Pretoria, 13 June 1995.

61. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm*, p. 351; Diary, Major L.W. Gerber, 15 May–5 August 1976, entries for period 20 June–3 July 1976; Diary, B-Coy Cmdr, 1 Para Bn, 27 March–21 April 1979, entries for period 10–19 April 1979; Diary, E-Coy Cmdr, 1 Para Bn, 7 April–13 May 1982, entries for 18 and 19 April 1982.

service paratroopers carried out operational parachute jumps. These may not have been spectacular, nor did they receive any publicity, but they included all the angst and uncertainty of any other operational drop, especially those done at night. Although these operations were executed without direct support from other ground forces, they formed an integral part of the greater tactical plan for the conduct of the counter-insurgency campaign in Ovamboland. Even when a fire force was employed further south, inside the so-called white farmlands and outside of the area of responsibility of Sector 10, it would come under operational command of whatever HQ was conducting the operation, and would also be an integral part of the tactical ground plan.

10.3. SMALL-SCALE AIRBORNE ACTIONS AND CROSS-BORDER INCURSIONS (Angola, Namibia and Zambia)

The second type of airborne action in support of a larger ground force was when a land operation was mounted in which there was an airborne component of the plan. The first operational parachute drop by the SADF on 4 June 1974 on the Caprivian/Angolan border, described in Chapter 7, was the first of many such actions.

For a year after that jump there were no further airborne operations of note, although the deteriorating political and military situation in Angola led to a steady increase in the SADF presence along the border, even before the outbreak of the Angolan Civil War in about September 1975. The paratroopers from 1 Parachute Battalion were maintaining a company in the operational area on a rotational basis for three months at a time and there were occasional skirmishes in the Caprivi Strip, during one of which a paratrooper was wounded.⁶²

In about July 1975, a small special forces reconnaissance operation was carried out by parachute on a UNITA base, with involvement by 1 Parachute Battalion. At the time, UNITA and SWAPO had very cordial and mutually supportive relations. The base had been identified in the remote bush of southeast Angola and it was thought that it was providing support to SWAPO insurgents. A four-man team from 1 Reconnaissance Commando was busy completing its arrangements near Rundu to undertake the reconnaissance of the base when one of them was seriously injured in a vehicle accident. Sergeant Johan Landman, platoon sergeant of the 1 Parachute Battalion standby platoon based at Rundu at the time was quickly co-opted to take the injured man's place. He parachuted into Angola with three

62. "Vereer", *Die Volksblad*, 24 October 1975.

special forces sergeants from a Dakota aircraft well after dark.⁶³ After monitoring the base for four days from a koppie and confirming the presence of some 200 insurgents, the team was ready to bring in the standby parachute platoon to carry out a helicopter assault. But there was a delay due to a damaged helicopter and the insurgents, possibly getting wind of the attack, vacated the base. When the paratroopers finally arrived, the base was empty.⁶⁴

A few months later, with the situation in Angola fast spiralling out of control as the rival liberation movements faced off for control of the vast country, a fresh platoon of paratroopers on standby duty at Rundu found themselves participating in another parachute operation. At the time, white Portuguese refugees from Angola were streaming across the border into Namibia at various places, often pursued or harassed by bands of UNITA or MPLA insurgents who sometimes clashed with the SADF.⁶⁵ The Portuguese military had effectively abdicated all responsibility for them in Angola, and assisted by UNITA, groups of SWAPO insurgents were moving into the vacuum left in the remote wilderness of south-east Angola and establishing bases there. But this was also the time of prime minister Vorster's efforts at détente in Africa, and he had achieved some success with President Kaunda of Zambia. In return for pressurising the Rhodesians, Vorster elicited an agreement from Kaunda to pressurise SWAPO. Zambia's territory, according to some reports, was no longer open to SWAPO as a springboard for conducting military operations.⁶⁶ Although this arrangement was short-lived because of the collapse of Vorster's initiative, at that time bases in Angola had become doubly important to SWAPO for continuing the insurgency campaign. From these bases they would be able to infiltrate Namibia.

On the night of 17 September 1975, under command of 2nd Lieutenant Johan Blaauw, 19 national servicemen from Number 1 Platoon of A-Company 1 Parachute Battalion were flown over 300km in a Dakota aircraft, from Rundu to Immelman airfield, close to the Cuando River, on the border between Angola and the Caprivi.⁶⁷ A company of SADF Bushman (San) soldiers (their unit later became known as 31 Battalion⁶⁸) was carrying out extensive reconnaissance patrols in the south-eastern corner of Angola, between the

63. Interview, WO1 Johan Landman, Bloemfontein, 10 March 1992.

64. Telephonic interview, Capt Anton Retief (ret'd), 21 July 1992.

65. DOD, C Army D Ops Gp, Box 19, G/Ops/3/3 Vol. 4, "1 Mil Gebied", Encl. 85, Op FOCUS Contact Report, 18 August 1975; OD 1968 Gp, Box 84, War Diary, 1 Air Comp, Rundu, 17 and 29 August 1975.

66. Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means", p. 26.

67. Interview, Cmdt Johan Blaauw, Bloemfontein, 20 July 1990.

68. DOD, 1 MG Gp, Box 71, Secret G/Ops/3/3 F Vol. 15, Encl. 19, Signal from 1 MA, 27 May 1975; I. Uys, *Bushman Soldiers: Their Alpha and Omega* (Germiston, Fortress Publishers, 1993), pp. 1–25.

Caprivi Strip and the Cuando River. The code-name for the operation was DIAMANT.⁶⁹ One of their platoons made contact with a large group of SWAPO insurgents, estimated to be about 150-strong, just south of the tiny settlement of Luiana, near the confluence of the Luiana and Cuando Rivers. There was a fierce fire fight and five of the Bushman soldiers were wounded, four of them seriously. The Bushmen broke off the contact and withdrew, but came under heavy mortar and grenade fire and were pinned down. Blaauw's paratroopers had to reinforce them for a first light counter-attack.⁷⁰

As day broke the Dakota was running in over the airstrip just north of the little town.⁷¹ Blaauw and his platoon sergeant, Jerry Holtzhausen, dispatched the troops and then Blaauw followed them out of the door.⁷² The SWAPO group, employing classic insurgency tactics, split up into groups of 20 or 40 and withdrew in different directions into the thick surrounding bush while the security forces closed in on Luiana, cleared the area and commenced follow-up operations, pursuing separate groups.⁷³ Blaauw's paratroopers spent two days footslogging through the marshy terrain and tall grass, searching for the insurgents on the islands in the Luiana area. Struggling through mud, swamps and thick undergrowth, a few shots were exchanged with the retreating guerrillas, some documents and weapons were seized, huts were razed and crops were burned. After those two days there was no further sign of the insurgents – they had escaped back into Zambia. Only four bodies were found in the area where the initial contact had taken place, as well as weapons and food supplies; but the attempt by SWAPO to establish a base had been thwarted.⁷⁴

It was not a particularly spectacular operation in terms of the fighting done, but it did illustrate how a parachute force can be used to provide reinforcements to a beleaguered force at short notice and over distances of several hundred kilometres, crossing otherwise difficult terrain with ease. From then on, small-scale parachute operations by the SADF became increasingly frequent. Initially, the special forces did most of these, although they were missions that were probably better suited for the larger paratrooper forces. But there was possibly a reluctance to employ national servicemen in such high-risk ventures.

69. DOD, 1 MG Gp, Box 60, Top Secret HK 1MG Ops G/OPS/3/3 FOCUS, Sub-File Ops DIAMANT, Encl. 1, Message No 1103/75, 4 September 1975.

70. Ibid., Encl 9, Contact Report, 17 September 1975.

71. Ibid., Encl. 10, Contact Report, 18 September 1975.

72. Interview, Cmdt Johan Blaauw, Bloemfontein, 20 July 1990.

73. DOD, 1 MG Gp, Box 60, Top Secret HK 1MG Ops G/OPS/3/3 FOCUS, Sub-File Ops DIAMANT, Encl. 13, 1 Military Area to C Army (D Ops), 19 September 1975.

74. Ibid., "Nabetragting: Ops Suid-Oos Angola deur 4 Sub-Area 15–20 Sep 75", October 1975, where the operation is described in sequence.

During Operation SAVANNAH, the SADF participation in the Angolan Civil War of 1975/76, there was one such operation. It was known as Operation KREEF and took place in mid-December 1975. It was undertaken by nine CF special forces soldiers from the newly established 2 Reconnaissance Commando at a place called Lindingue some distance from Serpa Pinto (Menongue). The nine men were dropped on the night of 14 December to confirm a SWAPO base that was to be attacked by a helicopter force from 3 SA Infantry Battalion. But the base was empty when the attack took place. The operation was a complete failure because it was launched with faulty and out-dated intelligence, the special forces soldiers were unable to provide up-to-date information on the situation on the ground, and the infantrymen and their commander were not trained to carry out a helicopter assault.⁷⁵

The next parachute operation was also undertaken by special forces. Operation CURRY was carried out on the SWAPO bases at Shatotwa and Kaunga-Mashi in south-western Zambia in July 1976. Five men, acting as pathfinders, did a free fall insertion at night from a C-130 aircraft, followed two nights later by two groups, dropping separately for each of the objectives, doing a static line jump from a C-130 aircraft flying at 800 feet (about 250m). Two separate attacks were done: the one on Shatotwa was completely successful, and the SWAPO camp was destroyed with at least 25 insurgents killed and no casualties among the special forces. Weapons, ammunition and equipment were destroyed and valuable documentation was captured; but the camp at Kaunga-Mashi was never found. The special forces soldiers were extracted by helicopter.⁷⁶ Success, in the case of Shatotwa, was due to accurate intelligence and effective use of pathfinders – in stark contrast to Operation KREEF. Failure, in the case of Kuanga-Mashi, was due to poor intelligence and no employment of pathfinders (they had only been used for Shatotwa). It was a straightforward parachute assault operation, albeit of small scale, a classic mission for paratroopers.

Less successful by far was Operation KROPDUIF, the special forces parachute operation at Eheke (or Heque, also known as Ohaipe⁷⁷) in southern Angola that took place

75. DOD, OD 1968 Gp, Box 100, Top Secret Operations War Diary 1 MA, Vol. 12, 1 to 31 December 1975, Appendix E, "Nabetragting: Op KREEF", 19 December 1975.

76. DOD, Special Forces Gp, Box 100, Top Secret SPES GP/310/1/C92 Vol. IV, Zambia, Encl. 2, 101 Task Force "Operasieinstruksie No 8: Operasie CURRY", G/OPS/3/3 (CURRY), 25 June 1976; Encl. 25, "Die Aanval op Shatotwa", 2 August 1976; Vol. I, Encl. 5, Top Secret handwritten orders for Op CURRY by OC Bravo Recce Gp, 1 Recce Comdo, 8 July 1976; Encl. 31, Ops Report, Op CURRY, by Team Leader, B Recce Gp, 1 Recce Comdo, 20 July 1976; Encl. 32, "Lesse Geleer tydens Ops CURRY, 27 July 1976.

77. Nortje, *32 Battalion*, p. 122.

in October 1977.⁷⁸ An attack from the north on a large SWAPO base by a group of special forces delivered by parachute was to be followed by an attack on foot from the south by 32 Battalion on another objective. On the night of 24/25 October 1977 a five-man special forces team was inserted by means of a high altitude low opening (HALO) parachute jump from a C-130 aircraft to act as pathfinders. They were dropped some 30km northeast of the objective, two days before the attack was scheduled to take place. Twice, they were compromised, so they were extracted by two Puma helicopters without carrying out their planned reconnaissance of the base.⁷⁹

Still, the operation went ahead. After dark on 27 October 1977 the airborne assault force consisting, according to Breytenbach, of 80 to 90 special forces operators from 1 and 2 Reconnaissance Commandos⁸⁰ (Stiff's account gives the impression that there were no more than about 30⁸¹) took off from Ondangwa in a C-160 aircraft (Els says there were two aircraft⁸²). They carried out a static-line jump, but were dropped some 15 km from their intended DZ and 18km from the objective. Regrouping on the ground was difficult. Some paratroopers were caught up in trees and there were several minor landing injuries that had to be treated. The next day, due to the inaccurate drop, a spotter plane had to be sent out to find them and redirect them to the objective. This compromised them even further. As a result of the many delays, the special forces launched a daylight attack, rather than the night attack that had been envisaged. They came up against a force of several hundred well-trained guerrillas and suffered horrific casualties, with six dead (two more died later of their wounds), and many were injured. Only 16 paratroopers were unscathed. Over 60 SWAPO insurgents lay dead in their defensive positions.⁸³

The whole operation accomplished nothing and cost the lives of some highly trained and experienced SADF special forces soldiers. It had not been a good application of the vertical envelopment manoeuvre because no reconnaissance had been done, the pathfinders had been compromised and withdrawn, the element of surprise had been lost, there had been no employment of close air support, and the intelligence reports on the

78. P. Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969–1994* (Alberton, Galago, 1999), pp. 193–201.

79. Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword*, p. 160; Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp. 194–195.

80. Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword*, p. 161.

81. Stiff, *The Silent War*, p. 194.

82. P. Els, *We Fear Nought but God: The Story of the South African Special Forces, "The Recces"* (Johannesburg, Covos Day, 2000), p. 47.

83. Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp. 198–199; Els, *We Fear Nought but God*, p. 51, gives the special forces deaths as seven.

objective had been woefully inaccurate. For an objective so strongly defended, a parachute battalion should have carried out an airborne assault.

During 1976 and 1977 there appear to have been no parachute operations carried out by any of the parachute battalions. Helicopters employed in the fire force role dominated airborne thinking. Parachuting was seen by many, together with the two-week selection or PT Course, as merely part of the important rite of passage of the paratrooper; while parachute operations were relegated to an academic issue – perhaps something that would take place in a more conventional war.⁸⁴

But all that changed in 1978 with the attack on Cassinga. Until then the paratroopers may have lost sight of their primary role, but Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen, the Chief of the Army, certainly had not. His penchant for strategic thinking had exposed, in his own mind at least, the limitations of helicopters – the same limitations that had been pointed out by the young Lieutenant Fourie back in 1960.⁸⁵ Viljoen's concept for fighting the war with an airborne capability was not restricted to small numbers of troops being transported over short distances in support of other ground forces. Cassinga was a watershed occurrence for the paratroopers and, contrary to what some writers claim, initiated a spate of parachute operations rather than heralding the end of such actions.⁸⁶

Based on the lessons learnt and in an attempt to correct the mistakes made in the attack on Cassinga, the Chief of the Army instructed 1 Parachute Battalion to test techniques and doctrine. B and D-Companies were flown to Mpacha in the Caprivi to conduct these tests. Meanwhile, the Air Force improved the navigation and accuracy of dropping by their transport aircrews. On 21 and 22 September 1978, the two companies, under the overall command of the battalion commander, Archie Moore, carried out jumps under operational conditions, using four C-130/160 aircraft to drop 256 paratroopers simultaneously. They jumped into heavily forested areas, perfecting techniques for jumping with equipment into trees, regrouping after landing and navigating in dense forest, as well as practising tactics for attacking bases in thick bush. The companies were eventually able to regroup within 12 to 15 minutes of the first man leaving the aircraft.⁸⁷ The tests proved

84. Interviews, Col J.R. Hills, Tempe, 24 April 1990; Cmdt Piet Nel, Port Elizabeth, 14 October 1991.

85. Vermeulen, C.F., Fourie, D.F.S. and Groenewald, J.A.N., "Memorandum oor die Totstandbring van Valskermtroepe Binne die SA Weermag", 1960, Unpublished document provided by Prof D.F.S. Fourie.

86. W. Steenkamp, *Borderstrike! South Africa into Angola 1975-1980* (Durban, Just Done Productions, 2006), p. 226; L. Scholtz, "The Lessons of the Border War", *Scientia Militaria*, 40, 3 (2012), p. 331.

87. War Diary of B-Coy, 1 Para Bn, "Verslag: Ops Valsk Oef Spronge te 13 Sub-Area, Tydperk 20/9/78 – 24/9/78"; Operational Diary of D-Coy, 1 Para Bn, entries for 21 and 22 September 1978.

exceptionally useful in adapting parachute operations to the operational area where the South African paratroops found themselves operating and parachute training was modified accordingly by 1 Parachute Battalion.⁸⁸

On conclusion of the tests, both companies were flown directly to Ondangwa to participate in a parachute operation in 2 Military Area. They were dropped from three C-130 and one C-160 aircraft at first light on 26 September to form three sides of a cordon around the settlement of Ondobe, while troops from 53 battalion carried out a search of the settlement.⁸⁹ The operation does not appear to have produced significant results, although one contact with insurgents was reported.⁹⁰ The spectre of Cassinga continued to loom large over the paratroopers and the lessons from that operation were addressed throughout the rest of 1978. Trench clearing had proved a problem at Cassinga, with no proper standardised technique in place. The companies of 1 Parachute Battalion therefore worked on correcting this, digging trenches in the De Brug training area and practising until they had perfected an acceptable method.⁹¹

By January 1979 the number of insurgent incidents were at the highest they had ever been in the entire war thus far (and this was only nine months after Cassinga). In February, the SADF obtained permission from the new prime minister, P.W. Botha (who had also retained the portfolio of Defence), to attack and destroy the SWAPO bases from which a spate of attacks had been launched.⁹²

Two simultaneous operations were planned. REKSTOK would take place from 2 Military Area into Angola, with aircraft operating from Ondangwa, while SAFRAAN would take place from 13 Sub-Area in the Caprivi into south-western Zambia. The first was a vertical envelopment using helicopters, with no ground forces taking part, while the second involved significant ground forces but was to include a parachute assault. However, once again, the starting point for a successful airborne operation was missing. The intelligence that was available was either out-dated or very inaccurate. In the case of Operation REKSTOK, two assault groups, each an infantry company (not paratroopers), and each composed of six platoons (thus approximately 200-strong) were employed. To transport

88. Interview, Col James Hills, Jubel I Farm, Potchefstroom district, 1 January 1996; Telephonic interview, Cmdt David Blaauw, 19 February 1992.

89. Secret Ops Instruction 16/78, 2 Military Area, 309/1, 22 September 1978, War Diary of B-Coy, 1 Para Bn.

90. War Diary of B-Coy, 1 Para Bn, 26 September 1978; War Diary of D-Coy, 1 Para Bn, 26 September 1978.

91. War Diary of B-Coy, 1 Para Bn, 3 November 1978.

92. DOD, Supp. Docs, OD 1968, Box 3, Top Secret HS OPS/309/4 REKSTOK/SAFRAAN Vol. 1, Encl. 17, C SADF to PM and Min. of Def. and Nat. Sec., "Beplande Oorwoë Ops in Angola en Zambië", 25 February 1979.

them there were 14 Puma and four Super Frelon helicopters, with four Alouette gunships and an Alouette command helicopter for support. It was the largest concentration of helicopters yet for a single operation, and meant that assaults could be carried out with one complete company lifted at a time. But the operation was an unmitigated failure. Several bases in Angola at places like Môngua, Oncocua, Henhombe and Huambongo were assaulted after being subjected to air attack by a Canberra and four Mirage III aircraft, but all were found to be empty. The aircraft also attacked other bases, deeper into Angola, with marginally more success, but the Canberra bomber crashed after coming under ground fire. It was an irreplaceable loss for the SAAF.⁹³

To the east, in the Caprivi, Operation SAFRAAN was hardly more successful. A fairly extensive series of operations was planned, one of them a parachute assault by a battalion-minus on a SWAPO base 75km inside Zambia.⁹⁴ Two companies of 1 Parachute Battalion were to do the assault on 6 March 1979.⁹⁵ But the operation was aborted at the last minute, when the transport aircraft were on the final run-in to drop the paratroopers. By then four Buccaneers and three Canberras had already completed their bombing missions (though they had bombed the wrong target!) and three Impalas had strafed the base. Once again, intelligence had been faulty and the insurgents had vacated the base; the gunship Alouettes had seen the base was empty and a “stop drop” was given as the first paratroopers were standing in the door, about to jump.⁹⁶

The two operations showed the SADF tactical intelligence capability to be unbelievably poor. Over the next few weeks two more parachute operations of two-company strength were planned to attack SWAPO bases inside Zambia (one of them 150km from the Caprivi border), but both were cancelled a day before they were due to take place because of possible political ramifications (not because of tactical considerations). There were five Super Frelons and nine Pumas available for the extraction of the paratroopers and both these operations were planned along lines very similar to the Cassinga raid.⁹⁷

93. DOD, Supp. Docs, OD 1968, Box 3, War Diary for Op REKSTOK, 6–15 March 1979, HSF/DOK D/514/2/10/1.

94. Handwritten Top Secret 44 Para Bde Warning Order by Cmdt A.L. van Graan, Waarskuwingsorder No. 2/79: Op SAFRAAN”, 44 Valsk Bde/309/1/3, 22 February 1979; Top Secret Image Interpretation Report No. 440, Zambia, Kalongo River Camp 52, JARIC/TS/204/3/Z2/1/1/23, 13 February 1979. See also the two handwritten Top Secret Operational Orders by 1 Para Bn, Opso 1/79 and OPS 2/79, both March 1979.

95. DOD, Supp Docs, OD 1968, Box 3, Top Secret Opso: Op SAFRAAN, 13 Sub-Area, 1 March 79, in War Diary, Operation SAFRAAN, 5–11 March 1979.

96. Ibid.; Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, p. 466; Diary, B-Coy Cmdr, 1 Para Bn, 2–7 March 1979.

97. Handwritten Top Secret Opso 2/79 of 1 Para Bn, Mar 1979; Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (retd), Sedgfield, 30 December 1990.

A few months later a parachute operation was eventually executed in that area, but it was a low-key action. Operation STOOMPOT, was carried out in July 1979.⁹⁸ Two companies of paratroopers from 1 Parachute Battalion were dropped approximately 140km inside Zambia at first light on 6 July 1979, to the west of the Zambezi River, and a company of infantry from 6 SA Infantry Battalion was trooped in by helicopter. Each company operated independently in its own area.⁹⁹ Dropped in the forest between Sioma and Kalabolelwa, the paratroopers found the bases they were supposed to attack were empty and they then spent 10 days searching for insurgents, laying ambushes and patrolling in company strength. There were several skirmishes with small groups of insurgents and casualties were suffered on both sides (one paratrooper was killed), but no large SWAPO concentrations were found. At the end of this time, the companies were helicoptered back to Mpacha in the Caprivi.¹⁰⁰

Operation STOOMPOT was a less than successful attempt to disrupt SWAPO in SW Zambia. It had been an unimaginative employment of airborne troops in a purely tactical operation where accurate intelligence on SWAPO's locations and movements had been singularly lacking. Three companies had been aimlessly thrashing around for ten days in the dense bush of a remote corner of Zambia, while the headquarters had remained static and ineffective, 140km away, safely ensconced at Katima Mulilo and Mpacha in the Caprivi. No attempt had been made to employ a Tac HQ on the ground inside Zambia. Although there were three Super Frelon helicopters, four Alouette gunships, one Alouette Command Car, two Cessnas and a Dakota available, with six Impalas for close air support,¹⁰¹ other than for the initial deployment of one company, the helicopters were only used for replenishment. There was one heliborne assault (on a base that proved to be empty),¹⁰² but with the almost total absence of intelligence, there was no real air-mobility applied.

98. DOD, OD 1968, Box 228, War Diary, 13 Sub-Area, July 1979, Part 1 of 3, Top Secret Briefing to C Army, 2 July 1979.

99. Ibid., Part 2 of 3, Top Secret Opso: Op SAFRAAN TWO: STOOMPOT, 4 July 1979 and Top Secret Debriefing Report, Op STOOMPOT (6–14 July 1979); Operational Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn, (July 1978 Intake), 12 July 1978 to 20 May 1980, entry for 5 July 1979; 1 Para Bn Top Secret Training Report for January 1978 Intake, D-Coy, 9 January 1978–21 December 1979, 1 VALSK BN/308/3/1, 31 December 1979, Appendix F, Annexure 1, Operational/War Diary, 6 July 1979.

100. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Box 48, 1 Para Bn/104/10 Vol. 1, Encl. 72, C Army to C SADF, 6 July 1979; 1 Para Bn Top Secret Training Report, January 1978 Intake, D-Coy, 9 January 1978–21 December 1979, 1 VALSK BN/308/3/1, 31 December 1979, Appendix F: Operational Debriefing Report, 4–16 July 1979: Op STOOMPOT, and Annexure 1 to Appendix F: Operational/War Diary, 6 July 1979; Interview with Maj Endri Steyn (retd) and Capt Eugene "Loffie" Eloff (retd), Pretoria, 25 November 1995.

101. Ibid., Top Secret Opso: Op SAFRAAN TWO: STOOMPOT, 4 July 1979.

102. DOD, OD 1968 Gp, Box 228, War Diary, 13 Sub-Area, July 1979, Part 2 of 3, Top Secret Debriefing Report, Op STOOMPOT (6–14 July 1979).

A more successful parachute operation was carried a few days later in southern Angola by E-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion, under command of Captain Leon Groenewald. At the time the company was the resident fire force at Ondangwa. Operation MOONSHINE was an independent company operation, but formed part of the overall tactical plan of Sector 10. Groenewald, with three of his four hawk groups (the fourth remained at Ondangwa on fire force duty), was to destroy a SWAPO detachment base that had been positively identified at Handabo, some 20km inside Angola. Thereafter they were to move on to a second base at the Oshana Hucumbongo, about 18km southwest of Handabo, and also destroy this.¹⁰³

Groenewald sent his No 2 Hawk Group in with two Puma helicopters to secure the DZ some seven kilometres north of the first objective and before last light on 19 July 1979 he jumped with his Company HQ and Nos 1 and 3 Hawk Groups from a C-160 Transall aircraft, covered by Alouette gunships.¹⁰⁴ The company moved through the night and carried out a successful first light attack, fought further engagements throughout the day, supported by helicopter gunships, and occupied their deserted second objective before nightfall.¹⁰⁵

It was a small airborne operation, with limited success, but it had shown how one fixed-wing transport aircraft could position a group that would otherwise have required five Puma helicopters; that by placing them sufficiently far from the objective not to be observed when they jumped and by approaching the enemy from a completely unexpected direction, surprise could be achieved.

The paratroopers continued to be used in an airborne role by Sector 10, albeit often unimaginatively. Because they were deployed in companies and not as battalions they were usually allocated to non-airborne battalion commanders. These commanders often had little or no idea of the potential of the airborne concept and of vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre, and for the most part the paratroopers were consigned to secondary roles. Other infantry troops were thus used to carry out assaults, while the highly trained and aggressive paratroopers were dropped by parachute as “stoppers”.¹⁰⁶ This unimaginative role soon became the accepted job of the paratroopers, and when they were dropped to carry out a parachute assault, the intelligence was frequently so poor that the bases they

103. War Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), 18–22 July 1979.

104. Interview, Col Leon Groenewald, Kimberley, 1 April 1993.

105. Ibid.; War Diary, E-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), 18–22 July 1979.

106. War Diary, E-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), 31 July and 1 August 1979; Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword*, p. 173.

attacked were empty.¹⁰⁷ There were many such operations carried out by the paratroopers, but the lack of imagination and expertise at the planning level and the notorious lack of up-to-date intelligence doomed most of them to failure or cancellation. There is no evidence that the Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion did anything to change this. Breytenbach, as SSO Para Ops, certainly did try, but his imperious manner merely offended and antagonised those he approached.¹⁰⁸ The absence of a senior parachute commander and Tac HQ in the operational area contributed in no small way to this situation. However, the SAAF aircrews gained valuable experience on these operations and developed their skills to a commendable level, especially at night.¹⁰⁹

Operation MEEBOS took place during the 1981 to 1984 occupation of southern Angola and it saw several airborne actions carried out for purely tactical purposes. In mid-1982 an offensive task force was formed that included 61 Mechanised Battalion Group, two companies of 32 Battalion, a company of paratroopers from 1 Parachute Battalion and the Recce Group from 32 Battalion.¹¹⁰ Action was carried out in the period July to August 1982 and initially entailed a series of attacks, mainly using helicopters, on identified SWAPO bases, steadily driving the SWAPO operational HQ further north.¹¹¹ The paratroopers and the infantrymen from 32 Battalion struck successive SWAPO bases in a series of helicopter assaults, while the mechanised force stood by as the mobile reserve, should the conventional FAPLA forces intervene. The Air Force involvement was significant: one Alouette III command helicopter, armed with a 7.62mm machine gun; seven Alouette III gunships armed with 20mm cannons; nine Puma medium transport helicopters; a number of C-130/C-160 and Dakota transport aircraft; and Mirage F1s and Impalas for air strikes.¹¹²

The intention was to drop the paratroopers by parachute in the first of these assaults, but the drop was cancelled at a late stage because the 32 Battalion Recce Group was unable to find a suitable DZ in the immensely thick bush. The aircraft returned to Ondangwa and the paratroopers were trooped in by helicopter. Thereafter they participated in several actions as heli-borne troops and were involved in heavy fighting. It

107. War Diary of A-Coy, 1 Para Bn (January 1979 Intake), 10 September 1980. The Record Book of Parachute Jumps, Parachute Training Centre records that on 10 September 1980 a total of 128 troops were dropped from two C-130 aircraft on an operation. Interview, Lt Col Chris Grové (ret'd), Pretoria, 13 June 1995.

108. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*, pp. 470–471; Diary, B-Coy Cmdr, 1 Para Bn, 21 July–14 August 1980, entry for 7 August 1980.

109. L. Barnard, "The South African Air Force's Transport Aircraft: Acquisition and Utilisation during the Border War", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3, (December 2006), pp. 235–236.

110. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm*, pp. 592 and 595.

111. Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p. 103.

112. Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle*, p. 212; De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm*, pp. 593–596.

was during one of these helicopter insertions, on 9 August 1982, that the paratroopers suffered their biggest loss of the war close to the Mui River. Eight Pumas were trooping them into position when a flight of four of them inadvertently flew directly over a SWAPO anti-aircraft gun emplacement. A burst of fire struck one of the Pumas, bringing it down in flames. The three aircrew and 11 paratroopers perished in the incident. A twelfth paratrooper survived briefly, terribly burnt, and was shot by SWAPO on the scene.¹¹³

There was a final major helicopter assault the next day by the companies of 32 Battalion and the paratrooper company, backed up by helicopter gunships and Mirages, on a substantial and well-armed SWAPO force approximately 30km north of Cuvelai along the Calonga River. A total of 116 SWAPO insurgents were killed, two were captured and a number of 14.5mm anti-aircraft guns were taken. There were no South African casualties.¹¹⁴

Subsequent political developments and negotiations led to major restraints being imposed on the SADF by Pretoria. Although the occupation of southern Angola continued, offensive operations were severely curtailed and this resulted in a marked increase of insurgent activity in northern Namibia. Concern was expressed by the SA military that SWAPO was gaining the initiative in the war. By March 1983 the level of insurgency was at its highest level yet.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, this led to the launching of Operation ASKARI in December 1983/January 1984 that brought limited success for the SADF, resulting in the establishment of a Joint Monitoring Commission with the South Africans and Angolans.¹¹⁶

The last parachute operation by the SADF in Angola was Operation PINEAPPLE in May/June 1987, when the large-scale conventional operations in southeast Angola were beginning to shift attention away from Sector 10, Ovamboland and the central part of southern Angola. At the time there were two companies from 1 Parachute Battalion deployed in Sector 10. These were tasked to ambush a FAPLA supply convoy on the road from Cuvango to Cuvelai. As there were no pathfinders available, one of the company commanders was flown out by helicopter with a section of ten paratroopers and a medical officer to reconnoitre and man the DZ about 30km east of Cuvelai. The distance from the border was about 200km, so three Puma helicopters were used, two of them carrying extra fuel tanks.¹¹⁷ Departing from Ondangwa in the late afternoon, they arrived at the proposed

113. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm*, pp. 617–619; Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle*, p. 213; Geldenhuys, *At the Front*, p. 157; Venter, *Gunship Ace*, pp. 88–91.

114. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm*, pp. 621–622.

115. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 7, Top Secret OPS/309/4/REKSTOK/SAFRAAN Vol. 8, CS Ops to C SADF, 15 April 1983.

116. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, pp. 164–190.

117. Interview, Lt Col Chris Grové, Pretoria, 13 June 1995.

DZ at twilight. Because of the build-up that was taking place as a prelude to the intense conventional operations that occurred some months later around the Lomba River in the east, there was only one C-160 Transall aircraft available to drop the two companies, and this would require four flights. The three helicopters refuelled and remained on the ground. The first lift was dropped at 20h00, and the last at about 01h00 on 28/29 May 1987. A total of 165 paratroopers were dropped, with their equipment.¹¹⁸ There were three casualties on landing that required further medical attention and these were flown back to Ondangwa by the helicopters.

The two companies then split up, with D-Company heading northwest to lay their ambush on the road between Tetchumatete and Cuvelai, and B-Company heading southwest to lay theirs on the road between Cuvelai and Mupa. They had approximately 50km to cover in a day and a half in order to be in position in time, and for D-Company this included crossing the Cuvelai River. The ambushes were unsuccessful because the convoy did not pass by, and after several clashes with FAPLA, the companies linked up with SADF ground forces and returned to Namibia. The operation had not been a success and once again this was due to poor or faulty intelligence – a characteristic of many of the airborne operations in support of ground forces.

Before closing the discussion on small-scale airborne actions and cross-border incursions, mention must be made of a series of independent helicopter operations of purely tactical significance that were conducted in the west. These were assaults of less than company size, aimed at preventing SWAPO infiltration across the Cunene River to outflank the security forces by entering Ovamboland via the arid and mountainous desert that forms the Kaokoveld. They all took place in the mountains of southwest Angola on small transit facilities established by SWAPO. Two of these operations, KLIPKOP¹¹⁹ and DORSLAND¹²⁰ (both in 1980), were carried out by paratroopers from 1 Parachute Battalion,

118. Parachute Jump Record Book, May 1987.

119. DOD, "AanvullendeDokumente" 1968 Gp, Box 452, Top Secret War Diary, Sector 10, Entries for July/August 1980 and MVV Gp 4, Box 157, DMI File MV/48/3 Vol. 17, Intrep 16/78; Diary of B-Coy Cmdr, 1 Para Bn, 21 July–14 August 1980; Hand written orders of B-Coy Cmdr for attack on Chitado; Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p. 94; "SA Magte Vergeld Ruacana-aanval: Swapo Hard Geslaan", front page article, *Volksblad*, 31 July 1980; A.J. Venter, "Hot Pursuit Behind Enemy Lines", *Scope*, 3 October 1980, p. 36; A.J. Venter, "SWAPO Strikes Out: South Africa Raids Chitado", *Soldier of Fortune*, January 1981, p. 69.

120. Operational Diary of G-Coy, 1 Para Bn, entries for 19–20 October 1980; Interview, Lt Col Chris Grové (retd), Pretoria, 13 June 1995; Telephonic interview, Col Gustave Erlank (retd), Kleinmond, 19 August 2014; Emails, Col Kobus Human (retd), Ermelo, 18 August 2014, Brig Gen As Kleynhans (retd), Pretoria, 19 August 2014;

while the third, Operation SUPER¹²¹ (1982), was executed by soldiers of 32 Battalion. They were all based on intelligence obtained through special forces deployments and were all highly successful for the SADF. But because they were not directly in support of other ground forces, they are peripheral to the argument of this thesis and are therefore not analysed.

10.4. MAJOR TACTICAL AIRBORNE OPERATIONS

For the purposes of this thesis the term “major” airborne operations refers to those of battalion size or larger. At least one battalion-size operation consisting only partly of paratroopers, was attempted by a non-airborne commander. It was yet another example of inaccurate and out-dated intelligence. Known as Operation KURKTREKKER (corkscrew), it was carried out on 11 October 1979. At the time, E-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion was the resident fire force at Ondangwa, but it was attached to 52 SA Infantry Battalion at Ombalantu for the operation. Army intelligence at Sector 10 Headquarters in Oshakati had identified SWAPO’s North-Eastern Regional Headquarters as being located in the Okatale-Kongwe area of Angola. Intelligence sources provided detailed information regarding the size of the base, the buildings inside it, the armament used for its defence, vehicles and the names of prominent SWAPO personalities likely to be in the base.¹²²

Under command of Commandant Chris Serfontein, 52 Battalion did a helicopter assault in two lifts, using eight Puma helicopters and delivering one company of infantrymen and then returning to fly in a second company as the follow-up force. E-Company commander, Captain Leon Groenewald, divided his paratroopers into two 50-man stop groups, jumping from a C-130 Hercules and a C-160 Transall to seal off the northern and eastern sides of the base. The base was just north of the dirt road between Chiede and Mulavi, about 80kms inside Angola. Able to rehearse their role outside Ondangwa the day before the operation, the paratroopers were well prepared. The objective was attacked at 08h00, with four Mirage III jets each dropping a 250kg bomb on the centre of the base, followed by four Impalas each dropping either a 250kg bomb or a napalm bomb. Two other Impalas orbited above to secure the DZs and LZs for the parachute and helicopter landings

121. Discussions, former OC 51 Comdo, 5 Recce Regt, Cape Town, 24 August 2014; Nortje, *The Terrible Ones*, Vol. 2, pp. 722–745; Nortje, *32 Battalion*, pp. 181–185; Scholtz, *SADF Border War*, p. 159; Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp. 358–360; Venter, *Gunship Ace*, pp. 52–57; “Operation Super: Crushing Defeat for Terrorists” and “SALM het sleutelrol in Operasie Super gespeel”, *Paratus*, April 1982; D. Lamprecht, “Oudsoldate se Pelgrimstog op Soek na Innerlike Vrede”, *Rapport*, 6 November 2010.

122. Sector 10 Secret Confirmatory Notes for Op KURKTREKKER (Ops 13), Appendix A, issued at Oshakati, 8 October 1979, Copy No 8 in War Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake).

and there were six Alouette gunships to provide supporting fire during the assault. The battalion commander controlled the operation from an Alouette command helicopter.¹²³

The paratroopers jumped at 08h03, immediately after the air bombardment. As they hung in the air under their parachute canopies with the smoking base just to one side of them, those dropping on the eastern leg saw two panic-stricken insurgents racing through the trees and bushes below them, making good their escape. They were the only insurgents seen that day; the base was empty.¹²⁴ Either the intelligence was dismally out of date, or there had been a serious breach of security and the insurgents had been warned to vacate the base. It is difficult to understand how the headquarters at Oshakati could be prepared to execute an operation of this magnitude and expense without first confirming the objective, given that the highly-trained special forces capability did exist and that it could have been used to conduct surveillance and provide in-time intelligence right up to the moment of the attack.

Two of the more significant battalion-size airborne operations, one a parachute drop and the other a tactical air landed operation (TALO) carried out by the paratroopers in support of ground forces are now discussed.

10.4.1. Battalion Parachute Drop: Operation DAISY (Angola)

Towards the end of 1981, following Operation PROTEA, the largest incursion into Angola by the SADF until then, considerable information was obtained from the documents that had been captured. Among these was evidence that the SWAPO operational command post, logistic base and its Bravo Battalion were located to the east of Cassinga and Tetchumatete.¹²⁵ Operation DAISY took place between 4 and 14 November 1981 in an attempt to locate and destroy the command post and the battalion. The terrain was flat, but covered with extremely dense forest with the vegetation severely limiting visibility as well as movement in vehicles.¹²⁶

Intelligence, including aerial photos, identified seven targets within the objective area and it was thought that there could be as many as 2,000 of SWAPO's PLAN fighters

123. *Ibid.*, and handwritten orders issued by Captain Groenewald. See also War Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), entries for 10 and 11 October 1979.

124. War Diary of E-Coy, 1 Para Bn (July 1978 Intake), entry for 11 October 1979.

125. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p. 150, quoting Geldenhuys, Nortje and Lord.

126. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetracting.

present. There were also strong conventional FAPLA and Cuban forces in the area, some as close as 40km from the objective area.¹²⁷

By 7 October 1981 HQ Sector 10 had drawn up the design for battle for Operation DAISY.¹²⁸ To carry it out, a brigade-sized force was grouped for the operation under the command of Brigadier “Witkop” (Blondie) Badenhorst, the OC Sector 10. It comprised four battalions, including 61 Mechanised Battalion Group and 3 Parachute Battalion, as well as the fire force from Ondangwa.¹²⁹ Because the objective area was so deep inside Angola (approximately 250km from the border cutline) and within range of Angolan fighters, the SAAF contribution for the operation was massive, and included 40 jets: twelve Mirage F1 AZs and eight Mirage F1 CZs to maintain air superiority, three Buccaneers for possible attacks on FAPLA airfields, two Mirage III RZs and one Impala Mk 2 for photo-reconnaissance, and fourteen Impala Mk 2 ground attack aircraft. The helicopter fleet comprised nine Pumas, two Super Frelons and ten Alouette III gunships. To provide air transport, trooping, re-supply and casualty evacuation there were six C-130 Hercules/C-160 Transall aircraft, four C-47 Dakotas and a DC-4 passenger aircraft. Nine Bosbok light aircraft were available for radio relay, navigation and reconnaissance support.¹³⁰ This gave a total of 81 aircraft – a phenomenal number for what was probably one of the largest contributions by the Air Force to a single operation in the entire war.

The plan was for 32 Battalion to occupy Ionde, about halfway to the objective area, holding its airstrip to enable a forward Tac HQ for the operation to be established there.¹³¹ The fire force would then also be based here, on the airstrip, with the helicopters, placing them within their range to reach the objective area. The main assault would be carried out by 61 Mechanised Battalion Group, just after 3 Parachute Battalion had been dropped north of the objective area to form a stop-line to cut off any fleeing insurgents. Thereafter 17 days of area operations would follow before the whole force would withdraw.¹³²

According to the special forces commander who participated in the operation, the senior paratroop officer involved in the initial planning was Commandant Anton van

127. *Ibid.*, Box 402, Top Secret bound folder, 61 Mech Bn Gp, “Oorlogsdagboek: Op DAISY 22 Okt 81–17 Nov 81”, Memo, Sector 10 to GOC SWA, 23 September 1981; Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p. 150.

128. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp, Box 57, Top Secret D OPS/309/1, OP DAISY, Encl. 10, Signal from Sector 10 to GOC SWA Comd, Ref. Ops/384, 7 October 1981.

129. *Ibid.*, Box No 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetracting.

130. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Top Secret “Summary of Air Force Participation in Op DAISY” and Secret Op DAISY Nabetracting; DOD File of photographs taken during Op DAISY; Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle*, pp. 188–189.

131. Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle*, p. 189.

132. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p. 151.

Graan,¹³³ It is surprising that the airborne commander who would be participating in the operation was not involved in its planning. Commandant James Hills, appointed as overall commander of the cut-off force, which consisted of 3 Parachute Battalion and a company from 1 Parachute Battalion, apparently had no part in the initial planning and merely had to work out the details of how it was going to be implemented. He expressed reservations about dropping a parachute battalion to position stoppers. Hills' objections were apparently brushed aside.¹³⁴ The plan was presented to the Chief of the Army on 16 October 1981, and the SAAF made it clear that it would only be prepared to drop the paratroopers at night.¹³⁵

Hills positioned himself with the Tac HQ at Londe airfield and under his command were 3 Parachute Battalion, the fire force at Londe and a 64-man reserve that stood by at Ondangwa airfield to be parachuted into any area where they might be needed.¹³⁶ The OC 3 Parachute Battalion, Commandant Gerrie Steyn, and his HQ jumped with his three companies. His battalion, a Citizen Force unit, was not specifically called up for Operation DAISY. It reported for a routine training camp of 30 days from 5 October, and was therefore simply made available once the operation had been approved at DHQ level. This, however, meant that the period of service of the men involved had to be extended by ten days and this was only done shortly before they were due to demobilise. These paratroopers, unlike those who fought at Cassinga, did have a period of almost three weeks to mobilise and undergo refresher training before they arrived at the Oshivello Training Base in the south of Ovamboland on 24 October 1981. However, by 22 October, two days before they arrived, Hills still had no idea of the strength or composition of the battalion. His frustrations were compounded by the Air Force failing to provide a representative from 28 Squadron (the C-130/C-160 squadron) to participate in the planning.¹³⁷

Hills found 3 Parachute Battalion to be disorganised and confused when the men arrived. There were supposed to be 450 paratroopers, but only 370 arrived. Hills had been told they would come fully equipped, but this was not the case. At Oshivello he arranged with his RSM to obtain what was needed from Sector 10 and the CF paratroopers then commenced rehearsals for the operation. Hills supervised the training and the rehearsals.

133. E-mail correspondence with a former OC 51 Recce Comdo in Cape Town, 27 December 2012.

134. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetrugting, Persoonlike Kommentaar deur Kmdt J.R. Hills, Bev Operasionele Vleuel, 1 Valsk Bn.

135. Ibid., Box 690, War Diary, 1 Para Bn Ops Wing, Op DAISY, Entries for 14 and 15 October 1981.

136. Ibid., Box 57: Top Secret D OPS/309/1, OP DAISY, Encl. 95, "OP DAISY: PLAN VAN VALSK BN", undated.

137. Ibid., Box 690, War Diary, 1 Para Bn Ops Wing, Op DAISY, Entries 22 October, 5 November 1981; Box 57, Top Secret D OPS/309/1 Vol. 1, OP DAISY, Encl. 8, C Army to GOC SWA Comd, D Ops/893, 1 October 1981.

However, he expressed his annoyance with the vague command and control arrangements imposed on him by the sector commander and the conflicting instructions that were emanating from Pretoria.¹³⁸

On 1 November the battalion did its rehearsal jump.¹³⁹ During this night jump near Oshivello, there were eleven injuries, four of them fractures that required plaster casts,¹⁴⁰ and none of the eleven were able to participate in the operation. Hills was also concerned at how long it took each company to regroup after jumping. It was between an hour-and-a-half and an hour and forty-five minutes, and this was in terrain not nearly as forested as that where they would be jumping for the operation.¹⁴¹

Also, on the night of 1 November 1981 (three days before the attack was due) a C-130 aircraft dropped a seven-man pathfinder team from special forces. Their task was to reconnoitre the objective area and mark the DZ for the drop by the main force of paratroopers. The pathfinders could only be inserted by means of parachute, because the distance precluded the use of helicopters. Furthermore, the radar coverage of that part of Angola prevented a high altitude parachute insertion, so instead, a low-level static-line drop at night under moonless conditions was undertaken. Subsequent SADF intercepts of Angolan radio traffic revealed that the aircraft had been heard and reported to the SWAPO HQ, but it appears that the actual drop had not been detected. The jump, in pitch darkness, went very well.¹⁴²

On the morning of 4 November 1981, the six C-130/160 aircraft began taking off from Grootfontein airfield at 02h00, at five-minute intervals, with 384 paratroopers on board.¹⁴³ This time, the drop did not go well. Accusations were subsequently exchanged between the special forces acting as pathfinders, the paratroopers and the Air Force on who was to blame. There was apparently a navigation problem and this was exacerbated by the pilots being unable to distinguish between the strobe lights used by the special forces and the numerous bush fires in the vicinity. The aircraft dropped the paratroopers late, shortly

138. Ibid., Entries for 24, 25 and 26 October 1981.

139. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetracting.

140. Ibid.

141. Ibid., Box 690, War Diary, 1 Para Bn Ops Wing, Op DAISY, Entry for 1 November 1981.

142. Ibid., Box 59, "Top Secret Special Report", nd; Box 57, Top Secret D OPS/309/1, OP DAISY, Encl. 4, 2 November 1981; Box 58, Top Secret HLeër/D-Ops/309/1, OP DAISY, Vol. 2, Encl. 18, C Army (D Ops) to C SADF (CS Ops), "Evaluasie van Effektiwiteit van VM se Taktiek en Optredes tydens Transgrens Operasies", 30 January 1982; Letter, former OC 51 Recce Comdo to Lt Col Tinus de Klerk (retd), 17 December 2012.

143. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Op DAISY Nabetracting.

before daybreak, and very inaccurately.¹⁴⁴ According to the Air Force report, five paratroopers “got tangled up and did not jump”.¹⁴⁵ The Army confirmed this.¹⁴⁶ There were also a few injuries on landing that required evacuation by helicopter to Ionde.¹⁴⁷ Two R4 rifles, one light machine-gun (LMG), one spare barrel for an LMG and one RPG-7 launcher were lost during the drop.¹⁴⁸ Regrouping on the thickly forested DZ was only completed at 06h15, and the three companies began moving towards their respective cut-off positions at 07h30.¹⁴⁹ The delay in moving out was because two paratroopers (both from Breytenbach’s Pathfinder Company) were despatched too early and were lost (some sources indicate that they were despatched too late).¹⁵⁰ Contrary to the orders issued by the Cut-off Force Commander, James Hills, movement was delayed until they had been found.¹⁵¹ A Bosbok light aircraft and two Alouette helicopters had to be used to assist with this search.¹⁵² This endangered all the aircraft concerned and compromised the position of the paratrooper cut-off groups. Fortunately, both men were found. According to McAleese, each company had a group from Breytenbach’s Pathfinder Company with it, to “lead the advance and navigate” as they moved off to their respective stop-line positions.¹⁵³ However, the special forces team that had acted as pathfinders claimed that they led the paratroopers to their positions.¹⁵⁴

144. Ibid.; Also Box No 57, Top Secret D OPS/309/1, OP DAISY, War Diary of MAOT ZULU, 29 October–12 November 1981, entries for 040500B and 041844B November 1981; Box No 402, Top Secret bound folder, 61 Mech Bn Gp, “Oorlogsdagboek: Op DAISY 22 Okt 81–17 Nov 81”, handwritten transcript of a tape recording: “In-Huis Nabetrugting van Op DAISY op 250900B by HK Sektor 10”. See also Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle*, p. 191; Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p. 152; and Letter from a former OC 51 Recce Comdo to Lt Col Tinus de Klerk (Retd) 17 December 2012.

145. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Top Secret “Summary of Air Force Participation in Op DAISY”.

146. Ibid., Box 57, Top Secret D OPS/309/1, OP DAISY, Encl. 51, Ref. Ops/199, 5 November 1981.

147. Ibid., Encl 56, Signal from Sector 10 to C Army, Ref. Ops/231, 4 November 1981; Encl 89, Signal from MAOT ZULU to 10 FACP, 4 November 1981; War Diary of MAOT ZULU, 29 October–12 November 1981, entries for 041830B and 041940B, November 1981.

148. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetrugting.

149. Ibid.

150. Ibid., Box 57, Top Secret D OPS/309/1 OP DAISY, Encl. 53, Sector 10 to Army, Ops/213, 4 November 1981.

151. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetrugting, Persoonlike Kommentaar, Kmdt J.R. Hills, Bev Operasionele Vleuel, 1 Valsk Bn. In the Landing Plan of OPSO 5/81 in Box 58, Top Secret HLeër/D-Ops/309/1 OP DAISY, Vol. 2, specific mention is made that any lost paratroopers would only be searched for after H-Hour (the start of the attack).

152. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp Box 57, Top Secret D OPS/309/1 OP DAISY, Encl. 97, MAOT ZULU to 10 FACP, 4 November 1981; War Diary, MAOT ZULU, 29 October–12 November 1981, Serial 110, entry 041409B, November 1981.

153. P. McAleese, with M. Bles, *No Mean Soldier: The Autobiography of a Professional Fighting Man* (London, Orion Books, 1993), p. 168.

154. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, “Top Secret Special Report”, undated.

The Air Force pre-bombardment strike by Buccaneer and Mirage aircraft commenced at 08h15 on 04 November 1981. An enormous tonnage of ordnance was dropped and all aircraft reported coming under anti-aircraft fire.¹⁵⁵ However, there was a total failure of communications between the SADF ground forces and the striking aircraft. The special forces had notified the Tac HQ during the night of changes in the positions of the SWAPO forces, but the information was not transmitted to the Air Force.¹⁵⁶ Consequently, there were almost no casualties among the insurgents.¹⁵⁷

A few hours after the paratroopers had been dropped, 61 Mechanised Battalion Group attacked the two main targets, only to find them both vacated by SWAPO. The mechanised attack only went in some 45 minutes after the inaccurate air strike, giving the SWAPO occupants time to escape.¹⁵⁸ It was subsequently found that SWAPO had been expecting the attack.¹⁵⁹ The paratroopers had not all reached their cut-off positions in time.¹⁶⁰ This meant that most of those insurgents who were in the objective area managed to escape.¹⁶¹ In fact, had the Air Force deployed helicopter gunships to cut-off the escape of insurgents, as the Rhodesians had done during Operation DINGO, this would not have happened.¹⁶² The special forces commander highlighted this failure, pointing out that the dense forest in the area would have made it almost impossible for the anti-aircraft weapons to be deployed effectively against low-flying helicopters. The Air Force, however, had not been prepared to commit their helicopters to this role.¹⁶³

During the next four days, the paratroopers carried out area operations on foot and encountered several groups of SWAPO guerrillas who they engaged in fire fights. A total of five insurgents were killed, and others were wounded but escaped.¹⁶⁴ The paratroopers marched considerable distances through the bush, enduring thirst because of a shortage of water and with a number of them having to be evacuated with heat exhaustion.¹⁶⁵ They had been instructed to jump with at least four litres of water and they were warned to use it

155. Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle*, p. 191.

156. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, "Top Secret Special Report", undated.

157. Ibid., Top Secret "Summary of Air Force Participation in Op DAISY".

158. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, "Top Secret Special Report", undated.

159. Nortje, *32 Battalion*, p. 179.

160. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetracting.

161. Ibid., Persoonlike Kommentaar deur Kmdt J.R. Hills, Bev Operasionele Vleuel, 1 Valsk Bn.

162. E-mail correspondence from former OC 51 Recce Comdo, 27 December 2012.

163. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, "Top Secret Special Report", undated.

164. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetracting.

165. Ibid., Persoonlike Kommentaar deur Kmdt J.R. Hills, Bev Operasionele Vleuel, 1 Valsk Bn.

sparingly,¹⁶⁶ but this was apparently not done and replenishment by air had to be arranged.¹⁶⁷

Acclimatisation and a high level of fitness are essential in any airborne operation. The young national servicemen, undergoing two years of full-time military service with most of the second year being spent in the operational area, were accustomed to the energy-sapping heat and the debilitating tropical climate; they were also subjected to intensive daily sessions of physical training while in base, and routinely undertook long patrols, covering sometimes hundreds of kilometres over many days; they were also accustomed to operating on very little water. On the other hand, the CF troops were given only a few days to acclimatise, came from their civilian occupations that were generally sedentary, and had varying degrees of physical fitness. They were unaccustomed to wearing army boots, to patrolling in deep sand under extremely hot and draining conditions and to rationing their limited water supplies. Captain Velthuisen, the Permanent Force commander of Breytenbach's Pathfinder Company, observed this during Operation DAISY.¹⁶⁸ However, it did not take the CF paratroopers long to acclimatise. By 8 November, after four days of marching through the thick bush and deep sand (plus the ten days they had spent at Oshivello), Hills was prompted to record: "On the whole, it is going very well with the CF men" (own translation from the original Afrikaans).¹⁶⁹

The fire force provided by D-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion, operating from Ionde where the Tac HQ was located, experienced greater success than 3 Parachute Battalion. On 9 November it was activated after helicopter gunships encountered a group of insurgents. In the ensuing fight 24 insurgents were killed and five were captured, while the fire force suffered no casualties. Hills himself had run the fire force action from a command helicopter. During the action, however, there were also six civilians killed.¹⁷⁰

On 12 November 1981, after eight days of area operations in Angola, 3 Parachute Battalion was trooped out in successive lifts by helicopter or brought out in a vehicle convoy

166. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 58, Top Secret HLeër/D-Ops/309/1, OP DAISY, Vol. 2, 1 Para Bn Ops Wing OPSO 5/81, Ref. OPS/309/1, undated.

167. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetrugting; Box 690, War Diary, 1 Para Bn Ops Wing, Op DAISY, Entry for 5 November 1981. See also McAleese, *No Mean Soldier*, pp. 168–169.

168. E-mail letter from Col Dries Velthuisen, PhD (retd), Pretoria, 12 March 2014.

169. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 690, War Diary, 1 Para Bn Ops Wing, Op DAISY, Entry for 8 November 1981.

170. *Ibid.*, Box 59, Op DAISY Nabetrugting and Top Secret "Summary of Air Force Participation in Op DAISY"; Box 402, Top Secret bound folder, 61 Mech Bn Gp, "Oorlogsdagboek: Op DAISY, entry for 9 November 1981 (D+5): Box 690, War Diary, 1 Para Bn Ops Wing, Op DAISY, Entry for 9 November 1981; Box 57, Top Secret D OPS/309/1, OP DAISY, Encl. 74, Sector 10 to C Army, Ref. Ops/370, 11 November 1981.

to londe, where they spent the night. From there they were shuttled over the next two days by Dakota aircraft to Ondangwa in Namibia.¹⁷¹ Operation DAISY was over. The CF paratroopers had to have their 30-day call-up extended because of the operation, and this had major implications for them in the workplace. Hills lamented the decision by those in authority to use them for this operation. There were, after all, three national service companies from 1 Parachute Battalion available and they could have been used with no disruption to the lives of the CF men.¹⁷²

Operation DAISY, by the admission of General Jannie Geldenhuys (at the time Chief of the Army), was “one of the less successful operations”.¹⁷³ Some 70 SWAPO insurgents had been killed for the loss of three SADF soldiers,¹⁷⁴ and although the operation undoubtedly disrupted insurgent plans and activities, the SWAPO headquarters and battalion had not been destroyed. The ordinary soldiers in 3 Parachute Battalion referred disparagingly to the undertaking as “Operation OOPS-A-DAISY”. For most of them it had been a singular waste of their time, particularly as their absence from work and home had at a late stage been extended by an unscheduled period. SAAF aircraft flew a total of 479 sorties during the operation, making it an extremely expensive failure! Hills felt he was justified in his initial assessment that the operation could have been just as effectively carried out using a single company of paratroopers.¹⁷⁵

DAISY was not an operation to boast about and there were extensive debriefs that set out the lessons learnt. These are housed in the SANDF archives, have since been declassified and form the basis of the analysis of the operation presented in this thesis. Hills, the commander of all the paratroopers involved, submitted a carefully considered personal assessment of the operation for the debriefing. In it, he maintained that it had been totally unrealistic to expect an area of only 5km by 12km to contain 2,000 insurgents, particularly given the almost complete absence of water within that area. The attack on Cassinga, Hills stressed, had taught SWAPO the folly of concentrating large numbers of people in a small area. He also pointed out that the operation had been based on limited and highly questionable intelligence, emanating principally from one insurgent deserter and some

171. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetrugting; and Top Secret “Summary of Air Force Participation in Op DAISY”.

172. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 690, War Diary, 1 Para Bn Ops Wing, Op DAISY, Entry for 12 November 1981.

173. Geldenhuys, *At the Front*, p. 163.

174. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p. 154.

175. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp, Box 690, War Diary, 1 Para Bn Ops Wing, Op DAISY, Entry for 7 November 1981.

reports from UNITA, who had repeatedly proved to provide unreliable information. As a consequence, many of the Air Force bombs dropped harmlessly where there were no targets. To illustrate the importance of accurate and timely intelligence that an airborne force can react to immediately, Hills referred to the single fire force action, in which one hawk group of 22 paratroopers had killed 24 and captured five insurgents, while the 384 paratroopers of 3 Parachute Battalion, in a deliberate and planned operation based on unconfirmed intelligence, had only accounted for five insurgents.¹⁷⁶

However, this action had been an exception for the fire force. While based at Ionde it was often without helicopters, which defeated the object of having a fire force there at all. This was partly due to Badenhorst allocating the helicopters for other tasks (including the transporting of visitors) and partly due to the Air Force not maintaining the number of helicopters that had been agreed upon in the planning phase. Furthermore, unscheduled withdrawal of helicopters for servicing occurred without the prior knowledge of the paratroop commanders and was indicative of poor Air Force planning. There was also seldom a command helicopter for use in the fire force role; but what particularly riled all Army commanders was the refusal, on occasion, of the Air Force to allow its helicopters to be flown in the vicinity of the objective area.¹⁷⁷

Hills was critical of the fact that there had been no up to date aerial photos of the objective area available at the planning stage, and indicated that all subsequent evidence showed that there was a headquarters base further north that was occupied by SWAPO at the time of the attack – a base with ample water and a stockpile of provisions. Yet the intelligence section of Sector 10 had been unable to pinpoint it, and had identified a completely faulty location. The plan for the operation was too inflexible to change when the special forces pathfinders identified the location of the correct base. The only element with the flexibility to react in time was the fire force, and besides there being limitations placed on the availability of helicopters at this crucial stage, the accurate information did not reach them. Hills was of the opinion that a mechanised force was unsuited to carry out the main attack in terrain where the vegetation was so dense. Instead, he felt that in an area where powerful enemy armoured and mechanised forces were close by, an airborne assault could be carried out and that due to its mobility the mechanised force would be better suited for

176. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetracting, Persoonlike Kommentaar deur Kmdt J.R. Hills, Bev Operasionele Vleuel, 1 Valsk Bn.

177. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp, Box 402, Top Secret folder, 61 Mech Bn Gp, "Oorlogsdagboek: Op DAISY", handwritten transcript of a tape recording: "In-Huis Nabetracting van Op DAISY op 250900B by HK Sektor 10".

the cut-off task. In his assessment of Operation DAISY, Hills made frequent reference to what went wrong at Cassinga; he had clearly learnt those lessons well.¹⁷⁸

Hills lamented the absence of helicopter gunships to back up the cut-off groups, and the shortage of helicopters for rapid positioning of troops. The airborne aspects of the operation had been woefully neglected, at great cost to the success of the operation. Hills, himself an experienced parachute instructor and despatcher, called the standard of both despatchers and parachutists into question, pointing to the fact that a number of paratroopers were unable to jump or were despatched too early and that personal equipment and weapon losses had occurred during the operational jump. Hills pleaded passionately for national service paratrooper companies to be used for such operations if they were available, rather than CF companies. He pointed out that the three trained national service companies from 1 Parachute Battalion were available at the time of the operation and could have changed places with the three from 3 Parachute Battalion.¹⁷⁹ This argument made a great deal of sense. Had this been done, those from 3 Parachute Battalion could have been used for the physically less demanding tasks of fire force and mechanised actions, and the parachute drop with its subsequent arduous area operations might have been more successful.

At the debriefing conference held at HQ Sector 10 on 30 November 1981, other points were addressed. The special forces team that was used as pathfinders had been compromised. Although the need to use gunship helicopters for cut-off purposes was acknowledged, it was pointed out that the SAAF policy regarding their employment would not allow them to fly near a target unless the absence of anti-aircraft weapons could be guaranteed. Paratroopers, it was concluded, when dropped en masse as they had been during Operation DAISY, should rather be used to carry out the main attack on foot, while the more mobile mechanised force should be employed in the cut-off role (as Hills had recommended).¹⁸⁰

Specific points of criticism directed at the paratroopers included the following: Pathfinder training and employment was not yet in accordance with their role; because of the growing air threat during operations in Angola, greater emphasis should be placed on training of paratroopers for parachuting at night with equipment in heavily forested areas;

178.DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 59, Secret Op DAISY Nabetracting, Persoonlike Kommentaar deur Kmdt J.R. Hills, Bev Operasionele Vleuel, 1 Valsk Bn.

179. Ibid.

180. DOD, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp (OD-1968), Box 58, Top Secret HLeër/D-Ops/309/1 OP DAISY, Vol. 2, Encl. 17, "Notule van 'n Nabetractingskonferensie, Op DAISY, HK Sector 10 ", 25 November 1981.

organisation of CF parachute battalions was not up to standard, and their paratroopers were not all at the required level of fitness. Furthermore, the navigational ability of some of the aircrew of the transport aircraft dropping the paratroopers was sub-standard; the fire force for such an operation should in future be dropped by parachute from a Dakota aircraft for quick airborne actions during extended area operations; and poor intelligence remained the single greatest operational problem.¹⁸¹

There were other points that emerged from the debriefing. The main paratrooper drop had immediately alerted SWAPO (probably because of the aircraft flying back and forth searching for the DZ). Security breaches by individuals of 3 Parachute Battalion highlighted the risks of using CF soldiers for highly sensitive operations. Commandant Roland de Vries, the OC 61 Mechanised Battalion Group and himself a paratrooper, expressed the conviction that paratroopers should not be dropped at night in such terrain, but should instead be utilised to isolate an objective. He went on to say that the main assault should be done by helicopter-borne troops, with the mechanised force being used to link up with the airborne forces. Commandant Anton van Graan expressed his frustration at his failed efforts to persuade the decision-makers (Brigadier Badenhorst, OC Sector 10 and Major General Lloyd, GOC SWA, neither of whom were paratroopers) to drop paratroopers for the main attack on a base in such thick forest, while using more mobile forces in helicopters or vehicles for the cut-off work.¹⁸²

The Air Force came in for harsh criticism. It was pointed out that it had been strongly influenced by the anti-aircraft fire it had experienced at Cassinga and was now overly wary of dropping paratroopers or deploying airborne artillery observers too close to an objective. This was negating the greatest advantages of an airborne force. During the area operations that followed the initial attack for Operation DAISY, the fire force had frequently been without helicopters. This effectively meant that it could not be employed. The suggestion that paratroopers be dropped from a Dakota aircraft as an alternative was met with an outright refusal by the Air Force; it insisted that there would never be another operational daylight drop of paratroopers. Furthermore, the absence of the lead pilot and navigator at the planning for DAISY was seen as a major shortcoming in the preparation for the operation.¹⁸³

181. Ibid.

182, Supp. Docs, War Diaries Gp, Box 402, Top Secret folder, 61 Mech Bn Gp, "Oorlogsdagboek: Op DAISY", handwritten transcript: "In-Huis Nabetraging van Op DAISY op 250900B by HK Sektor 10".

183. Ibid.

There was a general feeling expressed at this debriefing conference that SWAPO had been thrown into a state of confusion and uncertainty by the operation, although there was little in the way of evidence of material gains for the SADF. Unfortunately, in the available literature on SWAPO's experience of the war, nothing was found to indicate whether there had in fact been any major disruption of the movement's insurgency campaign as a result of Operation DAISY.

The trend of the discussion at the debriefing conference was that the success or failure of the operation was once again being measured by how many SWAPO "kills" had been achieved. It was the same old trap that regular soldiers fall into. Criticism from Army HQ about the lack of success, it seems would have been more muted had there been more dead insurgents to report. Some of the top soldiers in the SADF had still not grasped the essence of an insurgency conflict: ultimate victory is dependent on the support of the population for a morally defensible cause. The irony is that a quotation by Peter Paret¹⁸⁴ was emblazoned in large letters on the wall of the same conference room at Sector 10 where these discussions were taking place:

The decisive factor is the population, which is both the strongest force in the struggle, as well as its primary object.

10.4.2. Tactical Air-Landing: Operation MERLYN (Kaokoveld)

In considering a second battalion-sized airborne operation in support of ground forces, the TALO that was carried out as part of Operation MERLYN at the very end of the war is examined. During the battles around the Lomba River and Cuito-Cuanavale in southeast Angola in 1987 and 1988, the war had reached its highest level of intensity yet. By then, the Soviet-supplied Angolan Air Force, backed by the Cubans, had achieved such dominance of the skies that airborne operations by the SADF were no longer viable in that high-threat environment. With what amounted to a military stalemate in the campaign, with FAPLA and the Cubans on one side and UNITA and the SADF on the other, political, economic and social factors on both sides inevitably resulted in a resort to negotiation. Coinciding as it did with

184. Paret, a professor emeritus at the American Institute for Advanced Study has written widely on the history of war and society and on the relationship of art, society, and politics. He has been described as one of the very few scholars capable of addressing what he calls the cognitive challenge of war – the sad fact that those who wage war are often surprised by its unintended consequences and baffled by its dynamic range. It is paradoxical that a quote by this man should be displayed on the walls of the Operational Headquarters of those who were waging war. I copied this quotation down during one of the conferences I attended in that room the year before Operation DAISY. I noted it because the irony was so striking.

the sudden end of the Cold War, this made an agreement possible, one that was brokered by the Americans and supported by the Soviets.¹⁸⁵

The South Africans withdrew from SE Angola, but a standoff developed in 1988 between the South Africans in Namibia on the one side and the Cuban/FAPLA/SWAPO forces in Angola on the other. It was at this time that a full-time parachute battalion group was established by 44 Parachute Brigade (see Chapter 12, Operation KWËVOËL). Britain, France, the USA, Canada and West Germany formed the Western Five Contact Group to set about working alongside, rather than with the UN Security Council to bring about a resolution of the impasse. As Cedric Thornberry, Chief Aide to the UN Special Representative for Namibia, put it: "After protracted negotiations with South Africa, SWAPO and the Frontline States (then comprising Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia) the [Western] Five secured support for a Settlement Proposal that would implement [UN Security Council] Resolution 385."¹⁸⁶

As a result of these negotiations and the agreements reached, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 435 on 29 September 1978. This provided a detailed plan of transition for Namibia, leading up to elections. It also authorised the establishment of a United Nations Transitional Assistance Group (UNTAG) to assist the UN Secretary General's Special Representative to oversee the elections and independence of the country.¹⁸⁷ But the war dragged on after this for more than a decade, because South Africa rejected the new resolution as having deviated from what had previously been accepted.¹⁸⁸ It was only in 1988, with the stalemate in southeast Angola, that an agreement could be reached to implement Resolution 435.¹⁸⁹ The counter-insurgency war against SWAPO too, was proving unwinnable. According to Thornberry, "the conflict between SWAPO/PLAN and the South African Defence Force in the 1980s ended in deadlock. Neither could defeat the other". Elsewhere he added, "everybody needs to be able to declare a general victory."¹⁹⁰

185. I. Van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball, 2015), pp. 280–282; Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, pp. 415–422.

186. C. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born: The Inside Story of Namibia's Independence* (Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2004), p. 20. I have made extensive use of Thornberry's account, as he appears to be the only senior member of the UN who was on the ground and has recorded his impressions of the events.

187. C.A. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood* (New York, Norton, 1992), pp. 495–499.

188. G. L'Ange, *The White Africans: From Colonisation to Liberation* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2005), p. 345.

189. See Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa*, pp. 361 and 363; Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means", p. 36; L'Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 406.

190. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp. 20 and 29.

Intense diplomatic activity produced a series of accords during 1988. In July a document titled “Principles for a Peaceful Settlement in Southwestern Africa”, was signed in New York by delegates from South Africa, Angola and Cuba. Shortly afterwards, in early August the Geneva Protocol was signed by delegates from the same three countries, under the mediation of Chester Crocker, US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa. At this meeting, the Angolans undertook to use their good offices to pressurise SWAPO to move all their bases in Angola north of the 16th parallel (some 150km north of the border).¹⁹¹ An article on the website of NAMRIGHTS, a human rights monitoring and advocacy organisation in Namibia, points out that the president of SWAPO, Sam Nujoma, twice affirmed in writing to the UN Security Council his commitment, in accordance with the spirit of the Geneva agreement, to implement a cessation of all hostile acts until the formal signing of a ceasefire between SWAPO and South Africa under Resolution 435. These affirmations were dated 12 August 1988 and 18 March 1989.¹⁹² On 13 December 1988 the Angolans, Cubans and South Africans signed the Brazzaville Protocol, in terms of which there would be a staged and total withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. Soon after, on 22 December 1988 a Tripartite Agreement was signed at the UN Headquarters in New York to the effect that the UN would be requested to implement Resolution 435 and the withdrawal of all South African military forces from Namibia.¹⁹³

On 24 January 1989 an agreement was announced in New York, in terms of which a new Joint Military Monitoring Commission (JMMC) was established, comprising delegates from Angola, Cuba and South Africa and observers from the Soviet Union and the United States. The JMMC would, until UNTAG was in place, deal with problems arising on either side of the Angola/Namibia border from the various agreements that had been signed.¹⁹⁴

Resolution 435 was scheduled for implementation on 1 April 1989.¹⁹⁵ This would therefore be the day on which the formal ceasefire in the long war between SWAPO and the SADF would come into effect. But UNTAG was behind schedule. The first members of UNTAG only began to arrive in Namibia early in 1989, and by late March that year the UN

191. P. Stiff, *Nine Days of War: Namibia: Before, During and After* (Alberton, Lemur Books, 1989), p. 46.

192. P. ya Nangoloh, “Remembering the April 1 Massacre”, at <http://www.nshr.org.na>, News, 5 April 2012. See also M. Malan, *My Life with the SA Defence Force* (Pretoria, Protea Book House, 2006), pp. 297–298.

193. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa*, pp. 499–511. The respective documents are reproduced in Crocker’s book.

194. Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 60.

195. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, p. 26.

Special Representative, Martti Ahtisaari, was in Windhoek, the capital.¹⁹⁶ In terms of the Tripartite Agreement, the SAPS Koevoet counter-insurgency unit and the SWA Territory Force would be disbanded and the SADF presence in Namibia gradually reduced to only 1,500 soldiers.¹⁹⁷ The level of insurgent activity in northern Namibia dropped drastically towards the end of 1988 and into the first three months of 1989.¹⁹⁸ It appeared that SWAPO was keeping its part of the agreement regarding the cessation of hostilities. But Angola had done nothing – or was unable to do anything – about persuading SWAPO to move its bases in Angola further north of the border, despite South Africa’s complaints about this.¹⁹⁹ At a meeting of the JMMC in Havana, Cuba on 21 March 1989, South Africa, not for the first time, raised concerns about SWAPO not being restricted to the area north of the 16th parallel. Angola merely gave assurances that this would be done by 1 April 1989.²⁰⁰

SWAPO had long been claiming to have bases inside “liberated Namibia” and now let it be known to the UNTAG elements that they intended moving to those bases on 1 April. The UN, according to Thornberry, acknowledged that there was as yet no “liberated Namibia” and felt that SWAPO knew very well that the idea of moving in and being confined to base inside Namibia was not on. Indeed, the UNTAG military commander, Lieutenant General Dewan Prem Chand of the Indian Army, was troubled by these reports and on 26 March 1989 he briefed the UN in New York about his concerns. Sam Nujoma had also stated, both in a speech to the OAU and to a UN official that SWAPO intended occupying bases inside Namibia after the implementation of the ceasefire. Quite clearly, neither Angola nor the UN did anything to prevent this intended contravention of the accords.²⁰¹

In the meantime, the withdrawal by the SADF commenced and the combat elements in northern Namibia were steadily scaled down and sent back to South Africa. Until 1 April 1989 the SANDF troop levels were maintained, although demobilisation of SWA Territory Force units commenced and the cessation of hostilities was upheld. According to the withdrawal schedule, the SADF strength would then be reduced on a predetermined scale

196. B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies (eds), *South Africa in the 20th Century* (Pretoria, J.L. van Schaik, 1994), pp. 537–538.

197. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p. 428.

198. Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 51.

199. A.Ezurra Naón and L.D. Merizalde, *SWA/Namibia: Dawn or Dusk?* (Windhoek, self published, 1989), pp. 213–214.

200. Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 63.

201. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp. 71–72, 82 and 137.

over three months to only 1,500 troops by the end of June. Those were to return to South Africa after election day, scheduled for 1 November 1989.²⁰²

In the meantime, the UNTAG mission was experiencing significant logistic problems in putting its force on the ground in Namibia.²⁰³ All SADF units still in Namibia at the time were confined to their bases and heavy machine-guns had been removed from all armoured personnel carriers. The SAAF helicopters at AFB Ondangwa had been disarmed and all patrol activity had ceased, except for lightly armed police patrols. Effectively, the SADF in Namibia had been deactivated. Four SWA Territory Force battalions had been disarmed and for the most part demobilised.²⁰⁴ SWAPO, on the other hand, as events were to show, simply ignored the requirement that all its forces should withdraw north of the 16th parallel, despite Nujoma stating publicly that they would abide by the agreements.²⁰⁵

During the night of 31 March 1989, some 1,200 heavily armed SWAPO insurgents crossed the border from Angola at four different points over a 300km front. They were carrying small arms, mortars, SAM-7 anti-aircraft missiles and RPG-7 anti-tank rockets.²⁰⁶ In the early morning the first clashes with police patrols took place and in a short while heavy fighting had erupted all along the border. Just which side initiated these contacts will probably always be open to dispute, but the fighting was vicious. The war was supposed to end that day, yet the ceasefire was now in tatters. Casualties were high and the police were unable to obtain air support because there were no gunship helicopters available (their 20mm cannons had been dismantled and sent to Grootfontein the day before) and in any case, the SADF was confined to bases and was subject to UN monitoring. They needed permission from the SADF military authorities in Pretoria to leave their bases, and this was not forthcoming.²⁰⁷

The SWAPO incursion was a major embarrassment to the UN, because it was an open contravention of the ceasefire agreement that SWAPO had undertaken to implement

202. Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p. 180; Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 72.

203. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp. 71–72.

204. Briefing notes on Op MERLYN by OC 44 Para Bde, circa 1989.

205. "Nujoma Vows to Obey Treaties" *Sunday Times*, 12 March 1989.

206. DOD, C Army (D Ops) Gp, Box 160, H Leër/309/4 MERLYN, "Aanbiedingsnotas oor Op AGREE en Op MERLYN: Situatie in SWA", 14 April 1989". Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p. 180, gives the number of SWAPO insurgents as 1,000, while Snyman, *Beeld van die SWA Gebiedsmag*, p. 99, states that there were about 1,500; Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 77, gives the number as 1,600; while Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa*, p. 421, gives an estimate of 2,000. The initial number who crossed the border on the night of 31 March was estimated by the SADF as "a force of close to 1,000 well-armed Swapo elements in groups of between 50 and 200", and one week later their number was estimated as "in excess of 2,000 insurgents inside SWA". See Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, entry for 8 April 1989.

207. DOD, HS Ops Gp 4, Box 160, H Leër/309/4, MERLYN, "Aanbiedingsnotas oor Op AGREE en Op MERLYN: Situatie in SWA", 14 April 1989.

from 1 April. And the UN, throughout the long years of the war, had supported SWAPO. Yet now its actions were threatening to derail the whole peace and independence process when everything was beginning to come together. It is generally accepted by most commentators that SWAPO's intention was to establish bases inside Namibia to which they would then be confined in terms of Resolution 435.²⁰⁸ This would have enhanced their status significantly in the run-up to the elections. In an interview many years later with one of the insurgents who had crossed the Cunene River that night, he stated that he had been told that there would be no fighting because the agreement had confined the SADF to bases; SWAPO fighters were to make their way "back to the bases they had occupied in Namibia". They carried the weaponry to protect their bases once they arrived. He was vague about the nature or location of these "bases".²⁰⁹

UNTAG had only 300 military observers in Namibia at the time, and none of them were near the border. Ahtisaari was asked to allow SAAF helicopters to evacuate casualties. He agreed.²¹⁰ He was under pressure from the South Africans to release some of their military units from their bases to deal with SWAPO and in the midst of a flurry of diplomatic activity centred around the visit to Windhoek by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and frantic calls to the Secretary-General of the UN in New York, a plan was devised by UNTAG, together with the staff of the South African Administrator-General, Advocate Louis Pienaar. Their despondent realisation was that if SWAPO had indeed orchestrated such a blatant contravention of the agreements, the only way of stopping them would be to employ the SADF. First an urgent fact-finding UNTAG mission under Thornberry was sent to the operational area; the members of his group quickly established that there was without a doubt a major incursion by SWAPO, and their reluctant recommendation to Ahtisaari was that some of the SADF units would have to be authorised to act against SWAPO – they simply had no other option. A statement by the UN was released:

Certain specified units to be agreed will be released from restriction to base to provide such support as may be needed by the existing police forces in case they cannot handle the situation by themselves. The situation will be kept under continuous review and the movement out of existing bases will be monitored throughout by UNTAG military observers.²¹¹

208. R. Dale, *The Namibian War of Independence, 1966–1989: Diplomatic, Economic and Military Campaigns* (Jefferson NC, McFarland, 2014), pp. 81–82 expands on this, giving the views of Bryan O'Linn and Guy Lamb.

209. Interview, WO1 R.T. Shipunda of the Namibian Defence Force, Oserikari, Namibia, 20 July 2014.

210. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, p. 89.

211. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Before dawn on 2 April the first SADF elements were already deploying against SWAPO – incongruously, under the banner of the UN.²¹²

It was this lifting of the confinement to bases that had been placed on the SADF/SWA Territory Force that became a huge point of contention over the next few days and for a long time afterwards. Although former South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha has cavalierly portrayed it to his biographer as a unilateral action by the South Africans after simply informing the UN Secretary-General,²¹³ Thornberry's account and the UN reaction do not bear this out. The South Africans appear to have been careful to obtain authorisation from the UN before acting. However, one can surmise that had the UN not authorised it, it is probable the South Africans would eventually have acted unilaterally, which would almost certainly have unravelled the entire peace process.²¹⁴ But the authorisation provided SWAPO and its allies with a whip that they used repeatedly against the UN throughout the crisis, railing against the organisation about this "proof" of its partiality towards South Africa.

UNTAG's official spokesperson in Namibia, Fred Eckhard, reportedly said that there was a possibility that SWAPO had been "misinformed" about the terms of the ceasefire and Resolution 435 and had believed they were entitled to bring in armed fighters to assembly points inside Namibia.²¹⁵ Yet Thornberry himself and others in the UN had been telling SWAPO since 1979 that they would not be permitted to establish bases inside Namibia after the ceasefire: "... they could not expect to gain at the conference table what they had failed to gain on the battlefield; even less so by subterfuge in a flagrant breach of a cease-fire agreement."²¹⁶

The SWA Territory Force immediately began to remobilise its battalions when the extent of the incursion became apparent. Soldiers who had been sent home thinking their military service was over and the war had ended were urgently recalled, fitted out with combat uniform and webbing and rearmed. Repeated messages were broadcast on local radio stations and the demobilised black troops streamed back to their former bases. The SAAF helicopters were rearming.²¹⁷ The OAU railed against Ahtisaari and UNTAG for using

212. In his autobiography, Gen Magnus Malan, Defence minister at the time, claims the first SADF elements were deployed against SWAPO at 14h00 on 1 April 1989. See Malan, *My Life with the SADF*, p. 298.

213. T. Papenfus, *Pik Botha en sy Tyd* (Pretoria, Litera, 2011), p. 581.

214. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa*, p. 422.

215. Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 144.

216. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, p. 98.

217. DOD, HS Ops Gp 4, Box 160, H Leër/309/4, MERLYN, "Aanbiedingsnotas oor Op AGREE en Op MERLYN: Situasië in SWA", 14 April 1989.

“the notorious murder squads of the South African occupation army to once again kill and maim the Namibian people”.²¹⁸ But more SWAPO insurgents were crossing the border, the conflict was escalating and the casualties were mounting.

As soon as the incursion by SWAPO had occurred, the Officer Commanding 44 Parachute Brigade was ordered to place 14 Parachute Battalion Group (his only full-time combat unit) on full alert for immediate deployment. At the time the battalion group was participating in Exercise SWEEPSLAG (“Whiplash”) at the Army Battle School training grounds near Lohatlha in the Northern Cape. The Brigade HQ was at Murrayhill, about 30km north of Pretoria and the brigade commander sent a warning order to the battalion commander at Lohatlha, instructing him to prepare for deployment at short notice, but to continue with the exercise in the meantime. While the brigade HQ called up additional personnel and arranged for mobilisation equipment to be packed and palletised for air transport by the brigade’s Air Supply Wing, the brigade commander sat daily in the Operations Centre at Army HQ, monitoring the situation as it developed. Within nine hours of receiving the warning order, the brigade was ready to deploy the required force.²¹⁹ It now just waited for the go-ahead.

Sam Nujoma, in the continuing diplomatic scramble, insisted that the UN allow it to have bases inside Namibia in any peace agreement to end the current fighting; South Africa was adamant that this would be unacceptable. The UN Secretary-General continued to openly support the SWAPO argument regarding bases. There was a very real possibility that the whole independence process would break down, UNTAG would be forced to depart and the war would resume with even greater intensity than before. Unlike his political colleagues, Prem Chand, the UNTAG military chief, did not mince his words about what had happened. Thornberry had been using the phrase “without hostile intent” to describe SWAPO’s actions, but the Indian general, an officer with a lifetime of military experience around the world, reiterated that from the South African point of view SWAPO’s actions could only have been seen as hostile:

If their intention had been peaceful they should surely have advised our people in Luanda so that we could have been there to ensure that they would be received in peace. You can’t have armed guerrillas wandering around openly in uniform after a cease-fire. Such action must lead to clashes.²²⁰

218. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, p. 101.

219. M. Alexander, Course JSC 34/95, *Research Staff Paper for the OC SA Defence College on the Employment of a SANDF Parachute Brigade for Interventionist Peace Support Operations in Africa*, SA Defence College, Pretoria, October 1995, pp. C5-2 and C5-3.

220. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, p. 105.

Thornberry admitted that even had UNTAG been at full strength, it would not have been able to react in any way to this totally unexpected, unforeseen and tragic contravention of the Geneva Protocol and thereby also Resolution 435. But for the UNTAG political staff, the situation was one of great stress: they knew the facts of what had happened, but their bosses at the UN Headquarters in New York did not want the facts. Many of those in New York

were institutionally committed to the idea that all South Africa's actions were bad and all SWAPO's were good. In that kind of political environment, facts become almost irrelevant. Political support and pressure is what makes them true or false, relevant or disposable.²²¹

In such conditions the role of UNTAG must have been almost impossible and it says much for people like Ahtisaari and Thornberry that they persevered and rode out the crisis, with accusations being thrown at them from all sides and no real support coming from the office of the UN Secretary-General in New York.

But the fighting was not going the insurgents' way and by 4 April the UN was picking up signals that SWAPO was prepared to negotiate. However, they continued to insist that their fighters had to be confined to bases within Namibia because "our combatants have been operating inside Namibia for more than 22 years".²²²

By Friday 7 April the fighting had not abated. South Africa (apparently basing its information on its wartime intelligence sources) told Ahtisaari that there were now around 1,800 SWAPO insurgents in the north of Namibia and that Cuban/Angolan brigades were beginning to move south from Lubango in Angola. The SADF had no choice but to mobilise additional units. Ahtisaari refused to authorise this and asked the South Africans to wait for developments over the next 48 hours.²²³ They demurred, but agreed. There was a real possibility that their patience would run out and they would simply brush the almost non-existent UNTAG aside and take matters into their own hands. This was the largest incursion by SWAPO in the 23-year war and the SADF generals were getting impatient at having one hand tied behind their backs while SWAPO did as they pleased.

In the northwest of Namibia lay a small settlement known as Opuwo. There was little there besides a small government station and a military base.²²⁴ It was the home of 102

221. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

222. Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 182.

223. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp. 107–108.

224. Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 74.

Battalion of the SWA Territory Force and their area of responsibility was the vast, bleached wilderness of the Kaokoveld. The only inhabitants were members of two tribal groupings: the primitive, peaceful and semi-nomadic Ovahimba and the colourful but more aggressive Herero. SWAPO had been active in the Kaokoveld during the war, principally because it was seen as a useful transit area for outflanking the security forces and entering Ovamboland from the west. The sparse and widely scattered population and semi-desert environment did not make it an easy area for an insurgency campaign. The soldiers of 102 Battalion were recruited from the two local tribes. In time, additional bases were established at Okongwati and Ehomba and there had been a number of armed contacts and mine incidents in the area during the war.²²⁵ Ehomba was located on an arid, scrubby plain to the south of the Cunene River and the harsh Zebra Mountains. Two infantry companies had been housed at the base alongside a dusty dirt airstrip, but as with the rest of the SWA Territory Force, 102 Battalion had been disbanded and the facilities were now virtually deserted.

When the SWAPO incursion took place on 1 April, 102 Battalion began remobilising. Its members were called back from their homes in the remote villages and by Thursday 6 April 1989 the battalion was able to commence operations from its forward base at Ehomba. It was not, as Stiff claims, up to full strength,²²⁶ it was unable to muster even three full companies.²²⁷ One of its platoons made contact that day with SWAPO insurgents near Swartbooisdrif beside the Cunene and killed two of them. But by then the South African intelligence reports indicated that a large group of SWAPO insurgents was moving towards the Caprivi Strip from a base inside Zambia, and the security forces were nervously anticipating an escalation of the conflict along the northeast border. Requests to the UN Special Representative for the release of more forces from restriction to base were turned down and met with a further plea for the SADF to exercise restraint.²²⁸ Ultimately, only one additional SADF unit was deployed: 14 Parachute Battalion Group.

Twice during the week following the initial incursion by SWAPO, the parachute brigade commander was tasked to send in the battalion group, but on both occasions the order was rescinded before the aircraft took off. The brigade commander had by then set up a tactical HQ at its Air Supply Wing in the Tek Base at Lyttelton, close to AFB Waterkloof in Pretoria and the brigade staff was on immediate standby to depart for Namibia. On 5

225. Snyman, *Beeld van die SWA Gebiedsmag*, p. 69.

226. Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 189.

227. Briefing notes on Op MERLYN by OC 44 Para Bde, circa 1989.

228. Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 203.

April the brigade commander was ordered to place his force on a two-hour standby.²²⁹ The Chief of the SA Army would not authorise the intervention by 14 Parachute Battalion Group until the UN had agreed in principle to sending in troops from outside Namibia. Whether this agreement was ever actually made could not be verified in the archives. However, at about 16h00 on Friday 7 April 1989, the brigade commander was finally given a verbal order for the battalion group to be flown to Namibia for deployment in the Kaokoveld. The OC Sector 10, Brigadier Chris Serfontein, was desperately short of forces in the Kaokoveld, where it was estimated a total of some 400 insurgents was trying to press south to Opuwa to establish a base and possibly even to take the town. The brigade was to deploy the battalion group at Ehomba, minus its light artillery battery, which was to go to Oshakati to help protect the Sector HQ and military housing.²³⁰

A total of 10 transport aircraft was made available for the operation: six C-130B Hercules and four C-160Z Transall aircraft. However, the Air Force was only able to muster sufficient crews to fly eight of them, and even then, had to call up some crewmen on the reserve. This meant that two of the available Transall aircraft were not used.²³¹ The parachute battalion group that was transported was nowhere near full strength and comprised a battalion HQ, one rifle company, a support company with an 81mm mortar platoon, an anti-tank platoon and a machine-gun platoon, a light artillery battery of 120mm mortars, a light anti-aircraft troop, an engineer troop, a signals section a light aid detachment for technical support and a medical task team. In addition, there was a rifle company of paratroopers from 4 Parachute Battalion at Ondangwa as the resident fire force (technically, confined to base), and another company at 1 Parachute Battalion in Bloemfontein, both available for attachment to 14 Parachute Battalion Group. The Brigade Tac HQ also deployed with a pathfinder platoon, a tactical air supply section and a dispatcher team of CF soldiers that had been mobilised.²³²

Other than the CF company from 4 Parachute Battalion and the despatchers, all other elements were PF or national servicemen. The brigade immediately commenced with the loading of equipment and vehicles onto the aircraft at AFB Waterkloof, working with the Air Force into the night. The battalion group at Lohatlha was withdrawn from the exercise it was involved in and assembled at the small Sishen airfield.

229. Alexander, *The Employment of a SANDF Parachute Brigade*, p. C5-3.

230. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, entry for 7 April 1989.

231. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, entry for 8 April 1989.

232. Briefing notes on Op MERLYN by OC 44 Para Bde, circa 1989.

At 03h00 on the morning of Saturday 8 April 1989, the first aircraft lifted off from Waterkloof. It was a C-160 carrying the brigade commander and part of his Tactical HQ. It flew the over 500km to Sishen airfield and landed in the dark. The side of the runway was lined with waiting paratroopers, Jakkals jeeps, boxes of ammunition and rations. Within 30 minutes the aircraft was filled with troops and their personal kit and was back in the air – but not before the second C-160 had landed and begun to load its cargo.²³³

Successive aircraft landing at Sishen uploaded the remainder of the battalion group, while others, fully laden with equipment flew directly from Pretoria to Namibia. Each aircraft flew separately. The brigade commander planned a Tactical Air Landed Operation (TALO) at Ehomba, staging from Ondangwa, and then an immediate deployment of his troops to commence the hunt for the insurgents. But the Air Force was convinced that its C-130 Hercules aircraft would not be able to land on the short gravel airstrip at Ehomba. Until then, the only transport aircraft that had landed there were the Dakotas and the C-160 Transalls, both of which could land on a shorter strip. There was also concern that the airstrip surface would not be able to handle successive landings by heavy aircraft. This meant that 14 Parachute Battalion Group would have to be shuttled to Ehomba in the two available Transalls.²³⁴

When each aircraft reached the *pannetjiesveld* (fields with shallow pans of water) of Ovamboland, they descended to treetop height for the final approach to Ondangwa. Because the insurgents were armed with shoulder-launched SA-7 surface-to-air missiles, it was necessary to fly tactically. The first aircraft to land in the early light of the new day was the Transall carrying the brigade commander. As he and the aircraft commander stepped out onto the tarmac, they saw two white UN Bell helicopters parked on the apron. They were a sharp contrast to the camouflaged Pumas that had stood on the airfield for the past 15 years and more. A staff officer from Sector 10 met the brigade commander and confirmed the deployment of the paratroopers to the Kaokoveld (the brigade commander had still received no formal written orders), while the pilot immediately filed his flight plan to Ehomba.²³⁵ It would be necessary for him to confirm the surface of the airstrip before commencing with the landing of the battalion group.

Two helicopter gunships were sent ahead to provide “top cover” for the landing, because the bush and scrubland around Ehomba afforded insurgents cover from which they

233. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, entry for 8 April 1989.

234. Ibid., entry for 9 April 1989.

235. Ibid.

could employ the SA-7 missile. The flight by the Transall to Ehomba to the east at low level took about half an hour, and after flying around the Ehomba Mountain it landed from the west, approaching from a direction that would not have been expected. The gunships then also landed. The pilot of the Transall tested the runway on landing and was satisfied that the surface was hard enough and the length of the runway sufficient for six successive Hercules aircraft to land, so the shuttling of the other aircraft immediately commenced.²³⁶ Circling Alouette gunships covered each landing and additional gunships were dispatched from Ondangwa to relieve those at Ehomba so that they could return and refuel. But because the dirt airstrip was small, with very little taxiway, it could only accommodate one transport aircraft at a time. This meant that each of the subsequent six aircraft participating (the offloading of the light artillery battery, the despatchers, parachutes and the tactical air supply section at Ondangwa, made it unnecessary for the seventh aircraft to fly to Ehomba) had to land, taxi, unload, taxi and take off again before the next one could follow suit. This made it a lengthy process, with the waiting aircraft remaining at Ondangwa, 240km away, until the previous aircraft had almost unloaded and was ready to take off. All the while, two gunships orbited above Ehomba on a constant rotational relief system until the last transport aircraft had departed. By 17h00 the battalion group and all its equipment had been landed and it was ready for action.²³⁷ See Appendix 71.

A total of 400 troops and 50 tonnes of equipment had been airlifted over a distance of 2,130km (Pretoria-Sishen-Ondangwa-Ehomba) in 14 hours and were able to be employed in action immediately on landing. The equipment that was airlifted included complete first line and first line reserve ammunition, seven Jakkals Jeeps, all support weapons and their ammunition, rations for four days, 450 personnel parachutes with reserves, tactical air supply equipment and cargo parachutes. If it proved necessary, additional equipment in the form of 40 tonnes of ammunition, four Ferret armoured cars fitted with 106mm recoilless guns and a further 13 Jakkals Jeeps had been prepared by 44 Parachute Brigade for a second airlift to be carried out by five aircraft that could have returned to Waterkloof to collect them. Two additional parachute companies were immediately available to reinforce the battalion group, one at Ondangwa and the other in Bloemfontein. Helicopter fuel was also airlifted to Ehomba so that the helicopters did not have to return to Ondangwa to refuel.²³⁸

236. Briefing notes on Op MERLYN by OC 44 Para Bde, circa 1989.

237. Alexander, *The Employment of a SANDF Parachute Brigade*, p. C5-3.

238. Briefing notes on Op MERLYN by OC 44 Para Bde, circa 1989.

The paratroopers immediately moved out to begin hunting the SWAPO insurgents, operating principally in the harsh and arid Zebra Mountains, where most of the guerrillas had taken refuge in the bush that covered the valleys. Making use of two Puma helicopters, two Allouette gunships and a Bosbok light aircraft operating from Ehomba airfield, the paratroopers conducted fire force operations, coupled with aggressive patrolling, follow-up operations, the deployment of observation posts manned by the pathfinders and the laying of ambushes.. They made their first contact with SWAPO the following day, and during a fire force action two insurgents were shot and killed.²³⁹

But on the same day that the paratroopers had landed, Saturday 8 April 1989, after a week of fighting and horrendous casualties on both sides, SWAPO and South Africa indicated a willingness to negotiate. Nujoma, apparently under pressure from the Angolans and the Cubans, had agreed to recall his guerrillas to Angola. The independence process had gone too far for those who had agreed on peace to allow it to be sabotaged at this stage. On Sunday 9 April a meeting that had been convened the previous day at Mount Etjo, a game farm several hundred kilometres north of Windhoek, was concluded. It proved pivotal in getting the independence process back on track. In attendance were Angolans, Americans, Cubans, South Africans, Soviets and members of UNTAG.²⁴⁰

All five countries were represented at ministerial level and there were also generals and diplomats present.²⁴¹ The gathering reflected the tripartite JMMC (which had in fact ceased to exist on 1 April, but had been reconstituted on 6 April as a result of the crisis²⁴²) composed of Angola, Cuba and South Africa, with the two influential observers, the United States and the Soviet Union. They had negotiated long and hard to end to the war in Angola and they were apparently determined not to allow SWAPO's action to jeopardise their endeavours of the past year and more.²⁴³ Whereas the UN Secretary-General and the Security Council had failed so dismally to resolve this crisis (Thornberry's book, in his inside account of events, graphically reveals the pusillanimity of the UN during the crisis), the JMMC was directly and vitally concerned with reaching a quick solution. The members had a great deal at stake. SWAPO was not present, but this was in accordance with Resolution

239. Alexander, *The Employment of a SANDF Parachute Brigade*, p. C5-4.

240. Mt Etjo Declaration, attached document and Annexure, 9 April 1989.

241. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, p. 112.

242. Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 202.

243. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa*, p. 422.

435, in terms of which the Administrator-General of SWA, Louis Pienaar, would represent Namibia until the UN-supervised elections had taken place.²⁴⁴

An agreement was reached that PLAN fighters would be allowed free passage to designated assembly points that would be under UNTAG supervision and be operational by midday on Tuesday 11 April for a period of ten days.²⁴⁵ These assembly points would be manned by contingents from FAPLA and the SADF, and once the guerrillas had reported they would lay down their arms to UNTAG and be taken by UNTAG or under UNTAG supervision to SWAPO bases in Angola, north of the 16th parallel.²⁴⁶ But the Mount Etjo Agreement left out many important specifics – there were no clear deadlines and no formal ceasefire was mentioned. Although the purpose of the Mount Etjo Declaration was to restore the situation in northern Namibia to the status quo of 31 March 1989, it was only possible to reach agreement on this with the consensus of the Administrator-General of SWA and the UN Special Representative. Allowance was made for the SADF to conduct verification operations under UNTAG supervision throughout the northern area of Namibia in the event that such consensus was not achieved.

All of this left a very small window in which the SADF and the remobilised SWA TF units could continue hunting the SWAPO insurgents who had caused the disruption of the Resolution 435 process. The Officer Commanding Sector 10, who was in overall command of the SADF military operation known as MERLYN (the code name for the SADF contingency plan to prevent the subverting of the implementation of Resolution 435) appointed the brigade commander as his personal representative in the Kaokoveld and instructed him to establish two assembly points on the border in co-operation with UNTAG.²⁴⁷ The paratrooper colonel reallocated his available forces, putting together a composite battalion of companies from 102 Battalion and 14 Parachute Battalion Group and the pathfinders to continue the search and destroy operation while he established the two assembly points on the banks of the Cunene River, one at the spectacular Epupa Falls and another at Swartbooisdrif, some 70km apart at opposite ends of the Zebra Mountains. His brigade HQ then paradoxically oversaw both the hunting of the insurgents and manning of the assembly points where the insurgents could report to be taken back into Angola.²⁴⁸

244. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp. 114–115.

245. Handwritten Memo from C Army (Lt Gen Liebenberg) to GOC SWA (Maj Gen Meyer), 9 April 1989 and attached to Mt Etjo Declaration.

246. Mt Etjo Declaration, Annexure, 9 April 1989.

247. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, entries for 8 to 11 April 1989.

248. *Ibid.*

It was a well-nigh impossible balancing act. In his hand-written instructions to the GOC SWA, the Chief of the SA Army, General “Kat” Liebenberg, had expressly forbidden the shooting of any SWAPO insurgents who were on their way to an assembly point, or any who were within 5km of the Angolan border and moving in a northerly direction. However, he also stated that any insurgents “moving southwards or acting aggressively were to be handled normally” (own translation).²⁴⁹ This left enormous leeway for a very broad interpretation of the situation, particularly for individuals who felt they had scores to settle with the insurgents. They could exploit whatever circumstances prevailed when they encountered SWAPO bands or individuals. It also meant that any insurgent who crossed the border intent on mayhem, merely had to face in the other direction if he encountered security forces! Clearly, it was a ludicrous and unworkable situation.

Both Generals Jannie Geldenhuys of the SADF and Prem Chand of the UN expressed doubts about PLAN guerrillas reporting to the assembly points, saying they would in all likelihood avoid contact with any security forces and simply return directly to Angola. This is in fact what happened. Yet Thornberry accused the security forces of a “highly intimidatory profile” at the assembly points, discouraging SWAPO insurgents from reporting. He used an incident he claimed took place at the Swartbooisdrif assembly point on 13 April as substantiation for this claim,²⁵⁰ but a record of the incident shows that when the insurgent in question was shot, he was some eight kilometres away from the assembly point.²⁵¹

However, it did reflect the irony of the situation created by the imprecise wording of the Mount Etjo Declaration. No doubt UNTAG saw it as a ceasefire agreement and possibly so did the JMMC. But it is clear that the SADF and the SWA Police did not. For them, the war would continue until SWAPO had reverted to the situation that existed prior to their breaching of Resolution 435 on the night of 31 March/1 April. This meant, in their eyes, that all insurgents had to return to Angola or face being killed in battle. Therefore, away from the nine assembly points that had been established, the SWAPO insurgents continued to be hunted relentlessly and mercilessly. Between them, the paratroopers, 102 Battalion and the SAAF gunships employed by 44 Parachute Brigade killed 20 insurgents in the Kaokoveld and captured the same number during those dying days of the conflict.²⁵²

249. Memo from C Army to GOC SWA, 9 April 1989 and attached to Mt Etjo Declaration.

250. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, p. 117.

251. DOD, HS Ops Gp 4, Box 160, H Leër/309/4, MERLYN, “Aanbiedingsnotas oor Op AGREE en Op MERLYN: Situasie in SWA”, 14 April 1989; Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, entry for 13 April 1989.

252. Briefing notes on Op MERLYN by OC 44 Para Bde, circa 1989.

Only one SWAPO insurgent arrived at an assembly point manned by the paratroopers. This was at the Epupa Falls point when three Ovahimba, mounted on horseback, brought in a guerrilla. No FAPLA contingents came to the two assembly points manned by the paratroopers, and UNTAG provided each point with one nervous officer with no radio equipment, no rations, no UN flag and no resources.²⁵³ See Appendix 71.

By 17 April UNTAG knew of only seven SWAPO insurgents who had handed themselves in at assembly points or churches in northern Namibia.²⁵⁴ On 26 April from 18h00 all SADF personnel were again confined to their bases for a period of 60 hours to give those insurgents who had not yet returned to Angola or reported to the assembly points the opportunity to do so without fear of being killed in the process. This was apparently agreed upon by the SADF because of allegations that the continued hunting of insurgents was slowing the return of the situation to what it had been prior to 1 April. The SAAF dropped UNTAG leaflets during the day on 26 April, informing SWAPO of this arrangement.²⁵⁵

From 13 May 1989, all SADF troops were confined to their bases throughout Namibia and SWAPO guerrillas to their bases north of the 16th parallel in Angola. Both were monitored by steadily growing UNTAG and the peace process leading to elections was able to continue.²⁵⁶ The death toll as a result of SWAPO's incursion has been described as the highest in the bush war. This is clearly not so if one includes the SADF actions in Angola, but it was almost certainly the highest during any of the many incursions conducted by SWAPO into Namibia. Thornberry gives the South African figures (the only ones available) as showing that 343, mostly young men, died between 1 April and 13 May 1989; 316 SWAPO insurgents and 27 security force policemen and soldiers.²⁵⁷ Other sources indicate that 38 SWAPO insurgents were captured and that besides the dead, there were 100 wounded among the security forces in a total of more than 60 fire fights. The insurgents shot out 21 armoured vehicles belonging to the police and the SADF.²⁵⁸

While the paratroopers manned the two assembly points in the Kaokoveld they were replenished with rations parachuted from a Dakota aircraft on 20 April 1989 by the brigade's Air Supply Wing.. It was the last operational air supply mission of the war. The light artillery battery and the company from 4 Parachute Battalion carried out a training

253. Ibid.

254. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, p. 118.

255. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, entry for 26 April 1989.

256. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, p. 121.

257. Ibid., pp. 125–126.

258. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p. 432.

parachute jump at the Ondangwa airfield on 26 April 1989 – the last parachute jump by the paratroopers of the SADF in Namibia. A platoon from the company manned an assembly point at Oshikango until these were all closed down. The Tac HQ of 44 Parachute Brigade was withdrawn and returned to South Africa before the end of the month.²⁵⁹

UNTAG was considered fully deployed in Namibia by 10 May 1989.²⁶⁰ No doubt the events of 1 April had lent urgency to the process. Chester Crocker felt that despite what he regarded as SWAPO's ploy to gain bases recognised by the UN inside Namibia having resulted in hundreds of SWAPO dead and a six-week setback of the settlement clock, the crisis actually drove the signatories of the peace deal he had brokered closer together.²⁶¹ In a meeting of the JMMC in Cape Town towards the end of April 1989, the Cubans reported that 1,187 SWAPO guerrillas had exfiltrated back into Angola and that only 200 remained inside Namibia. SADF intelligence put the figures at about 850 exfiltrators and some 400 still inside Namibia.²⁶²

The final withdrawal of 14 Parachute Battalion Group from Namibia took place on 20 and 21 May 1989.²⁶³ The continued presence of the paratroopers in the operational area had, for the last few weeks that they were there, been merely to provide additional forces should SWAPO again attempt to sabotage the peace process. B-Company, 4 Parachute Battalion, the resident fire force at Ondangwa, was flown back to South Africa in a chartered aircraft from the Safair freight company on 4 June 1989.²⁶⁴ It was the last combat element of the SA Army to be withdrawn from Ovamboland. The paratroopers had been the first SA Army combatants to deploy there during Operation BLOUWILDEBEEES in 1966 and they were the last to leave 23 years later. There were no casualties among the paratroopers during Operation MERLYN.²⁶⁵

What SWAPO intended in launching the 1 April incursion remains a matter of conjecture and controversy. Although its apologists do not admit to any incursion and insist that SWAPO's fighters were merely converging so that they could be confined to their own bases in Namibia by UNTAG, the evidence negates this. Some commentators point to the

259. S. Du Plessis, "The Paratroopers: Last SADF Combat Force to Withdraw from Namibia", Unpublished article, circa 1990; Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, entries for 20, 26 and 27 April 1989.

260. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, p. 127.

261. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa*, p. 484.

262. DOD, HS Ops Gp 4, Box 160, "Draft Summary of Third Regular Meeting of Joint Commission" Addendum B, Cape Town, 27–29 April 1989.

263. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, entries for 20 and 21 May 1989.

264. Du Plessis, "The Paratroopers: Last SADF Combat Force to Withdraw from Namibia".

265. Alexander, *The Employment of a SANDF Parachute Brigade*, p. C5-4.

situations in Rhodesia and Angola prior to their independence and claim that SWAPO was attempting to achieve similar last minute gains.²⁶⁶ L'Ange states:

SWAPO launched what appears to have been a carefully planned attempt to seize power before the election and, like the MPLA's seizure of power in Angola, have it accepted by the OAU – and therefore the UN – as a *fait accompli*.²⁶⁷

Stiff, on the other hand, uses the Zimbabwean analogy:

[Nujoma's] intentions had been to establish PLAN bases within Namibia from which he could launch a massive campaign of intimidation against the local populace, in much the same way as Robert Mugabe and his ZANU/PF had done in Zimbabwe in 1980.²⁶⁸

Saunders states that it seemed Nujoma was acting on the advice of Robert Mugabe,²⁶⁹ while De Vries maintains: "The purpose of SWAPO was to establish a position of strength, as basis for political manipulation for the oncoming democratic election."²⁷⁰ Nujoma himself implied that there was a conspiracy between the USA's Reagan administration and the South Africans to set up his PLAN fighters for a massacre by ensuring that there were no UN troops on the ground on 1 April.²⁷¹ Saunders is highly critical of this claim, commenting,

No-one who has made a detailed study of these events will be convinced by such an interpretation, which at a minimum fails to explain why the SWAPO leadership did not anticipate what might happen if there were no UN forces in place in the north when the armed PLAN fighters emerged.²⁷²

Saunders, however, despite the weighty evidence available, is careful to avoid admitting that they had crossed the border from Angola and uses the cautiously vague term "emerged" instead, which could imply that they were actually in Namibia before 1 April. Despite a military and diplomatic humiliation, politically SWAPO's exceptional propaganda machine used the exercise to good effect, boosting their support during the subsequent elections. The TRC of South Africa, in its report on the events of 1 April 1989, stated that the South African government developed

266. Dale, *The Namibian War of Independence*, p. 81.

267. L'Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 408.

268. Stiff, *Nine Days of War*, p. 258.

269. C. Saunders, "History and the Armed Struggle: From Anti-Colonial Propaganda to 'Patriotic History'", in H. Melber (ed.), *Transitions in Namibia: Which Changes for Whom?* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007), p. 23.

270. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm*, p. 766.

271. S. Nujoma, *Where Others Wavered: The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma. My Life in SWAPO and my Participation in the Liberation Struggle of Namibia* (London, PANAF Books, 2001), pp. 286 and 395.

272. Saunders, "History and the Armed Struggle", p. 23.

a multi-faceted effort to weaken and damage SWAPO and disrupt its electoral campaign. This took a number of forms. The first of these was the breach of the cease-fire agreement. On 1 April, UN forces moved into South West Africa/Namibia to oversee the transition process. From that day on, both SWAPO and the South African forces were expected to abide by the ceasefire and be confined to base. Instead, the launch of this new era was marred by a series of military battles across a 320-kilometre front in Owamboland.²⁷³

This implies that SWAPO's incursion was no more than an allegation by South Africa and highlights SWAPO's denial that there had been an incursion at all. The TRC went on to claim that the UN had "conceded to pressure from British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha". Given the weight of evidence available and the UN's own reports, these unsubstantiated statements seriously compromise the TRC's impartiality on the matter.

Although the paratroopers were deployed too late to have a major impact on the operation, they did achieve significant local success in the two days before the Mount Etjo Declaration was reached, and continued to hunt those insurgents who did not lay down their arms after SWAPO had agreed to recall its fighters. Their activation was the only real example of a battalion-sized airborne rapid deployment over thousands of kilometres to have been carried out by the SADF during the war. The operation illustrated the significant potential of South Africa's airborne capability.²⁷⁴ It was a potential that was, in this case, utilised to reinforce ground forces already engaged in combat; but it could have been used as an independent force to carry out a strategic operation on its own at short notice.

10.5. DEDUCTIONS

This chapter has shown that the potential of airborne operations in support of other ground forces was not optimised by most of the non-airborne commanders in the SADF. This was largely because of their lack of understanding of vertical envelopment, their consequent failure to grasp the potential of this form of manoeuvre and their ignorance of the limitations of airborne forces. As a result, inflexible plans and unimaginative use of paratroopers and helicopters frequently characterised their employment. Exacerbating these shortcomings was the dangerous tendency to carry out airborne operations with insufficient or faulty intelligence about the identified objectives. However, the paratroopers

273. TRC of SA, *Final Report, Vol. 2*, Chapter 2, par 127–129.

274. Alexander, *The Employment of a SANDF Parachute Brigade*, p. C5-4.

themselves were not without fault. Some airborne operations revealed the limitations of inexperienced commanders within some of the parachute battalions.

While the failures and shortcomings in the employment of the paratroopers were not perhaps the most egregious that commanders were guilty of during the war, the lack of good intelligence or the poor use of available intelligence was certainly not limited to the employment of airborne troops. Nevertheless, better use of airborne troops could conceivably have reduced the effect of the insurgency, both on the local population and in terms of the numbers of soldiers required on the ground.

Generally, airborne operations during the later stages of the war proved most successful when they were conducted with helicopters operating in close conjunction with mechanised forces that were working on confirmed intelligence. Equally, the development of lunar operations was a positive and successful sophistication of the fire force technique and proved useful in restricting insurgent activity at night.

Had the parachute companies that were sent to the operational area been grouped under an airborne HQ that was attached to a Sector HQ, they could have been used far more judiciously. The “penny-packeting” of companies or even platoons of paratroopers was contrary to the principles of employment of airborne forces, and ensured that they were used in secondary tasks and given low priority in the planning of any operation. An airborne HQ would have prevented this. Permanent Air Force representation in such an HQ would have avoided the lack of participation in the planning of airborne operations by the Air Force and would have ensured their greater understanding of and commitment to the vertical envelopment concept.

As a tactical tool of the ground force commander, an airborne element provides a valuable additional form of manoeuvre. It can be used to increase the speed of an advance, to carry out surprise attacks that keep the enemy commander guessing, to exploit enemy vulnerabilities that are exposed during operations and to reinforce distant garrisons or isolated forces. Provided a flexible approach is maintained, it can become the ultimate means of dislocating the psyche of an opposing force commander. But this is only possible if the ground commander understands the principles of employment, capabilities and limitations of parachute, helicopter or air landed forces. Most importantly, without good intelligence, even the best airborne force’s value is compromised.

CHAPTER 11

CREST OF THE WAVE: AN AIRBORNE CAPABILITY AT ITS PEAK

11.1. INTRODUCTION

The previous three chapters have shown how the SADF was able to apply its growing airborne capability on both the strategic and tactical levels. By employing parachute, helicopter and air landed techniques the airborne forces were able to play an important part in the SADF's war effort.

In this chapter the unprecedented growth of the airborne forces during the 1980s is considered. The expanding capabilities of 44 Parachute Brigade as an operational formation and of 1 Parachute Battalion as a training unit are examined. However, contrasting with this growth, the absence of any unity of command is highlighted as hampering the achievement of the full potential of the SADF airborne forces.

11.2. AIRBORNE APOGEE: THE PARACHUTE BRIGADE AT THE PINNACLE OF DEVELOPMENT

By the late 1980s, 44 Parachute Brigade had developed into a viable modern airborne force. After the departure of Jan Breytenbach as SSO Para Ops in early 1982 a brigade commander, Colonel Frank Bestbier was formally appointed. He had served for ten years with 1 Parachute Battalion and commanded policemen, paratroopers, Angolans and mechanised infantry on operations. Taciturn and unsmiling, he had the full backing of Lieutenant General Jannie Geldenhuys, the Chief of the SA Army, to get the brigade off the ground.

11.2.1. Formalising of the Parachute Brigade: Structures and Units

The newly appointed Bestbier's command directive from the Chief of the Army was dated 31 March 1982 and his mission was stated as:

You are to be prepared to conduct conventional landward operations, including air assault and air landed operations, and COIN operations so as to safeguard the territorial areas and the peoples of the RSA and SWA as directed by me or by the theatre or territorial commander under whose operational command you may be attached to from time to time.¹

1. Secret Report, " Die Rasionalisering van die Samestelling en Bevel en Beheer van die SA Leër se Valskermmagte", Ref. 1 VALSK BN/ 503/2/1, 22 October 1984 (hereafter "Rasionalisering, Valskermmagte"), Translation of extract from Flag E, Secret document: "Bevelskrif: Bevelvoerder 44 Valskermbrigade", Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/501/5 over H LEËR/D PLAN/501/5/2, 31 March 1982.

This made provision for the brigade to operate independently on what could be considered a strategic mission, or under command of another HQ to carry out what would probably be a tactical mission. The directive listed the units under Bestbier's command as 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions, 18 Light Regiment (Artillery), 44 Field Engineer Squadron and 44 Parachute Brigade Signal Squadron.

Bestbier began the task of formalising the parachute brigade. In this he was fortunate to have as his SO1 Operations one of the most able staff officers in the SA Army. Commandant Jos Rabie was an experienced paratrooper officer who had served for many years with 1 Parachute Battalion as a company commander, adjutant, and commander of the Parachute Training Wing as well as the battalion second-in-command. He had also served in the mechanised infantry. As for Maj S.J.P. van Schalkwyk, he was formerly the quartermaster at 1 Parachute Battalion and was a competent and experienced logistics officer. He was transferred to the brigade as the SO2 Logistics.² Bestbier, Rabie and Van Schalkwyk faced a daunting task. Breytenbach was notorious for his failure to follow approved channels and to conduct proper administrative procedures, so he had left them with something resembling a tangled fishing line to sort out. Although Breytenbach may have shown commendable initiative, unfortunately the new commander had to handle many difficult situations when he took over.

A board of inquiry was convened in an attempt to resolve the myriad of logistic problems. There were vehicles, weapons and other equipment that were simply not on record and some had apparently disappeared. Visits from Army HQ inspection teams led to audits that identified many other administrative shortcomings. As a result, a formal organisational study was conducted of the brigade in 1983. It pointed out numerous issues of concern and areas that required attention, such as a lack of conventional training among the CF soldiers in the brigade (the focus at 1 Parachute Battalion during the period of national service was on counter-insurgency, because of the war being waged in Namibia/Angola, and the parachute brigade had never exercised with other conventional formations). Other failings included an absence of guidelines and decisions from Army HQ; the absence of a formal airborne doctrine or battle-handling manuals; poor training facilities; the lack of a centralised headquarters for all parachute forces (an oblique reference to the refusal by 1 Parachute Battalion to come under command of 44 Parachute

2. Interview, Col Jos Rabie, Pretoria, 19 November 1993.

Brigade); the need for an air supply capability in the brigade; and an urgent requirement for operational planning staff.³

But the enquiry also identified positive aspects, such as the high quality and enthusiasm of the available staff; the location of the brigade HQ in an excellent training area for the exclusive use of the paratroopers; the co-location of the HQs of the constituent units of the brigade with the brigade HQ; and the positive leadership of the new brigade commander.⁴ In October 1982 the Army's Strategic Plan was issued. This set out clearly what the requirements were for a parachute force, how such a force should be employed and what it should be capable of doing. It also indicated what considerations would be taken into account in the employment of a parachute force, and laid down broad planning guidelines and logistic and air supply requirements.⁵

By January 1983 a Headquarters Unit to take care of the extensive administration was functioning.⁶ There was no shortage of volunteers for parachute training at 1 Parachute Battalion among the conscript intakes, and the growing number of young men being fed into the CF as trained and experienced paratroopers soon exceeded the capacity of the two existing CF battalions to absorb them. So, in July 1983, under Rabie's able administrative guidance, a third CF battalion, 4 Parachute Battalion, was formed. Though it was never officially gazetted, it functioned as a unit for the next six-and-a-half years.⁷ Rabie also consolidated the brigade headquarters, and did the staff work necessary to have the non-infantry units that Breytenbach had envisaged in his "blueprint" either established or converted to the airborne role.⁸

One of the first and most important of these units to be incorporated into the brigade was 18 Light Regiment of the SA Artillery, which was a part-time CF unit. The unit had been established as early as January 1977 with the specific intention of providing indirect fire support to the paratroopers during airborne assault operations.⁹ The Chief of the Army at the time, Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen, himself a gunner and

3. "Rasionalisering, Valskermmagte", Flag I, "Verslag oor 'n Organisasie-studie Ondersoek te 44 Valskermbbrigade", 7 December 1983.

4. Ibid.

5. "Rasionalisering, Valskermmagte", Flag G, Top Secret, "SA Leër se Strategiese Plan", Ref. H LEëR/301/1/2 over H LEëR/522/1/1/1, 11 October 1982; and Flag I, "Verslag oor 'n Organisasie-studie Ondersoek te 44 Valskermbbrigade", 7 December 1983.

6. "A Concise History of the South African Parachute Forces", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1, Appendix A, Bound volume, "44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure".

7. Ibid.

8. Interview, Col Jos Rabie, Pretoria, 19 November 1993.

9. Anon., "18 Ligte Regiment: Eenheidsgeskiedenis van Ontstaan tot en met September 1985", p. 1.

paratrooper, had given instructions towards the end of that year that a policy should be drawn up for the parachute training of members of the regiment.¹⁰ The first artillery conscripts underwent voluntary parachute training at 1 Parachute Battalion in October/November 1980,¹¹ and by the end of that year 18 Light Regiment received its first paratrooper gunners.¹² In June 1981, while Breytenbach was still with the brigade, 18 Light Regiment was placed under command of 44 Parachute Brigade.¹³ Employing the 120mm heavy mortar as their primary armament, the regiment provided a significant boost to the firepower of the paratroopers. Initially, there were very few parachute-qualified gunners in the regiment, but by November 1984 when the unit was called up for a four-week training camp, three batteries were parachuted onto one DZ, from where they successfully carried out a regimental fire-mission. It was a huge accomplishment and showed the significant progress that had been made in the brigade under Bestbier's command.¹⁴

Other units were added to the brigade under Bestbier's tenure as commander, although some of his subordinates saw Rabie as the one who took the initiative and who was the driving force.¹⁵ Although 44 Field Engineer Squadron had been the first non-infantry unit gazetted as part of the brigade as early as 1979, the absence of qualified officers and NCOs meant that it only began to function during 1983/1984. It later grew into a full regiment.¹⁶ Much the same applied to the Signals Squadron, which also began to take shape in 1984, and eventually grew into a fully-fledged unit.¹⁷ The establishment of a CF pathfinder company had been approved in principle by Chief of the Army in February 1982, but due to the absence of trained officers it only began to take shape a few years later.¹⁸ As with the engineers, the establishment of a CF maintenance company for the parachute brigade had been approved in January 1979 to provide the paratroopers with logistic support, but little had come of this. Eventually, an infantry major was appointed as the commander in October

10. SANDF Archives (hereafter DOD), C Army Gleeson Gp, C Army Comd Cadre Conferences, Secret Minutes of Conference 3/77, held 15–17 November 1977, "Para Trg of Members of 18 Lt Regt", 30 November 1977.

11. DOD, 1 Para Bn Gp 3, Box 47, Confidential 103/2/0574, "Courses 1 Para Bn (15 June 1977–11 June 1981), Encl. 80, 29 October 1979 and Encl. 131, 22 July 1980.

12. Anon., "18 Light Regiment", p. 4.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. E-mail letter from Col Philip "Jakkals" Jäckel (ret'd), Kleinmond, 29 October 2014.

16. "44 Field Engineer Squadron: Unit Report", undated. See also "A Concise History of SA Para Forces", Appendix A, Bound volume, "44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1.

17. "Gesiedenis van Eenheid: 44 Seinenheid", 29 August 1985. See also "A Concise History of SA Para Forces", Appendix A, Bound volume, "44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1.

18. "Gesiedenis van 44 Padvinderkompanie", 44 VALSK BDE/514/2/1/9, 26 September 1985.

1984 with a view to making it a fully-fledged unit.¹⁹ On 16 January 1984 a CF technical/mechanical unit, 37 Field Workshop, was transferred to under command of the brigade.²⁰ This provided the units of the brigade for the first time with the light workshop troops needed to service and repair their vehicles and weapons in the field.

In the meantime, the concept of “battle groups” (essentially, a force based on an infantry battalion or armoured regiment, but reinforced with other combat and supporting elements to enable it to operate independently of a brigade) had gained favour in the SADF to the extent that the brigade was instructed to work towards deploying a parachute battalion group at short notice.²¹ To this end, equipment and personnel were obtained or reorganised.²²

Colonel “Archie” Moore, the new brigade commander from the end of 1984, ably assisted by Rabie, continued to build the brigade. In August 1985 a CF anti-tank company was established to operate directly under the brigade commander.²³ Moore’s tenure also saw the establishment of a despatcher company in the same year and an anti-aircraft unit in January 1986. The following year a provost platoon was formed to provide military police for the brigade.²⁴ In addition, Rabie supervised the compilation of a comprehensive doctrinal handbook for airborne assault operations.²⁵ Of further inestimable importance to the functioning of the brigade was Rabie’s achievement in arranging for an Air Force officer (a transport pilot, Major Hennie Smit) to be attached to the brigade HQ as the SO1 Air, and a medical officer (Major Chris Blunden) from 7 Medical Battalion Group to be attached as the SO2 Medical. This resulted in extremely close co-operation between the brigade and the SAAF – an all-important aspect for any airborne formation. It also meant that co-operation with the South African Medical Service, which had now become a separate Arm of Service on the same level as the Army, Air Force and Navy, was greatly enhanced.²⁶

19. “44 Maintenance Unit: Unit History”, 26 September 1985; “A Concise History of SA Para Forces”, Appendix A, Bound volume, “44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure”, Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1.

20. “Gesiedenis van Eenhede”, 37 VD WKP/514/2/1/9, 2 October 1985.

21. Conf. OC 44 Para Bde to C Army (D Ops), Signal Army HQ, D OPS/521/2, 4 June 1984; “Rasionalisering, Valskermmagte”, Flag K, “Verslag: Valskermataljongroep”, 44 VALSK BDE/521/3, 25 June 1984.

22. “Rasionalisering, Valskermmagte”, Flag K, Conf. OC 44 Para Bde to C Army (D Ops), “Verslag: Valskermataljongroep”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/521/3, 25 June 1984; and Flag L, Conf. Minutes, Conference, HQ 44 Para Bde, 3 August 1984.

23. “Eenheidsgesiedenis: 44 Tenkafweerkompanie”, undated.

24. “A Concise History of SA Para Forces”, Appendix A, Bound volume, “44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure”, Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1.

25. SADF, *Gesamentlike Oorlogvoeringhandboek GWU 110 Deel 1: Lugstormoperasies* (Pretoria, SADF, 1985).

26. Interview, Col Jos Rabie, Pretoria, 19 November 1993.

11.2.2. Unresolved Command and Control Issues

All this had brought the parachute brigade organisationally up to the level required to function as an independent formation. Unlike the other brigades in the Army, it could not rely on support from a division and needed to possess the means to operate on its own. For purposes of command and control, the brigade was placed directly under the command of the Chief of the Army, on the same level as the two conventional divisions and the ten territorial commands.²⁷ Yet the anomaly was that 1 Parachute Battalion in Bloemfontein remained outside of the brigade's ambit of command. As a full-time national service training unit, it fell under the Orange Free State Command for matters relating to discipline, military legal issues, administration, ceremonial, welfare, leisure time utilisation, sport, public liaison, religious issues, security, messing, accommodation, budgeting, logistic support and daily maintenance.²⁸ For training matters, however, it fell under the Directorate of Training at SA Army HQ in Pretoria, and for operational deployments it was tasked and scheduled by the Directorate of Operations.²⁹ In sharp contrast to this somewhat complex set of affiliations, 44 Parachute Brigade had one boss for everything: the Chief of the Army.³⁰

The principal feeder source for 44 Parachute Brigade remained 1 Parachute Battalion, with almost all conscripts who completed their two years of national service and who qualified as paratroopers being transferred to units of the brigade for the remainder of their service obligations in the CF. But with both 1 Parachute Battalion and 44 Parachute Brigade being commanded by colonels, there were effectively two separate parachute organisations within the SA Army, with no command affiliation between them. Although 1 Parachute Battalion was primarily responsible for the training³¹ and the brigade for the operational employment of paratroopers, the situation inevitably led to disagreements, rivalry and tension. At times there were differing standards and approaches to parachuting. As the parachute school of the SA Army, 1 Parachute Battalion was the custodian of the

27. SADF, *Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag Oorsig/South African Defence Force Review, 1989* (Durban, Walker-Ramus on behalf of the SADF, 1990), pp. 69 and 71; H-R. Heitman, *South African War Machine* (Johannesburg, Cental News Agency, 1985), pp. 39 and 46; and H-R. Heitman, *South African Armed Forces* (Johannesburg, Cental News Agency, 1985), p. 29.

28. "Rasionalisering, Valskermmagte", Flag H, "Bevelskrif: Bevelvoerder 1 Valsk Bn", Ref. KMDMT OVS/501/7 14 December 1983.

29. "Rasionalisering, Valskermmagte", Flag J, "Bevelsdirektief aan Bevelvoerder 1 Valskermbataljon", Ref. H LEËR/D OPL/501/5/2 30 January 1984

30. "Rasionalisering, Valskermmagte", Flag E, Secret Command Directive, "Bevelskrif: Bevelvoerder 44 Valskermbrigade", Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/501/5 over H LEËR/D PLAN/501/5/2 31 March 1982.

31. Companies of 1 Para Bn in their their second year of national service were usually placed under command of other units or headquarters for operational employment.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for parachuting and therefore maintained a rigid and very high standard. The brigade, on the other hand, as the operational parachute formation, tended to bend the rules to accommodate operational requirements and cater for the often rusty abilities of the CF paratroopers. As there was no single senior paratrooper commander, there was no arbiter to these disagreements and the co-operation between the two organisations depended heavily on the personalities of the two colonels involved and the relationship between them.

Another committee was appointed in 1984 to investigate the rationalising of the composition and command and control of the SA Army's parachute forces.³² The OC 1 Parachute Battalion, Colonel Chris le Roux, was appointed as chairman. Bestbier and Rabie were both on the committee and the absence of an impartial facilitator did not bode well for the outcome. Once again, the paratroopers were being left to sort out their differences.

Predictably, the recommendations of the committee did not resolve the situation, and things continued much as before between 44 Parachute Brigade and 1 Parachute Battalion.³³ It was recommended that the battalion come under "functional control" of the brigade, but that it retain its command affiliation to Army HQ, further complicating the battalion's own affiliations, but effectively preventing the brigade from having any real say over it. Based on economic stringencies, 1 Parachute Battalion would not agree to establishing a national service parachute battalion group at that stage, but instead continued with the more comfortable option of maintaining the Operational Wing, made up of only infantry paratroopers in their second year. This did not necessitate an operational HQ, so the operational companies continued to be allocated to other, non-airborne HQs for employment. It was somewhat lamely and vaguely stated that the parachute battalion group would be formed sometime in the future and would remain under command of 1 Parachute Battalion until such time as facilities were available to house it in Pretoria, when it would eventually come under command of 44 Parachute Brigade. One of the CF parachute battalions would then be disbanded. It was clear that the OC 1 Parachute Battalion had managed to get his way in the investigation, and that there would be no change in the status quo for the foreseeable future.

32. "Rasionalisering, Valskermmagte", Flag 0, Restricted Letter from C Army, "Rasionalisasie van Valskermmagte", Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/B/503/2/1 13 August 1984.

33. Secret Decision Brief: "Beslissingsvoordrag aan Hoof van die Leër oor Rasionalisering van die SA Leër se Valskermmagte", Ref. 1 VALSK BN/503/2/1, 22 October 1984.

There was a stubborn refusal by 1 Parachute Battalion to come under command of the brigade, doubtless because it would mean a downgrading of the command post from a colonel to a commandant (lieutenant colonel) and a reduction, not only in status but in size, as almost half of the unit would be lost to the envisaged parachute battalion group, making 1 Parachute Battalion a purely training unit with no operational role. Fewer soldiers on the unit's strength would make it less competitive in the sporting activities of the local territorial command. It was an opportunity lost because of personal agendas, and it led to simmering friction and eventually open confrontation between the two organisations over the following seven years. The Chief of the Army seems to have simply accepted matters and it is a mystery that the higher HQ tolerated the untenable situation.

11.2.3. Training, Internal Deployments and Heraldic Designs

While the battle over command and control continued, 44 Parachute Brigade was working steadily towards building the airborne force that was required by the Chief of the Army for conducting operations. In addition to new units that were established and developed under the brigade, training continued as units or their sub-units were called up for three-week camps at Murrayhill. The training took place in the adjoining General Piet Joubert Military Training Area (the area included the farm Haakdoornfontein, formerly one of the farms that was owned by Commandant General Piet Joubert of the old Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek), which had been placed under the control and administration of the brigade.³⁴ At the same time, elements of the brigade were deployed in the ongoing internal counter-insurgency operations around the country during the mid-1980s to assist the police in quelling the growing unrest. During this time they participated in Operations PONCHO and XENON in the black townships; in Operation WINDMEUL in the rural so-called "homelands" and in Operation PEBBLE to control illegal border crossings and occasional infiltrations by MK insurgents from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Botswana. These tours of duty were initially in company strength, but later the paratroopers deployed as complete battalions.³⁵

There was also considerable work done in formalising the heraldic side of the airborne forces. Rabie played a key role in this, initiating and guiding the designing, processing and eventual approval of a beret badge, depicting a stylised eagle with outstretched wings, surmounted by a parachute. The paratroopers later dubbed this the

34. "Haakdoornfontein", Unreferenced, undated document apparently compiled by Cmdt J.E. Rabie.

35. "A Concise History of SA Para Forces", Appendix A, Bound volume, "44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1.

“Iron Eagle”. Similarly, Rabie saw to the approval and production of a stable belt with a buckle depicting the brigade badge, shoulder flashes for each of the brigade’s constituent units and flags showing the badges of each unit.³⁶

After his substantial contribution towards the building of the brigade, Rabie was promoted and transferred away at the end of 1985. His replacement as SO1 Operations, McGill Alexander, had served many years in 1 and 2 Parachute Battalions. A former member of SA Army College’s directing staff and trained at the Spanish Army Staff College in Madrid, he brought an injection of formal planning expertise to the brigade HQ. At the time, there was little exposure by the SADF to the armed forces elsewhere in the world because of the political and diplomatic isolation of South Africa. Spain was one of the few remaining European countries that allowed South African officers to undergo formal training with its armed forces at staff college level, and as Spain was a member of NATO, this enabled the South Africans to keep abreast of international developments in operational planning and procedures, albeit through a back door.³⁷ Even while still on course in Spain, the new SO1 Operations had addressed a staff paper to the OC 44 Parachute Brigade with proposals for the reorganisation of the airborne forces in the SADF, based largely on his exposure to NATO trends.³⁸

11.2.4. Development of Air-Droppable Vehicles and a Heavy Drop Capability

Significant developments in the acquisition of suitable air-droppable vehicles for the airborne forces took place at this time. In the early 1960s a number of the Belgian Fabrique Nationale AS-24 air-droppable vehicles had been acquired (see Appendix 72). Dubbed “Tico Cars” by the paratroopers, these small vehicles were no more than folding motor tricycles that accommodated four soldiers sitting abreast of one another and had a very limited practical application. They were unable to transport any significant cargo and could not be fitted with radios. With a 15hp, two-cylinder, two-stroke, 254cc engine,³⁹ they were not at all powerful and had very little potential for use in airborne operations. Over the years since

36. Restricted letters “Uitkenningstekens: 44 Valsk Bde”, 44 VALSK BDE/406/3/38, 44 Para Bde to C Army (D Log S) and QMG (Heraldry), 11 April 1983; “Stafvereiste: 44 Valskermbrigade Baret- en Kraag/ Miniaturkentakens”, 44 VALSK BDE/406/3/38/2, 44 Para Bde to C Army (D Log S), 10 June 1983; “Stafvereiste: Bedreweheidskentakens, 44 Valskermbrigade”, 44 VALSK Bde/406//38/2, 44 Para Bde to C Army (D Log S) and C Army (D Inf), 11 April 1985. Also unreferenced file: “Heraldiek”, containing copies of Heraldic Approval Certificates for the units of the brigade.

37. Confidential Report on Spanish Army Staff Course, 15 September 1983 to 28 June 1985, August 1985.

38. Confidential Staff Paper for the OC 44 Para Bde on a Proposed Centralised Organisation of the Airborne Forces of the SA Army, July 1985.

39. “Fabrique Nationale AS 24”, online at Wikipedia.

their arrival they had fallen into disuse, become unserviceable and their parts were eventually cannibalised to make lightweight trailers. By the 1970s, South Africa was becoming increasingly isolated internationally and the effect of sanctions was such that parts and replacements for these vehicles could no longer be obtained.

In about 1980, Colonel Jan Breytenbach (then the SSO Para Ops at Army HQ) and Commandant “Archie” Moore (then OC 1 Parachute Battalion), in a rare instance of cooperation, initiated the building of an experimental vehicle. Breytenbach had identified the need, based on his own experience as the commander of the composite parachute battalion at Cassinga in 1978. Moore, in turn, tasked the commander of his Light Workshop Troop (LWT), Captain Philip “Jakkals” Jäckel, to do some exploratory work on a damaged Land Rover that had been written off. It was stripped down to the chassis and reinforced with metal tubing and a lightweight aluminium engine cover. Dubbed the “Firefly”, this experimental vehicle was successfully dropped by parachute from a C-130 aircraft, using the newly acquired platform load extraction delivery system (PLEDS), which had been adopted by the Air Force. With this system an extraction parachute is used to pull the load, strapped onto a platform, out of the rear cargo ramp of the aircraft. The extraction chute then becomes the static point that the far bigger cargo parachutes are attached to by static line, and draws the canopies of these cargo parachutes out of their packs so that they deploy. The load, packed on its platform, descends below these cargo parachutes. Jäckel and three others parachuted from the same aircraft after the vehicle, de-rigged it after landing and then drove it from the DZ at De Brug outside Bloemfontein back to the 1 Parachute Battalion base.⁴⁰ It was a completely successful test.

This became the basis for the Sabre vehicles used by Breytenbach’s Pathfinder Company on operations such as PROTEA in 1981. With the Firefly as the model, he approached Vernon Joint of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) to build a number of similar vehicles, using a Toyota Land Cruiser chassis. However, the vehicle was still problematic and took up too much space in the C-130 and C-160 aircraft, space that was at a premium because there were few such aircraft in the SAAF inventory.

Several options were considered (see Appendix 73).⁴¹ One of the first requirements was to provide a vehicle that could tow the 120mm mortar used by the airborne artillery, and to carry some of its ammunition. The Israeli Soltam 120mm light mortar, known as the

40. E-mail letter, Col Philip “Jakkals”Jäckel (retd), Kleinmond, 29 October 1914.

41. E-mail correspondence, Col Philip “Jakkals”Jäckel (retd), Kleinmond; and Brig Gen Jos Rabie (retd), Hermanus, 13 and 14 June 2014.

M5 in South Africa,⁴² had a two-wheeled carriage with torsion bar suspension and a tow bar, and it could carry six bombs, some spare parts and a tool kit. However, it needed an air droppable tractor that could pull it, and also had to carry more ammunition. A vehicle known as the Veldmuis (fieldmouse) was constructed to fulfil this role, mainly from parts of the remaining AS-24s. It was built by 61 Base Workshop in Pretoria and had a bigger engine than the AS 24, accommodated only two soldiers, but could carry 20 mortar bombs. It was successfully dropped by parachute,⁴³ but even as an interim measure it did not prove satisfactory; it was unreliable, difficult to maintain and with a poor overall performance.⁴⁴

Also tested was the Skerpioen (scorpion), a commercially available motor tricycle with a more powerful engine. It could take three soldiers but almost no equipment or ammunition, so it was rejected. Another, known as the Krokodil (crocodile) was made by 61 Base Workshop, but it too, was unsuitable. A staff target⁴⁵ for an air droppable vehicle was submitted (presumably, though very uncharacteristically, by Jan Breytenbach) and approved by the Chief of the SADF in 1981.⁴⁶ However the route that had to be followed with a formal project such as this was very lengthy and tortuous, and Breytenbach was transferred away even before it began. When Jäckel was promoted to major and appointed the Technical Staff Officer (TSO) at HQ 44 Parachute Brigade in 1984, he became the project officer for Project JONKHEER: the acquisition of an air-droppable vehicle for the paratroops.⁴⁷

The Operational B-Vehicle Division at the para-statal Armaments Corporation (Armcor) was tasked to carry out an investigation to establish the viability of the project.⁴⁸ The basic requirement was for a small but powerful vehicle that could be fitted with radios to serve as a command and control platform, one that could transport heavier weapons, ammunition, supplies and wounded soldiers. The vehicle would not be a weapons platform nor would it be used to transport troops. It was therefore not seen as a combat vehicle.

42. SADF, *The RSA Field Branch Artillery in Battle* (Pretoria, SADF, 1977), p. 3/3-1; D.H.R. Archer (ed.), *Jane's Infantry Weapons, 1977* (London, Macdonald & Janes, 1976), pp. 516–518.

43. Photographs provided by Lt Col Alastair MacKenzie, PhD (retd) in March 2015.

44. M. Alexander, "The Search for a Suitable Air-Droppable Vehicle for SA's Airborne Forces", Photograph Album, SADF 4 (1985–1986).

45. Defined in the SADF as "A short exposition of the operational requirements set for an envisaged item, equipment, facility, service or system, outlining its function and indicating the shortcomings of the existing product which are to be eliminated by the envisaged product."

46. Secret Armcor Report, "Projekstudieverslag: Projek JONKHEER", Ref. 1760F/rg, 23 July 1985 (hereafter Armcor Report), p. 2.

47. E-mail correspondence, Col Philip "Jakkals"Jäckel (retd), Kleinmond and Brig-Gen Jos Rabie (retd), Hermanus, 13 and 14 June 2014; P.L. Jäckel, "Operation Askari 1983: A Tiffie Experience", in J. Geldenhuys (ed.), *We Were There: Winning the War for Southern Africa* (Pretoria, Kraal Publishers, undated), p. 153; and Armcor Report, p. 2.

48. Armcor Report.

Requirements were drawn up and tenders were called for from private commercial firms, both South African and foreign (from the few countries that were prepared to trade with South Africa at the time). Four showed interest and submitted provisional designs, based on a tractor-and-trailer combination. Ultimately, three produced prototypes to undergo evaluation.⁴⁹ A project team of specialists was formed and the prototypes underwent stringent tests and practical field trials. Technical tests were carried out on the Armscor Vehicle Testing Grounds outside Pretoria; and a practical users' evaluation was conducted by 44 Parachute Brigade in the Limpopo River Valley, where the vehicles were subjected to operating in dense bush, deep sand, thick mud and steep, rocky inclines. Finally, the vehicles were dropped by parachute in the brigade's training grounds at Murrayhill. One of the vehicles emerged as the clear winner from these stringent tests.

A South African firm, Special Vehicle Manufacturers (SVM), then built an advanced development model, incorporating the necessary modifications identified in the evaluation. Further demanding evaluation tests were carried out, along the same lines as before, with parachute drops into the Limpopo Valley followed by trials in tough conditions.⁵⁰ This highly successful project resulted in a production model being approved and by 1987 the first of these vehicles was taken into use by 44 Parachute Brigade. See Appendix 74.

The new paratrooper vehicle had the appearance of a small Jeep, designed around the lines of the vehicle of that name made famous during the Second World War. It was powered by a petrol-driven Ford 1300cc engine, with four-wheel drive and reinforced glass fibre bodywork. Named the Jakkals (jackal) after the project officer, Philip Jäckel, it was to serve the South African airborne forces for more than three decades.

While the Jakkals jeep was being developed, another vehicle project was registered. This was Project LUNTAS, to provide a mobile anti-tank capability for the brigade. Ever since the Cuban armoured counter-attack at Cassinga, the paratroops had wrestled with the problem of how to deal with such an eventuality. It was clear that a mobile capability was required that could range out some distance from the airhead, set up ambushes for counter-attacking forces and compel them to deploy, thereby delaying them. Breytenbach's Sabre vehicles had gone some way towards resolving this quandary, but they had no armour protection and could not be fitted with heavier anti-tank weapons. What was required was

49. Ibid., "Toets en Evaluasieverslag: Projek JONKHEER, Proefontwikkelingsmodel (POM)", Ref. 2259F/rg, 16 May 1986.

50. Ibid., "Toets en Evaluasieverslag: Projek JONKHEER, Gevorderde Ontwikkelingsmodel (GOM) / Ingenieursontwikkelingsmodel (IOM)", Ref. 2259F/mdp, 27 February 1987.

an air-droppable vehicle with some degree of armour protection on which anti-armour weapons could be mounted.

In June 1986, after considering the options and the limited funds available for the project, the SO1 Operations, together with Major Jäckel, identified the Ferret light armoured scout car as a possible solution.⁵¹ Given the small number of these vehicles required by the brigade, it would not have been cost effective to develop something from scratch, and the SADF had large numbers of obsolete Ferret scout cars in mothballs.⁵² The Ferret, though its technology was 30 years old, was a reliable and proven vehicle that conformed to most of the paratroopers' requirements. It was lightly armoured, very mobile, had a low profile and had the potential to be used as a weapons platform. Its six cylinder water-cooled Rolls-Royce petrol engine aligned it logistically with the Jakkals jeep, which was also petrol driven, and it was known that the British had successfully modified it for use as a platform for launching either the BAC Vigilant or Swingfire anti-tank guided missiles.⁵³ The British also frequently dropped Ferret scout cars by parachute.⁵⁴

Several Ferrets were made serviceable and tested in the training grounds at Murrayhill during June 1986. One of these was then modified at 61 Base Workshop in Pretoria to carry the 106mm recoilless anti-tank gun and had an ammunition bin built onto its right side. Further tests at Murrayhill showed that the gun could be effectively fired from this platform in any direction. This was a significant advantage over previously used soft-skinned platforms, because it gave a 360-degree capability, as opposed to the usual 270 degrees dictated to by the severe back-blast of the weapon.⁵⁵ Using PLEDS, a Ferret was then successfully dropped from a C-160 Transall aircraft by the Air Supply Wing of the SA Army Logistics Command. The armoured scout car, weighing a mere 3.5 tonnes, descended safely under three 100 ft cargo parachutes. In October 1986, using a C-130 Hercules aircraft, the Ferret was successfully delivered on the Kromdraai dirt airfield near to Murrayhill by

51. M. Alexander, "Searching for a Solution to the Brigade's Anti-Tank Problem", in Photograph Album, SADF 4 (1985–1986).

52. H-R. Heitman, *South African Arms and Armour* (Cape Town, Struik, 1988), pp. 54–55. The Ferrets had been acquired from Britain during the short-lived MEDO arrangement in the early 1950s. See L. Jooste, "F.C. Erasmus as Minister van Verdediging, 1948–1959", MA dissertation, UNISA, 1995, pp. 147–150 and pp. 187–188.

53. C.F. Foss, *Armoured Fighting Vehicles of the World* (Shepperton, Ian Allan, 1977), pp. 71–72; C.F. Foss (ed.), *Jane's Armour and Artillery 1985–86* (London, Macdonald & Janes, 1986), pp. 227–230; B. Fitzsimonds (ed.), *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of 20th Century Weapons and Warfare, Volume 9* (New York, Phoebus Publishing, 1971), pp. 929–930.

54. J. Weeks, *Airborne Equipment: A History of its Development* (Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1976), p. 70.

55. Infantry School, Oudtshoorn, Study Material, Course INF 7923-7925, Battalion Anti-Tank, "Characteristics of the 106mm Recoilless Gun", 8 January–2 February 1979. The back-blast would damage the engine of a soft-skinned vehicle, but the armour protection of the Ferret prevented this.

means of a newly acquired air supply capability: LAPES (low altitude parachute delivery System).⁵⁶ See Appendix 75 for the air-dropping of this light armoured vehicle.

The Americans had developed LAPES during the Vietnam War to deliver heavy loads and vehicles accurately at very low levels where an aircraft could not risk landing. This low flying made the aircraft less susceptible to radar and less vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire. It involved loading supplies or vehicles onto a special platform in an aircraft. In fact, single, double or triple cargo platforms could be delivered in tandem on one pass. The operation required a fairly small, but level and open extraction zone (EZ) with a hard surface. In preparation for a drop the ramp of the aircraft was opened and a drogue parachute released. The aircraft approached at low level and then descended to the drop altitude – typically only between five and 15 feet (1.52 and 4.75 metres) above the ground. Once the aircraft reached the desired delivery point, braking parachutes for the load were released and they were extracted from the aircraft by the drogue chute. The retaining straps on the platform load were then automatically cut and the braking parachutes pulled the load from the aircraft. With the platform acting as a skid, the load dropped the short distance to the ground and the braking parachutes brought it to a stop on the ground within the EZ. The main parachutes would be sized to stop the skidding of the load on the ground within the required space, and were not intended to control its descent to the ground. Honeycombed packing material between the platform and the load absorbed the impact as the platform hit the ground. Once the delivery was accomplished, the pilot ascended to a safe altitude and returned to base. This method of air supply avoided the need to land on an airfield that might be exposed to enemy fire, enabled cargo to be delivered extremely accurately, made the aircraft less vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire and was suitable for cargo that might otherwise be too heavy for dropping by means of PLEDS (LAPES cargo could be a maximum mass of 36,700 pounds or 16,500kg). When dropping the load, the aircraft flew at a speed of 130 knots, or 241 km/h. It therefore allowed no margin for pilot error and required a very high level of flying skill.⁵⁷

Both PLEDS and LAPES were American systems in use with the Israeli Defence Forces, and given the US embargo on defence trade with South Africa, it is probably no coincidence

56. M. Alexander, "LAPES Trials with Ferret, October 1986", in Photograph Album, SADF 4 (1985-1986). The British term is Ultra Low Level Aerial Delivery (ULLAD). See P. North, "Technical Section", in P. De St Croix (ed.), *Airborne Operations: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Great Battles of Airborne Forces* (London, Salamander Books, 1978), p. 21.

57. Anon., "What is LAPES?", *Ad Astra*, 14, 5 (May 1993), p. 24; Weeks, *Airborne Equipment*, p. 73; Cesar, "Ik zag zelfs Para's met Blauwe Spiegels . . ." *Vox Militaire Weekblad*, 2, 23 (10–16 April 1975), pp. 4–5.

that the SADF acquired these systems at a time of increasing co-operation with the Armed Forces of Israel. During the 1978 visit by senior South African paratrooper officers to Israel to attend a parachute brigade exercise (see Chapter 9), they had witnessed and brought back photographs of both systems being used.⁵⁸ Technical exchanges by means of reciprocal visits between South Africa and Israel ensured that both countries enjoyed mutual benefits regarding the maintenance and operation of transport aircraft, including the C-130 Hercules and the C-47 Dakota, which the Air Forces of both countries operated.⁵⁹ PLEDS and later LAPES were acquired secretly from the USA under Project BEESHORING, with all the required elements of the LAPES system in place by the middle of 1985. Both Air Force aircrew and Army and Air Force air suppliers underwent training in the use of the system in Israel on C-130 aircraft over the period 23 October to 20 November 1984.⁶⁰

Over two weeks in December 1986, an operational evaluation of the Ferret in the role it would be expected to play as an air-droppable anti-tank system was carried out in the Limpopo Valley in conjunction with the final evaluation of the Jakkals. In tests conducted in mud, dense bush, rocky inclines, dry sandy riverbeds and tall buffalo grass, the Ferret emerged as an excellent choice. Although its engine was not very powerful and its armour protection was limited, it proved to be extremely reliable, easy to maintain and with a suitably low profile for setting up tank ambushes and firing from cover. The Ferret then underwent a number of modifications to strengthen it and make it better suited to the harsh bush conditions it would encounter. These included replacing the periscope for the driver with reinforced transparent armour-glass windows, installing 81mm smoke dischargers and placing the headlights inside armoured, reinforced covers. There were 24 Ferrets modified for use by the brigade's 44 Anti-Tank Company.⁶¹

In addition to developing vehicles, the year 1986 saw the testing of a towed high velocity 90mm anti-tank gun, and an evaluation of the Soviet 23mm ZU-23 and 14.5mm ZPU-1 anti-aircraft guns. Tests were also carried out on dropping 1000-litre rubber fuel bladders and inflatable boats by parachute, and the free dropping of rubber 20-litre fuel and

58. DOD, Reports Gp, Kluis 79/45, Box 65, Secret Report "Verslag: Besoek aan Argus vir Valsk Bde Oef, 29 Oktober tot 5 November 1978", Ref. H Leër/520/3/4/6, November 1978.

59. DOD, Reports Gp, Kluis 84/78, Box 174, Secret "Report on Visit of Israel Airforce Maintenance Officers to SAAF", Ref. LMH//D MAINT/S/520/2/5/6, 12 November 1983.

60. DOD, Reports Gp, Kluis, 86/80: Box 200, Secret Report "Projek BEESHORING: LAPES Opleiding in Lanvin: Oorsese Besoekverslag", Ref. LMH/S/302/6/B134, 28 February 1985.

61. M. Alexander, "Operational Evaluation of Jakkals Advanced Development Model and Ferret AFV, Madimbo Area, Soutpansberg Military Area, 1–12 December 1986", in Photograph Album, SADF 4 (1985–1986).

water “drop tanks”.⁶² The older air supply technique known as the container delivery system (CDS) was used extensively to drop lighter loads of ammunition and supplies where a platform was not needed. This too, was an American system acquired through the Israeli back door. The cargo was packed into A-7A or A-22 containers, a suitable cargo parachute was strapped to the container and a significant number of these were loaded onto the roller system fitted to the floor of a C-130 or C-160 aircraft. The static lines were attached directly to the cables designed for that purpose inside the aircraft. On approaching the DZ, the pilot opened the rear ramp of the aircraft, and when over the DZ he lifted the nose of the aircraft so that the containers could run down the rollers and out onto the ramp through the pull of gravity. Although an A-22 container used in CDS could only carry a maximum of one tonne, it was a far cheaper option than PLEDS, because it was constructed of canvas and cardboard and had the advantage that it could be dropped from as low as 500 feet (155 metres), while a PLEDS drop required a height of at least 1,000 feet (310m) AGL.⁶³

The early months of the following year heralded further developments. New grouping methods by troops on landing after a jump were examined; Project CHASE (the automatically opening free-fall equipment container) was subjected to trials; aircraft homing beacons (Project BRONZE) for use by the pathfinders were assessed; and the concept of an airborne command post in a C-47 Dakota aircraft was tested.⁶⁴

All these technical developments added significantly to the brigade’s ability to place a viable, balanced and sustainable fighting force on the ground. More than 25 years after the establishment of its first parachute unit, the SADF was, for the first time, beginning to wield an airborne force with a strategic capability.

11.2.5. Parachute Battalion Group Exercises

During 1987 the brigade commenced with the first of a series of exercises designed to test and refine the parachute battalion group concept. Exercise IRON EAGLE I was a non-tactical exercise to evaluate new doctrine, equipment, vehicles, weapon systems and command and control procedures using an airborne command post during the deployment of a force for an airborne assault. It involved 3 Parachute Battalion and additional elements from other

62. M. Alexander, “Search for a Suitable Anti-Aircraft Weapons System, Murrayhill, September 1986” and “Air Supply Drop by C-160 Transall at Mabiligwe, December 1986”, in Photograph Album, SADF 4 (1985–1986).

63. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/aircraft/systems/cds.htm>, GlobalSecurity.org: “Container Delivery System (CDS)”.

64. M. Alexander, “Rehearsals and Trials” and “Testing the Airborne Command Post, 18 May 1987”, Photograph Album, SADF 5 (44 Para Bde 1987).

non-infantry units.⁶⁵ The exercise was held near the Batavia Military Area near the Botswana border, between Dwaalboom and the border post at Derdepoort.⁶⁶

The battalion had been called up for a scheduled two-month deployment of border control duty as part of Operation PEBBLE and the brigade HQ utilised the opportunity to combine this with a mass drop exercise. During the exercise certain concepts were assessed and co-operation with the Air Force for large-scale airborne operations was honed.⁶⁷ The troops and equipment were dropped approximately 350km from the airfields where they took off. Over 500 troops and a significant amount of heavy equipment was transported in a single lift by a total of 18 transport aircraft, making this the largest parachute drop ever carried out by the SADF.⁶⁸

The exercise commenced with a pathfinder insertion the night of Friday 22 May 1987. Flying from AFB Waterkloof in a C-160 Transall aircraft, three teams of six heavily laden pathfinders, using MT-1 tactical free fall parachutes, exited at 12,000 feet (3720m) AGL at last light. Preceding them out the ramp were two CHASE containers with additional equipment. These were fitted with radio controlled ram-air free fall parachutes with automatic opening devices. The pathfinders were dropped some 20km from the actual DZs they were to man, and used the cover of darkness to reach these locations. The pathfinders were CF soldiers who had been called up for the exercise, and one PF officer, Captain Piet Nel, jumped with them to evaluate them and their equipment, and to override them should any decisions be made with the drop that might endanger the lives of the paratroopers.⁶⁹ One of the teams set up a Non-Directional Beacon (NDB) about 6km from the DZs in the direction from which the aircraft would approach, in order to serve as a navigational aid. They activated the beacon when the aircraft were confirmed as approaching for the drop. The other two pathfinder teams reconnoitred the large ploughed field that had been selected by the brigade commander as a DZ, and laid out the marker signals shortly before the arrival of the aircraft. Two teams were used because the field was laid out as two successive DZs.⁷⁰

65. Mediese Waardering, Oef YSTERAREND I, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE(G)/301/1/1 YSTERAREND I, March 1987.

66. "Information Leaflet for Observers: EXERCISE IRON EAGLE I", HQ, 44 Para Bde, 25 May 1987.

67. M. Alexander, "Exercise IRON EAGLE I : Abn Assault Ex involving 3 Para Bn Gp at Batavia, NW Transvaal", Photograph Album, SADF 5 (44 Para Bde 1987).

68. "Information Leaflet for Observers: EXERCISE IRON EAGLE I", HQ, 44 Para Bde, 25 May 1987.

69. M. Alexander, "Free Fall Insertion of Pathfinder Teams, Friday 22 May 1987", in Photograph Album, SADF 5 (44 Para Bde 1987).

70. "Information Leaflet for Observers: EXERCISE IRON EAGLE I", HQ, 44 Para Bde, 25 May 1987.

Before dawn on Monday 25 May 1987 the battalion group was trucked to the two staging airfields: AFB Waterkloof for those being flown in the C-130/C-160 aircraft and AFB Swartkop for those being flown in the C-47 Dakotas.⁷¹ Four C-130 Hercules aircraft and four C-160 Transalls lined the runway apron at AFB Waterkloof, while on the tarmac at AFB Swartkop stood ten C-47 Dakotas waiting for the paratroopers to emplane. The exercise was attended by members of the General and Air Staffs as observers, as well as numerous other senior officers and a large media contingent, resulting in massive publicity in the country's press.⁷² See Appendix 76 for photographs taken during the exercise.

The brigade commander, Colonel Moore, with his Tac HQ, was in a Dakota aircraft fitted out as an airborne CP, circling at a height of 3,000 feet (930m) AGL, maintaining radio contact with three other entities: the pathfinders on the ground, the commanders of the lead transport aircraft and the brigade Main HQ back at Murrayhill. The single lift of aircraft, in five separate waves, dropped cargo and paratroopers on the two DZs. The cargo comprised two Ferret anti-tank armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs), two Jakkals jeeps with trailers, extra fuel, two 120mm mortars, eight 81mm mortars, mortar ammunition and engineer equipment. This was followed by over 500 paratroopers.⁷³

The C-130/C-160 aircraft dropped their loads, including all the cargo, two companies and the supporting elements, onto the first DZ; the Dakota waves passed on to the adjoining second DZ and dropped another company plus the battalion HQ.⁷⁴ This dispersal reduced the confusion during grouping on the DZs.

The drop was exceptionally successful, with only one minor injury reported among the paratroopers⁷⁵ and one of the Ferrets being damaged because it landed on its rear end due to an entanglement during extraction. From P-Hour (08h48, the time at which the first cargo platforms were extracted) until the last paratrooper had landed was only seven minutes. Once the battalion commander was on the ground he immediately established

71. M. Alexander, "Early Morning, D-Day, Monday 25 May 1987", in Photograph Album, SADF 5 (44 Para Bde 1987).

72. "500 Valskermsoldate naby Grens Ontploo, Oefening Ysterarend 1: Grootste Getal Springers Ooit", *Transvaler*, 25 May 1987; "A Giant Leap for Operation Iron Eagle", *Pretoria News*, 26 May 1987; W. Havenga, "Grootste Oefening: Brigade Bult sy Spiere", *Vaderland*, 26 May 1987; G. Coetzee, "Oefening Ysterarend se Skouspel", *Transvaler*, 26 May 1987; K. Abendroth, "500 Parabats in Biggest Drop in Peacetime", *Citizen*, 26 May 1987; "Vyfhonderd Ysterarende Neergelaat: Grootste Valskermoeffening", *Beeld*, 26 May 1987; "Exercise Iron Eagle: A Battalion Group of 44 Parachute Brigade Tests Doctrines", *Armed Forces*, June 1987; A. van Deventer, "Oefening Ysterarend: Skouspel by die Berg van Yster", *Paratus*, June 1987; E. Keyter, "Paddastoele in die Lug", *Suid-Afrikaanse Panorama*, September 1987.

73. "Information Leaflet for Observers: EXERCISE IRON EAGLE I", HQ, 44 Para Bde, 25 May 1987.

74. MEDO, Oef YSTERAREND I, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE(G)/301/1/1 YSTERAREND I, April 1987.

75. Debrief, Ex IRON EAGLE I, Ref. 44 PARA BDE(R)/308/1/1 IRON EAGLE I, 8 June 1987.

communication by radio with the brigade commander in the air. In the meantime the assembling of the battalion group was well underway on the two DZs and the de-rigging of the cargo had commenced. Satisfied that everything was going according to plan, the brigade commander then authorised the dropping of the airborne reserve. This was merely a token force for purposes of the exercise and consisted of a stick of 20 paratroopers in the Dakota aircraft that had been holding at 3,000 feet (930m) about 10km away. The aircraft approached, descending to a drop height of 800 feet (248m) and the soldiers parachuted onto the second DZ nearby the battalion HQ.⁷⁶

From the air, the brigade commander selected a suitable DZ in a clearing in the bush close to the airfield and instructed the pilot to switch on the green light as he overflew it. The aircraft descended to 1,000 feet (310m) and the seven officers forming the brigade Tac HQ jumped with their maps, radios and equipment.⁷⁷ They immediately set up a ground Tac HQ and made contact with those to whom they had been speaking when they were in the aircraft.

It had been a singularly successful exercise and was an indication of the enormous strides the brigade had made in the five years since the reactivation of the headquarters in 1982. Many lessons had been learned and much that was propagated had now been tested and found to be working or wanting.⁷⁸

Exercise IRON EAGLE II, scheduled for later that year with 4 Parachute Battalion Group, had to be cancelled,⁷⁹ but the following year, in March 1988, Exercise IRON EAGLE III was carried out by 2 Parachute Battalion Group in the General Piet Joubert Training Area adjoining the 44 Parachute Brigade base. This was a tactical exercise and involved a night drop onto a very rough DZ by 600 paratroopers and 50 tonnes of equipment, including 16 vehicles (4 Ferrets and 12 Jakkals jeeps). The drop was followed by a night march of 12km and a first light assault on an objective, a defence and a link-up with ground forces.⁸⁰

The drop, however, was done in successive lifts, because there was a heavy commitment of transport aircraft and crews for the final operations of the war in southeast Angola at the time. Only two C-130 Hercules and three C-160 Transalls could be allocated

76. M. Alexander, "P-Hour (08h48) 25 May 1987", Photograph Album, SADF 5 (44 Para Bde 1987).

77. Military Parachutist Log Book of Brig Gen McGill Alexander, entry for 25 May 1987.

78. Debrief, Ex IRON EAGLE I, Ref. 44 PARA BDE(R)/308/1/1 IRON EAGLE I, 8 June 1987.

79. "A Concise History of SA Para Forces", Appendix A, Bound volume, "44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1.

80. 44 Para Bde "Bevelswaarderinig, Oef Ysterarend III", 44 VALSK BDE/308/1/1/YSTERAREND III, 19 February 1988; Diary of SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde, entry for 7 June 1988; M. Alexander, "Exercise IRON EAGLE III: 14-25 March 1988", Photograph Album, SADF 6 (44 Para Bde 1988).

for the exercise, together with four C-47 Dakotas.⁸¹ The dropping of heavy equipment experienced several serious failures. One platform carrying a Ferret broke in two when the parachutes opened, separating the Ferret from the platform and sending it plummeting to the ground where it was destroyed on impact. A second Ferret landed upside down when its cargo parachutes experienced an extraction malfunction, causing some damage and ensuring that the vehicle could not be used in the exercise; and a third platform, carrying ammunition, mortar tubes and other heavy equipment, suffered several canopy malfunctions and severe damage on impact. A board of inquiry was convened by Army HQ to investigate this disaster and the outcome was that the Air Supply capability was transferred from the Army Logistics Command to resort directly under the command of the OC 44 Parachute Brigade.⁸²

On 20 June 1988 a helicopter assault exercise known as HORNET took place, again in the Batavia area and again using 3 Parachute Battalion. The battalion was flown from AFB Waterkloof and parachuted in two lifts from three C-130/C-160 aircraft onto the farm Silent Valley, where eight Puma helicopters were waiting. Transporting one company at a time, they enabled the battalion to carry out an assault on an objective in the Batavia military area.⁸³

The extent to which both the Army and the Air Force had been prepared to support the brigade in its efforts during these exercises to develop its capability were indicative that the SADF was serious about airborne operations. As a modern airborne formation, 44 Parachute Brigade had resolved, or was in the process of addressing, many of the problems and shortcomings that had come to light since its formation ten years earlier and had reached a level where it could effectively deploy a parachute battalion group in an airborne operation, either by parachute or by helicopter. The organisation, armament, aircraft, equipment and personnel at the disposal of the brigade were better than they had been at any time in the history of South Africa's paratroops and the brigade headquarters was finally on an operational footing. Cassinga, in 1978, had seen a scratch, composite, under-strength parachute battalion put together for an operation; but now, for the first time in the history

81. SAAF, "Operasieorder 5/88 Oefening Ysterarend III", LMH/308/1/1 YSTERAREND III, 14 March 1988.

82. "A Concise History of SA Para Forces", Appendix A, Bound volume, "44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1.

83. 44 Para Bde "Padvinderplan: Oef HORNET I", 44 VALSK BDE/308/1/1/HORNET ! 14 June 1988; Diary of SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde, entries for 17 and 22 June 1988; "A Concise History of SA Para Forces", Appendix A, Bound volume, "44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1; Military Parachutist Log Book of Brig Gen McGill Alexander, entry for 20 June 1988.

of the South African airborne forces, a capability was in place to carry out an independent parachute operation by a properly and permanently composed battalion group on a strategic mission. See Appendix 77 for the organisation and constituent units of the brigade by 1989.

11.3. EXPANDING TRAINING COMMITMENT OF 1 PARACHUTE BATTALION

While developments at the brigade outside Pretoria continued to gain momentum, 1 Parachute Battalion in Bloemfontein was heavily involved in training. After considerable pressure from the brigade, the battalion agreed to institute an Airborne Battle Handling course in Bloemfontein in 1987. As the recognised Airborne School of the SADF, 1 Parachute Battalion was the only establishment that could present such a course; but it was the brigade that actually applied the battle handling in the field. Although the battalion had an abundance of expertise on the technical intricacies of parachuting, the unit suffered from a dearth of the knowledge and experience about the operational employment of anything larger than a company.

The reluctance to be associated with the activities of the brigade had prevented the PF officers of 1 Parachute Battalion from being exposed to the battalion group exercises that had taken place, while the part-time officers of the brigade's CF units had a better knowledge of tactical and battle handling aspects of large-scale airborne operations. The first such battle handling courses therefore made use of PF officers from the brigade as instructors – officers who had been involved in the planning and conduct of the recent exercises.⁸⁴ There also appeared to be little interest from 1 Parachute Battalion to acquire the knowledge that the brigade was building up. For instance, only one of the 31 junior officers who attended the second course was from 1 Parachute Battalion; the others were all from units of 44 Parachute Brigade or from the brigade headquarters.⁸⁵

But the lack of interest at 1 Parachute Battalion in what the brigade was doing merely reflected the ongoing dichotomy that had been prevalent in the battalion since its establishment more than 25 years earlier – was it indeed an operational battalion, or was it a parachute school? Clearly, the attempts over the years to make it perform the responsibilities of both lay at the heart of its ambivalence towards the activities of the brigade. For it was not to say that there was nothing happening at the battalion. Quite the

84. Letter, OC 1 Para Bn to OC 44 Para Bde, "Aanbieding van Lesings: Lugstormgevegshantering", 1 VALSK BN/513/7, 28 January 1987.

85. Course Photo, PARA 8733, Airborne Assault Battle Handling Course, 1 Para Bn, 22 June–17 July 1987.

contrary! However, the multiple command and control arrangement was unworkable for an operational parachute unit. The three-fold commitment referred to earlier in this chapter placed the battalion under serious strain. The main focus of its activities therefore depended largely on the personal priorities of the current OC 1 Parachute Battalion, and to what extent he was prepared to stand up to the brigadier in charge of OFS Command (who controlled his unit's finances). All three of his bosses were brigadiers, but the other two were in distant Pretoria, while the one who held the purse strings for day-to-day functioning of the unit was almost right across the road and chaired the weekly conferences concerning routine and other matters in the area. The territorial command OC was also the one who conducted the annual performance assessment of the OC 1 Parachute Battalion (in other words, who held his career in his hands).⁸⁶

The carefully selected, very fit and highly motivated young men who filled the ranks of 1 Parachute Battalion were an asset to OFS Command and boosted its reputation as one of the top performing territorial commands of the SA Army. There were ten such commands⁸⁷ and there was great competition between their commanders to be seen in a favourable light by the Chief of the Army.⁸⁸ During the time that 44 Parachute Brigade was working on developing operational airborne doctrine and organisations, 1 Parachute Battalion was making a sterling contribution to the status of OFS Command and building its own reputation in the sporting, ceremonial and other fields.

An indication of the priorities at the unit during 1984, for instance, can be gained from the 1 Parachute Battalion Annual/Yearbook, produced for the first time that year.⁸⁹ A deliberate decision is mentioned in the editorial comment that the focus for the publication would be on "a more social level" and that the "technical and military aspects of parachute training, equipment and operations" would not be given coverage. It also highlights the fact that the OC 1 Parachute Battalion, Colonel Chris le Roux, had won the award as the SA Army's Sports Administrator of the Year. The second annual, published at the end of 1986, again reflected mainly on the sporting achievements, social and ceremonial events that had taken place in the unit. That year, the 25th anniversary of the founding of 1 Parachute

86. "Rasionalisering, Valskermmagte", Flag H, "Bevelskrif: Bevelvoerder 1 Valsk Bn", Ref. KMDMT OVS/501/7 14 December 1983.

87. "The SA Army", *SAW Oorsig/SADF Review*, 1987, p. 99.

88. S. Stander, *Like the Wind: The Story of the South African Army* (Cape Town, Saayman & Weber, 1985), p. 132, tells of the importance of the annual "Gala Evening" in the SA Army, when trophies were presented.

89. SADF, *1 Valskermataljon/1 Parachute Battalion 1984 Annual* (Tempe, Bloemfontein, SADF, 1984).

Battalion, it won the Grand Prix award for the best unit in the SA Army⁹⁰ and the award for the best unit in OFS Command.⁹¹ The following two years it repeated these sterling achievements.⁹² Besides these top awards, the unit won various other competitions each year, including those for shooting, fitness, and logistic management as well as the trophy for the best corps school in the Army. These achievements may have had little or nothing to do with operations, but the unit was under constant heavy pressure by the less operationally minded individuals in authority to perform in such fields.

Nevertheless, operationally, 1 Parachute Battalion was heavily committed. Companies of national servicemen paratroopers continued to deploy in Sector 10 in Namibia and elsewhere on counter-insurgency duties and in 1984 they were deployed for the first time in an urban environment inside South Africa on Operation PALMIET. This became an increasingly frequent duty as resistance to the apartheid regime gained momentum and the unrest in the townships escalated. In Namibia there was almost always one company from 1 Parachute Battalion at Ondangwa as the fire force and it was the time when lunar operations were being honed to a sophisticated level. This was where the expertise of the young officers and NCOs of 1 Parachute Battalion lay. The national service paratroopers were carrying out more operational jumps than they had done over any other time (see Chapter 10). However, the battalion commander and his HQ were not involved in any way with these operational developments, although the unit's Operational Wing, under which the operational parachute companies fell, did maintain a headquarters presence in the operational area at times. In essence, however, 1 Parachute Battalion's HQ played the role of a post office, sending off its companies to deploy under operational command of other headquarters while it focused on the activities of the territorial command.⁹³

At the same time, the training commitment of 1 Parachute Battalion over the time that the parachute brigade was going through its first tumultuous decade was immense. This obligation had to be given priority, making it inevitable that operational matters received less attention. In addition to the military and parachute training of national servicemen (the number of which had doubled with the extension of conscription from one to two years in 1978), the battalion trained several hundred Rhodesians as paratroopers

90. SADF, *1 Valskermbataljon/1 Parachute Battalion 1986 Annual*, 25th Anniversary Commemorative Edition, (Tempe, Bloemfontein, SADF, 1986), p. 4.

91. *1 Valskermbataljon Affiliatie Nuusbrief* 1 VALSK BN/101/6/1/1, 8 December 1986.

92. *Ibid.*, 4/87 and 4/88, 1 VALSK BN/B/101/6/1/1, 8 December 1987 and 30 November 1988.

93. Interview, Lt Col Chris Grové, Pretoria, 13 June 1995.

between 1977 and 1979.⁹⁴ These soldiers were accommodated at 1 Parachute Battalion and placed a heavy additional logistic and training strain on the unit. But the demise of Rhodesia and the end of the war in that country in 1980 did not signal a decrease in extra training commitments for the battalion. There was a growing number of individuals from units and establishments outside of 1 Parachute Battalion that had to be trained as paratroopers.

In 1980, 1 Parachute Battalion had to commence with the training of members of the Reconnaissance Wings of 31 and 32 Battalions as paratroopers for possible employment on their own parachute operations.⁹⁵ Although it is apparent from remarks written into the margins of signals sent at the time that there was little enthusiasm at 1 Parachute Battalion to undertake this training and thereby become instrumental in producing a competing operational parachute capability, the matter was forced upon them by Army HQ. Language proved a problem and use had to be made of a Portuguese-speaking interpreter.⁹⁶ This training was eventually extended to others in 32 Battalion. From the course photographs against the wall of the parachute-training hangar in Tempe it is evident that in 1984 and between 1990 and 1992, large numbers of these soldiers with their distinctive camouflage berets underwent parachute training.⁹⁷ By then the war in Angola and Namibia was over for the South Africans and 32 Battalion had been moved from the Caprivi to the Pomfret Base in the Northern Cape. Yet at least 322 officers and other ranks of 32 Battalion were trained as paratroopers over this time. In addition, five parachute dispatchers and one parachute instructor from 32 Battalion were also trained.⁹⁸ Exactly why this was done and the purpose of this parachute training is unclear, but it seems that the intention was to turn the battalion into an airborne unit. By the time the unit was disbanded in 1993 it had several companies that were qualified paratroopers and most of these soldiers were transferred to

94. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Box 47, Conf. 103/2/0574, "Courses 1 Para Bn (15 June 1977–11 June 1981), Encls 1, 3 and 6, 1 July 1977 and Encl. 64, 1 PARA BN/103/2/0574/PARA 7913, 31 July 1979; Interviews, Lt Col Johnny Kieser and WO1 Johan Landman, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

95. Interview, Col Dries Velthuisen, PhD (ret'd), Pretoria, 5 March 2014; P. Nortje, *The Terrible Ones: A Complete History of 32 Battalion, Volume 1* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2012), pp. 448–449; Course Photo PARA 8016 (2 June–4 July 1980), Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt.

96. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Box 47, Conf. 103/2/0574, "Courses 1 Para Bn (15 June 1977–11 June 1981)", Encls 89, 91, 92, 93, 97, 102, 113, 114, 116 and 117, respectively 9, 10, 11, 16 and 25 January 1980, 1 February 1980, 14, 19, 28 and 29 May 1980.

97. Course Photographs, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8409 (2 July–3 August 1984), 9042 (26 September–19 October 1990), 9049 (21 November–14 December 1990), 9110 (18 April–10 May 1991), 9117 (25 July–16 August 1991), 9122 (14 October–8 November 1991), 9204 (5–27 March 1992), 9228 (29 October–20 November 1992) and 9220 (3–25 September 1992).

98. *Ibid.*, PARA 9118 (22 July–16 August 1991), 9201 (6–31 January 1991), 9203 (3 February–27 March 1991) and 9227 (26 October–20 November 1992).

1 Parachute Battalion.⁹⁹ The parachuting capability of 32 Battalion was never used operationally.¹⁰⁰

The instructors of 1 Parachute Battalion were also responsible for carrying out the parachute training of numerous other armed forces. In Namibia, where the South African government had declared its intention to co-operate with the UN in granting independence to the territory, apartheid was scrapped and an indigenous armed forces organisation known as the South West Africa Territory Force (SWATF) was established to take over much of the burden of the counter-insurgency war from the SADF.¹⁰¹ Officially established on 1 August 1980, the SWATF essentially metamorphosed from the territorial SWA Command of the SADF and was largely staffed by SADF officers and NCOs.¹⁰² A parachute capability to serve as a reaction force was seen as essential to the SWATF. Therefore, as early as 1979, all Namibian citizens who volunteered for parachute training during their conscription into the SADF (white Namibian males were liable for national service) were earmarked for the envisaged SWA Parachute Battalion. Those who underwent national service with 1 Parachute Battalion were transferred to what was initially a part-time company of paratroopers in Windhoek, but were attached to the resident fire force at Ondangwa for their annual camps.¹⁰³

In time this company grew into a full-time parachute unit with a part-time reserve company.¹⁰⁴ Members of the SWATF were first sent on parachute courses at 1 Parachute Battalion in 1984. Their numbers began to increase significantly in 1986 and for the first time included a majority of black Namibians.¹⁰⁵ The SWA Parachute Battalion was renamed, in January 1987, to 2 SWA Specialist Unit.¹⁰⁶ Elements of the SWA paratrooper unit took part in operations inside Angola, attached to companies of SADF paratroopers, and from as early as 1986 SWATF parachute companies began to occasionally relieve the SADF paratrooper

99. Nortje, *The Terrible Ones, Volume 2*, p. 1169.

100. *Ibid.*, *Volume 1*, p. 448.

101. C.J. Jacobs, "The Forward Defence Strategy of the SADF, 1978–1989", Special edition on the Grensoorlog/Border War, 1966–1989, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3 (December 2006), p. 35.

102. P.H.R. Snyman, *Beeld van die SWA Gebiedsmag* (Pretoria, Openbare Betrekkinge, SA Weermag, 1989), p. 30.

103. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Box 47, Conf. 103/2/0574, "Courses 1 Para Bn (15 June 1977–11 June 1981), Encl. 55, 4 April 1979.

104. DOD, SWA Valsk Bn/2 SWA Spes Eenh Gp, Box 8, 309/1 Vol. 2, Encl. 12, Training Programme, July 1988 and Encl. 13, Special Unit Order Part 1 No. 9/88, 12 July 1988.

105. Course Photos, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8419 (20 August–28 September 1984), 8415 (29 October–30 November 1984), 8617 (14 July–1 August 1986), 8625 (1 September–3 October 1986), 8633 (3 November–5 December 1986), 8705 (23 March–16 April 1987), 8717 (31 August–25 September 1987), 8815 (5–29 April 1988), 8840 (3–28 October 1988) and 8848 (21 November–15 December 1988).

106. Snyman, *Beeld van die SWA Gebiedsmag*, p. 59.

companies for scheduled tours of duty as the resident fire force at Ondangwa.¹⁰⁷ Their paratroopers were all trained by 1 Parachute Battalion in Bloemfontein¹⁰⁸ and their junior leaders (lieutenants and corporals) slotted into the same training cycle as those of the battalion.¹⁰⁹ In 1988 a number of 1 Parachute Battalion officers and NCOs were transferred on secondment from the SADF to 2 SWA Specialist Unit in Windhoek. These included the new OC, Commandant Nic van den Berg and the RSM, WO1 Lodewyk Pietersen.¹¹⁰ But with the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435 and the disbandment of the SWATF the need for these paratroopers disappeared, and the last two South West African paratroopers to be trained by 1 Parachute Battalion attended a course in January/February 1989.¹¹¹

When it was decided that the armies in the homelands (created as a result of the apartheid government's Bantustan policy) would be provided with a parachute capability, it was again 1 Parachute Battalion that was involved in the training. Three of the "independent" homelands acquired a parachute capability. The first was the Republic of Transkei, and Mills and Wood claim that Lieutenant Colonel Ron Reid Daly instigated this training. Reid Daly, the founder and former commander of the Rhodesian Selous Scouts, had been appointed as the Commander of the Transkei Defence Force (TDF) with the rank of major general after the expulsion of the South African advisors in a diplomatic spat.¹¹² The initial basic parachute course was held at Port St Johns during the first half of 1983 for about 20 volunteers from the TDF. They were from the Transkei Special Forces Regiment, based in Port St Johns and trained in special forces techniques by former members of the Rhodesian Selous Scouts. Parachute training took place under command of Major Johan Blaauw, assisted by Captain Johnny Kieser and WO2 Johan Landman. Improvised outdoor apparatus was erected by them, while a sawdust-covered floor inside an old sawmill was used to

107. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

108. DOD, SWA Valsk Bn/2 SWA Spes Eenh Gp, Box 8, 309/1 Vol. 1, Encl. 18, Ops Inst 5/86, 11 November 1986; Box 14, 102/1/3/2/2, "Recruiting of Reservists, Encl. 3, 27 November 1987; Box 15, 103/2/1, "Courses", February 1987; Box 16, 103/2/1, "Courses", Encl. 3, 4 May 1988, Encl. 5, 24 May 88, Encl. 18, 7 June 1988, Encl. 137, 10 November 1988 and Encl. 143, 31 October 1988.

109. DOD, SWA Valsk Bn/2 SWA Spes Eenh Gp, Box 14, Conf. 105/5/1B, NSM System Policy, Encl. 2, "Junior Leader Training for SWA Spec Unit", 22 November 1988.

110. DOD, SWA Valsk Bn/2 SWA Spes Eenh Gp, Box No 5, File 2 SWA Spes/105/15, Encl 9, Letter of Congratulation from OC 1 Para Bn, 31 October 1988. Also letter from OC 2 SWA Spec Unit to OC 1 Para Bn, Ref. 2 SWA SPES/B/101/6/1, 1 June 1988.

111. Course Photo, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8901 (9 January–3 February 1989).

112. G. Mills and G. Wood, "A Handful of Armies: The Future Prospects of the Homeland Defence Forces", *South African Defence Review*, 5 (1992), pp. 4–5.

practise landings.¹¹³ There was no PT selection course, because all the candidates had completed a tough 8-week special forces cycle of selection and training under the former Rhodesians.¹¹⁴ Qualifying jumps were done from a SAAF C-47 Dakota at the airport outside Umtata (now Mthatha).

Thereafter, 1 Parachute Battalion arranged progressive parachute training for the Transkeians from time to time, taking a Dakota and parachutes to Umtata for the purpose. The first such jumps were carried out from 4 to 15 July 1983. A second parachute course was held in Transkei, using the same facilities, over the period 12 August to 12 September 1983.¹¹⁵ Many other officers and NCOs of the TDF were subsequently parachute-trained, but did not serve in an airborne unit. Courses continued to be presented at Port St Johns by 1 Parachute Battalion for several years after this.¹¹⁶

When a TDF parachute school was under construction on the edge of the Umtata Airport during 1987/1988, two groups of respectively 30 and 73 volunteers were sent from the Transkei to do their basic parachute training in Bloemfontein, as well as selected, already qualified TDF officers and NCOs to be trained as parachute dispatchers and instructors by 1 Parachute Battalion.¹¹⁷ Thereafter parachute courses were presented by the TDF Umtata. An officer from 1 Parachute Battalion, Major Casper du Plessis, resigned to join the TDF and became the TDF Parachute School OC. The TDF Air Wing acquired a CASA 212 light transport aircraft from which their paratroopers subsequently jumped.¹¹⁸

Three years after the training of the first TDF soldiers, the Republic of Bophuthatswana Defence Force (BDF) established their parachute capability. They too, wanted a special forces unit.¹¹⁹ In November 1985 Captain Chris Grové of 1 Parachute Battalion, with two instructors, was sent to Gopane, not far from the South African town of Zeerust, in the geographically fragmented Bophuthatswana to prepare the first batch of volunteers for parachute training. According to Grové, of the 77 soldiers who underwent the tough selection, only three did not make it. Unlike the training that was given to the

113. Interviews, Lt Col Johnny Kieser, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995; Lt Col Chris Grové (ret'd), Pretoria, 13 June 1995.

114. Interview, WO1 Johan Landman, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

115. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Top Secret 1 PARA Bn/311/1, "Aid to and Co-operation with Other Countries/Governments", Encl. 5.

116. Discussions, Col Andile Mhatu, Hugo's Post, Donkergat Peninsula, Langebaan Lagoon, 17 August 2014.

117. Course Photos, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8717 (31 August–25 September 1987), 8813 Para Instructors (7 March–29 April 1988), 8819 (2–27 May 1988), 8841 (3–28 October 1988) and 8921 Para Instructors (5 June–28 July 1989).

118. Interview, Lt Col Johnny Kieser, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

119. Interview, Maj Willie Letseleba, Pretoria, 27 June 1995.

Transkeians, the Tswana soldiers were taken to Bloemfontein and trained in the parachute hangar at 1 Parachute Battalion.¹²⁰ Like the TDF, the BDF acquired the Spanish CASA 212 light transport aircraft (which was not used by the SAAF), so the drills for paratroopers inside the aircraft had to be modified accordingly.¹²¹ The first 42 Bophuthatswana paratroopers to qualify were presented their specially designed wings by the president of Bophuthatswana, Lucas Mangope, at a parade in Mmabatho on 21 April 1986.¹²²

The BDF then established both a small special forces unit (known as the Task Force) and a parachute battalion, though according to its last commander no more than one complete company of the battalion ever qualified as paratroopers.¹²³ Parachute training of the BDF continued to be done in Bloemfontein on an annual basis until 1990,¹²⁴ placing additional strain on the very stretched 1 Parachute Battalion. In March 1991 the BDF decided to establish a parachute school,¹²⁵ and recruited Major Johnny Kieser to be its commander. He took early retirement from the SADF and was appointed a lieutenant colonel, establishing the BDF Parachute Training Wing of the Military School at Lehurutshe.¹²⁶ By January 1993 it had moved to its new base at the Mafikeng Airport,¹²⁷ but although Kieser and his three instructors presented five basic parachute courses, two dispatcher and instructor courses and one free-fall course in the three-odd years of the existence of the BDF Parachute Training Wing, there were never proper facilities built. Improvised apparatus had to be used throughout this time.¹²⁸

Unlike the other homelands, the Republic of Ciskei did not opt for parachute training by the SADF, but instead engaged a private Israeli firm to do the training. However, they did request help with parachute packing, and 1 Parachute Battalion sent them instructors to present such courses twice during 1983.¹²⁹ There was apparently conflict and dissatisfaction with the Israelis, their contract was terminated and a former Rhodesian was engaged. This

120. Course Photo, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8607 (1–18 April 1986).

121. Interview, Lt Col Chris Grové (retd), Pretoria, 13 June 1995.

122. P.B.G. Delmar, "Bophuthatswana Proud of Own Crack Paratroopers", *Paratus*, July 1986, p. 58; Mills and Wood, "A Handful of Armies", p. 1.

123. Interview, Maj Willie Letsela, Pretoria, 27 June 1995.

124. Interview, Lt Col Johnny Kieser, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995. Course Photos, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8705 (23 March–16 April 1987), 8815 (5–29 April 1988), 8912 (3–28 April 1989), 9008 (31 January–22 February 1990) and 9009 Despatchers (29 January–23 February 1990).

125. Conf. "Beslissingsvoordrag vir HBWGM: Valsk Opl in die BW", BW HK/HS OPL/103/17, March 1991.

126. Letter, Lt Col J.H. Kieser to various BDF Commanders, HS OPL/BW VALSK BN/103/3, 18 September 1991.

127. Bophuthatswana Weermag Spesiale Order No. 86/92: Bevel en Beheer van Lugmagbasis Mafikeng na Oorhandiging en Oorname deur BW Depot, Mmabatho, 23 November 1992.

128. Interview, Lt Col Johnny Kieser, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

129. DOD, 1 Para Bn (3), Top Secret 1 PARA BN/311/1, "Aid to and Co-operation with Other Countries/Governments", Encl 5.

too, did not prove successful and after many parachute malfunctions and accidents, 1 Parachute Battalion was approached to resolve the technical problems. Two former 1 Parachute Battalion parachute instructors, Colonel A.H.S. "At" Schoeman and WO1 Jacques Tourney joined the Ciskei Defence Force (CDF) to take over the running of the parachute school, and only then, according to Kieser, was some order established and were proper safety measures introduced. The CDF made use of the Short Skyvan light transport aircraft for paratrooping.¹³⁰

In April/May 1991 the retired former SADF Colonel Jan Breytenbach and a number of colleagues arrived in Ciskei under private contract to establish a parachute battalion. Financial resistance to the project (which would have cost R52 million) on the part of South Africa eventually led to its severe curtailment and, after a confrontation with members of the CDF, the controversial Breytenbach and his colleagues left Ciskei.¹³¹ Colonel Schoeman then took over command of the Ciskei Parachute Battalion. However, it seems that the unit never grew beyond about a company.¹³²

Of particular interest is the fact that the independent homelands were not the only countries for which 1 Parachute Battalion trained paratroopers in the 1980s. Despite South Africa's international isolation and the antagonism of the OAU, there were African countries that were prepared to deal with the white apartheid state, albeit clandestinely. One of these was the island state of Comoros in the Indian Ocean. Captain Gerrie Leipoldt and WO2 Johan Landman were flown to the island of Grand Comoro in May 1984 on a scheduled South African Airways flight. There they spent two weeks, putting about 60 volunteers from the Presidential Guard through a PT selection course. About 40 passed the selection and were flown to Bloemfontein, accompanied by their two South African instructors and two interpreters in a chartered L-100 Hercules aircraft from the Safair company.¹³³ The Comorians were trained in Tempe by 1 Parachute Battalion, though their course photo shows only 26 students, including two white soldiers, who were apparently ex-French Army, Lieutenant W. Perrun and Corporal I. Djae, with the white accompanying officer, Colonel R. Bako.¹³⁴ On completion of their course, the Comorians were flown back to Grand Comoro.

130. Telephonic interview, Richard Charter, Johannesburg, 3 July 1995 (CEO of PISA, he was involved in the purchase of the aircraft for the CDF); Interview, Lt Col Johnny Kieser, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

131. J. Cilliers, "An Overview of the Armed Forces of the TBVC Countries", *South African Defence Review*, 13, (1993).

132. Letter from OC Ciskei Para Bn, Ref. CPB/13/103/13, 1 September 1994.

133. Interviews, WO1 Johan Landman and Lt Col Johnny Kieser, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

134. Course Photograph, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8408 (28 May–29 June 1984).

The intention was to provide them with annual progressive parachute training, including jumping, in the Comoros, as they had no aircraft or parachutes of their own. However, this failed to materialise.¹³⁵ It seems that the entire exercise was merely an attempt on the part of the Comorians to give their Presidential Guard a more elitist character.

Swaziland was another African country that requested the South Africans to train paratroopers for them. This training commenced in the early 1980s, and according to Kieser the Swazis initially sent their troops to Bloemfontein, where both the selection course and the parachute training were presented.¹³⁶ However, archival sources indicate that the initial selection took place in Swaziland from 21 October to 1 November 1985, with three instructors from 1 Parachute Battalion undertaking this task, but wearing civilian clothing. The 24 who passed the selection arrived at 1 Parachute Battalion in Bloemfontein on 10 November 1985 to commence their parachute course¹³⁷ and at their wings parade on 28 November 1985, they received their wings from the Swaziland Defence minister, Brigadier Gideon Fonono Dube.¹³⁸

Later, according to Kieser, two selection courses were held at Bulembu, near Pigg's Peak in Swaziland. Those who passed the selection were flown to Bloemfontein in an Israeli Arava aircraft of the Swaziland Defence Force, and this was also used for them to parachute from.¹³⁹ Landman, however, claims that instructors from 1 Parachute Battalion did all the training in Swaziland,¹⁴⁰ though this could have been during subsequent courses. Very little could be traced in the defence archives, but there are course photographs in the parachute training hangar in Bloemfontein for two subsequent groups of Swazis, one of 19 men in 1987 and another of 20 in 1988.¹⁴¹ There were also two Swazis trained as parachute despatchers and a further eight as tactical free-fallers.¹⁴²

Lesotho, yet another land-locked African country adjoining South Africa, also requested the apartheid state to train its paratroopers. Initially, according to Kieser, the Basotho had paid civilian skydivers from Bloemfontein to train some of their troops, but this

135. Interview, Lt Col Johnny Kieser, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

136. Ibid.

137. Course Photograph, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8524 (11–29 November 1985).

138. DOD, 1 Para Bn Gp 3, Top Secret File 1 PARA BN/311/1, "Aid to and Co-operation with Other Countries/Governments", Encl 6.

139. Interview, Lt Col Johnny Kieser, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

140. Interview, WO1 Johan Landman, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

141. Course Photos, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8717 (31 August–25 September 1987) and 8848 (21 November–15 December 1988).

142. Course Photos, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8802 Despatchers (4–29 January 1988), 8902 Despatchers (9–23 February 1989), 8902 and 9001 Free Fall (6 February–3 March 1989).

was not military parachuting, although they were apparently awarded parachute wings to wear on their uniforms. When the SADF became involved in their training about two years later, the troops who participated were put through a full selection phase of PT at 1 Parachute Battalion. After completing the parachute course, they too were awarded wings by the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF). Kieser maintains that this resulted in two mutually antagonistic factions within the LDF, because there was resentment towards the initial batch of civilian-trained parachutists who not only had done no selection, but were not trained to jump at low level at night, carrying heavy personal equipment. The LDF used the Short Skyvan as a jump aircraft, but because of a shortage of suitable DZs in Lesotho they carried out most of their progressive parachute training in the Bloemfontein area.¹⁴³ There is no course photo showing paratroopers from Lesotho on the wall of the parachute-training hangar in Bloemfontein, but a mysterious group photo from 1980 shows 13 black students wearing SADF fatigues with green Infantry Corps berets sporting Infantry Corps badges.¹⁴⁴ This was at a time when only individual black specialists were occasionally being trained to parachute, and when no black soldiers wore the Infantry Corps insignia. These unidentified men could therefore have been the Basotho soldiers, wearing the uniform for security reasons, because Lesotho would certainly not have wanted it to become public knowledge that they were co-operating militarily with the South Africans.

Another field in which 1 Parachute Battalion provided parachute training was the preparation of specialist teams for certain resistance movements, such as those from the Angolan UNITA movement, and later the Mozambican RENAMO rebels. The first of these groups to be trained appears to have been in July 1982, when a UNITA “saboteur team” attended a course. Under the auspices of the SADF Military Intelligence Division, a selection course was held for 120 UNITA guerrillas. Only 39 passed the course and they were able to embark on the parachute training. Because of security considerations and the highly secretive nature of South Africa’s support for UNITA, it was impossible to conduct the training in Bloemfontein at the 1 Parachute Battalion facility. So Captain J. Hoon carried out a reconnaissance of the Rundu base and the Bwabwata training area in the Caprivi Strip between 26 May and 2 June 1982 to determine a suitable location for the training. The parachute course took place between 5 and 17 July 1982 and was presented by three instructors and two parachute packers from 1 Parachute Battalion, under command of

143. Interview, Lt Col Johnny Kieser, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

144. Course Photo, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8017 (21 April–23 May 1980).

Major A.J. van der Walt. They were told that at least 20 of the UNITA men were to qualify and that the focus was to be on night jumps, with a total of 11 jumps being done to qualify the men.¹⁴⁵

It was a demanding course, no less for the instructors than for the students. Based at a camp named Tigre in the bush not far from the old Bwabwata airfield on the Angolan border, the course had to be presented through interpreters, two of them using Portuguese and the third Umbundu, one of the indigenous Angolan languages. The training apparatus was makeshift and primitively constructed and the instructors had to improvise in order to complete the course. Only two of the students had ever flown in an aircraft before. After the “flight experience” that all prospective paratroopers are taken on before their first jump, three of the students withdrew voluntarily. One other refused to jump when he approached the door on the first jump, while two others were withdrawn because they simply sat down in the door before every jump and another because he grabbed the door on his way out. More were withdrawn because of illness or because they lacked the necessary co-ordination or were considered to be parachuting risks.¹⁴⁶

All their jumps were done from a Dakota aircraft. Ultimately, only 22 of the UNITA insurgents qualified and instead of wings were awarded neck scarves of nylon parachute material and shoulder lanyards plaited from parachute rigging lines. The presentation took place directly after their eleventh and qualifying jump, which was attended by several hundred other UNITA soldiers. One of the instructors was led to understand that these men were indeed subsequently employed operationally in a parachute role,¹⁴⁷ probably carrying out sabotage on the Benguela railway line and doubtless dropped from South African aircraft. A photograph of the participants in this course appears in Appendix 78.

The training of members of resistance movements was resumed after Breytenbach was transferred to Military Intelligence to establish the Guerrilla School (officially known as the Special Tasks School). This too, was done in the Caprivi, at a base called San Michel after the patron saint of paratroopers, St Michael. Once RENAMO insurgents were trained in other military skills, they were returned to areas deep in Mozambique by parachute, so they had to be trained to jump. Breytenbach had used former 1 Parachute Battalion instructors for this, initially with very rudimentary apparatus, but gradually improving in this regard.¹⁴⁸

145. DOD, 1 Para Bn, Gp 3, Top Secret File 1 Para Bn/309/1, “Specific Ops, SA Army”, Op SILVER.

146. Interview, WO1 Johan Landman, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

147. Ibid.

148. Interview, Col Jan Breytenbach (retd), Sedgefield, 30 December 1990.

These RENAMO fighters were not trained to jump with personal equipment, as this was dropped on platforms, together with other supplies and arms, from the same C-130 aircraft that carried them out over the Indian Ocean and then back to the east coast of Africa to insert them at night into areas like the Gorongosa Crater in Mozambique.¹⁴⁹

Back in Bloemfontein, parachute training by 1 Parachute Battalion received a huge boost when a gigantic, ultra-modern training facility in the form of a new hangar was opened on 4 April 1986, to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the founding of the unit. The ageing and relatively small Second World War hangar housing the parachute training apparatus that had been installed in 1961 was now woefully inadequate and the upgrade was sorely needed. The new facility was carefully planned and custom-built to enable the simultaneous parachute training of over 200 paratroopers. It was equipped with new training apparatus, ample office and storage space, ablution facilities and a large auditorium-cum-lecture theatre with tiered seating. Outside, it had three C-130/160 mock-up fuselages and an outdoor exit trainer with six separate doors. It was probably the finest parachute training school in Africa and one of the finest in the world.¹⁵⁰

The momentous political changes taking place in South Africa as the war drew to an end were impacting on societal norms in the country and filtering through to the SADF in general and more specifically to the paratroopers. These became apparent in the training presented at 1 Parachute Battalion. The once exclusively white preserve of parachute training now saw a gradual increase of black soldiers being trained as paratroopers in the 1980s. Initially, this had been restricted to individuals fulfilling specialist roles in units such as the special forces regiments or the reconnaissance wings of 31 and 32 Battalions. But with the commitment imposed on 1 Parachute Battalion by higher headquarters to train paratroopers for the homeland armies, as well as for neighbouring black states and for the desegregated SWATF, it was no longer unusual to find black soldiers wearing parachute wings or to encounter increasingly large groups of black soldiers in the mess at 1 Parachute Battalion while undergoing selection or parachute training. Indeed, the political developments in the country had led to a significant sea change in attitudes at the battalion, and the racially motivated antagonism of instructors that had contributed to the failure of the SACC paratrooper company in 1978 (see Chapter 7) were now largely a thing of the past.

149. Maj P. Williams (retd), "Operational Drop by Renamo, Gorongosa, Mozambique, 18/19 Oct 87", Facebook posting on Border War, 2013; Diary of SO1 Operations, 44 Para Bde for night of 18/19 October 1987.

150. *1 Valskermbataljon/1 Parachute Battalion 1986 Annual*, 25th Anniversary Commemorative Edition, Tempe, 1986, pp. 11-13; Affiliatiebrief 1/86, Ref. 1 VALSK BN/101/6/1/1, 18 February 1986.

By 1987 there was a growing number of black SADF soldiers appearing in the parachute course photographs mounted on the wall of the new hangar at 1 Parachute Battalion.

Another white bastion fell when the first black parachute instructors were trained in 1988.¹⁵¹ Although they were from the TDF and not the SADF, this was probably a bitter pill for many of the older instructors to swallow. The earning of the “big wings” awarded to parachute instructors was an attainment of particularly high status within the paratrooper community, and nomination for the course was not lightly taken, nor were the wings easily won. But the cracks in the decaying walls of apartheid were widening and the edifice was beginning to crumble. The most significant indication of this was the training of the first company of black paratroopers who were to become fully-fledged members of 1 Parachute Battalion, wearing the coveted maroon beret. This came about largely because of the steadily decreasing number of white conscript volunteers for parachute training after the end of the war in Namibia and Angola. Even as early as 1988 a proposal was put forward by 44 Parachute Brigade that a start should be made with the training of black soldiers as paratroopers to fill the ranks of the envisaged full-time parachute battalion group.¹⁵²

Colonel James Hills took over command of 1 Parachute Battalion in January 1989,¹⁵³ after five years commanding the predominantly black special forces unit, 5 Reconnaissance Regiment.¹⁵⁴ He now introduced this revolutionary change in the until-then all-white structure of the country’s premier airborne unit. During his time with Special Forces, Hills had worked with many black former Selous Scouts from the erstwhile Rhodesia who had joined the SADF, as well as Mozambicans, Angolans and black South Africans who had served under his command. To Hills must go the credit for recruiting and training the first company of black paratroopers in the SADF. Faced during his tenure as OC with the reduction of the national service system of white conscription from two years to only 12 months and anticipating its imminent termination (which was to take place from the end of

151. Course Photo, Para Trg Hangar, 44 Para Regt, PARA 8813 (7 March–29 April 1988).

152. Conf. “Magsontwerp vir Valskermmagte: Implementeringstudie”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/C/305/2/1, 28 June 1988, pp 3 and 5.

153. 1 Valskerm bataljon Affiliatiebrief, No. 4/88, Ref. 1 VALSK BN/B/101/6/1/1, 30 November 1988.

154. P. Els, *We Fear Naught but God: The Story of the South African Special Forces, “The Recces”* (Johannesburg, Covos Day, 2000), p. 182.

1993),¹⁵⁵ he now made use of the voluntary short-service system to train B-Company as a black company, although with white officers and mostly white NCOs.¹⁵⁶

Army HQ gave Hills permission to recruit and train the black soldiers from scratch. This commenced over November/December 1989. Some 950 young black men were recruited from the streets, mainly in the Bloemfontein area. They were subjected to an initial screening and selection, from which 142 were chosen and enlisted. Of these, 135 arrived to commence their basic training at 1 Parachute Battalion on 8 January 1990 and Captain Johnny Kerswill was appointed as their company commander. After completing basic training and training in platoon weapons and in their individual musterings, 98 of these soldiers commenced with the selection phase of PT. Only five did not pass it. A further 27 fell away during the actual parachute training, leaving the company with 67 qualified paratroopers on strength. Training continued until the end of November of that year.¹⁵⁷

The company then deployed operationally for most of 1991 and 1992, doing “township duty” in the Johannesburg, Durban, Margate, East London, Richards Bay and Soweto areas. From the end of January 1991 until the beginning of March that year the company deployed in Kingwilliamstown, assisting with the prevention of a coup d’état in the Ciskei. During this time they also carried out a training parachute drop with the Ciskei paratroopers at the Bulembu Airport. They were deployed twice more in this area when there were yet again threats of a coup. Their deployments in the townships of Katlehong and Thokoza resulted in considerable action, including the shooting of insurgents and the capture of significant amounts of small arms, grenades and ammunition.¹⁵⁸ The war was no longer in Namibia and Angola, but was almost literally taking place in the backyards of these black paratroopers. The enemy they were fighting was no longer SWAPO, but after the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, who was the enemy?

A second black company, Support Company, was trained by 1 Parachute Battalion during 1992, also deploying in the urban areas on counter-insurgency operations, mainly in the Soweto/Johannesburg area. During 1993, when 32 Battalion was disbanded under very unhappy circumstances by the government of F.W. de Klerk, the then commander of 44

155. B. Sass, “An Overview of the Changing South African Defence Force”, *South African Defence Review*, 13 (November 1993), p. 14.

156. J. Kerswill, “B-Komp Votooi sy Basiese Opleiding en Handhaaf nog Steeds Valskermbataljon se Standaard”, *Ex Alto Vincimus*, 2, 1 (First Quarter, 1990), p. 6

157. Memo from Maj J.R. Kerswill to Col M. Alexander containing extracts from the Company Diaries of B-Coy 1990–1991, Supt Coy 1993 and A-Coy 1993, 30 November 1994.

158. Ibid. See also J. Kerswill, “B Company’s First Operational Deployment”, *Ex Alto Vincimus*, 2, 3 (Fourth Quarter, 1990), p. 2.

Parachute Brigade, Colonel Les Rudman, together with the OC 1 Parachute battalion, Commandant John Brooks, made several trips to Pomfret to select from among the parachute qualified soldiers those they wanted to accommodate in the parachute battalion. About 200 were found to be acceptable according to the paratroopers' standards.¹⁵⁹ The first company of these black, former Angolan, Portuguese-speaking paratroopers was quickly transferred to 1 Parachute battalion to become A-Company. Later that year a third locally recruited black company, D-Company, commenced its training and the second company of former 32 Battalion soldiers was formed.¹⁶⁰ By this time, on the eve of democratisation in South Africa in 1994, 1 Parachute Battalion had undergone a profound and revolutionary change in character and composition. From an exclusively white elite unit comprising soldiers that were all conscripts and where Afrikaans was the *lingua franca*, it had metamorphosed into a unit that retained its elitism based on selection and parachuting, but was composed of a racial, cultural and language mix in which black soldiers were the overwhelming majority and under circumstances where conscription had ended. The officers and most of the NCOs, however, were white.

Long before this, the appointment of Hills as the OC 1 Parachute Battalion in 1989 had seen an immediate shift away from focusing on the activities of OFS Command and there was a greater emphasis on training for operations. His arrival had coincided with the loss of the battalion's operational capability, as all national servicemen trained by 1 Parachute Battalion were transferred to 14 Parachute Battalion Group that same year for their second year of service (see the next chapter). Training therefore became the principal task of 1 Parachute Battalion, and during July 1990 Hills conducted Exercise PEGASUS at the De Brug training area. This involved more than 300 paratroopers making use of four new Oryx helicopters, two Pumas, four Alouette troopers, two Alouette command helicopters and four Alouette gunships. A rifle company and the Support Company carried out a live-fire helicopter assault on a carefully constructed insurgent base. The attackers were supported by six Impala strike aircraft dropping bombs, firing rockets and strafing the base with 30mm cannons. The attack was supported by mortar, anti-tank and machine-gun fire.¹⁶¹ The helicopters available made it possible to lift one complete company at a time. It was attended by the brigade commander and his staff, and taking place as it did on battalion

159. E-mail correspondence with Lt Col John Brooks (ret'd), 31 March 2015.

160. Memo from Maj Kerswill to Col Alexander, 30 November 1994.

161. C. Alberts, "PEGASUS-Troepe Wys Staal", *Uniform* (August 1990), p. 8; and C. Alberts, "Oefening PEGASUS", *Ex Alto Vincimus*, 2, 3 (Third Quarter, 1990), p. 4.

level, was the closest that 1 Parachute Battalion had yet come to aligning its training with the battalion group exercises of the brigade.¹⁶² This was probably the largest exercise ever carried out by 1 Parachute Battalion, involving as it did, 16 helicopters. And although Hills was transferred away from 1 Parachute Battalion at the end of that year, the PEGASUS exercises became an annual feature for several years.¹⁶³

All these heavy commitments, together with ongoing training of the regular intakes of conscripts who volunteered to become paratroopers (until the ending of national service in 1993), participation in SA Army exercises such as the SWEEPSLAG (whiplash) series at the Army Battle School, Lohatlha in the Northern Cape and constant operational commitments, placed a huge strain on 1 Parachute Battalion. It is therefore hardly surprising that the unit did not embrace with much enthusiasm the higher level developments in airborne warfare that were taking place at 44 Parachute Brigade. From 1992, when Headquarters, 44 Parachute Brigade moved back to Bloemfontein and 1 Parachute Battalion finally came under its command, the brigade too, was subjected to these strains, which were exacerbated by the decline of the CF due to the ending of conscription. It had been the CF that provided the brigade with cheap manpower when it was needed and had given it the flexibility and depth to undertake much of the innovative work done until then. It now became necessary for a complete reassessment of the way the airborne forces would be constituted in future. This is addressed in the next two chapters.

11.4. DEDUCTIONS

From about 1982 a concerted effort was apparent to build up a viable, modern airborne force in the SADF. This was characterised by the formalisation of organisations, the appointment of permanent staff to HQ 44 Parachute Brigade and the development or acquisition of air-droppable vehicles and armament as well as a heavy drop air supply capability. In the latter half of that decade the capability was tested and honed in a succession of progressive exercises, using both fixed wing aircraft and helicopters in conjunction with the part-time CF parachute units of the brigade. The ability to deploy a parachute battalion group was firmly established through these exercises.

Over the same period, and in fact commencing in the late 1970s, the training commitment of 1 Parachute Battalion, the only full-time parachute unit, increased substantially. The extension of national service to two years and the increase in parachute

162. Diary of OC 44 Para Bde, entry for 13 July 1990.

163. Memo from Maj Kerswill to Col Alexander, 30 November 1994.

operations in the war in Angola and Namibia led to the doubling in size of the battalion with a concomitant doubling in the number of paratroopers who had to be trained. There were also external training commitments that included the parachute training of Rhodesians, of 32 Battalion, of the SWATF, of UNITA and RENAMO elements, of the homeland armies of Transkei, Bophutatswana and later Ciskei and of other African countries such as the Comoros, Swaziland and Lesotho. The training of black paratroopers for 1 Parachute Battalion commenced in 1990. This heralded a drastic change in the composition of the paratroopers, and with the ending of conscription and the imminent integration of forces, the battalion soon comprised mainly black soldiers.

The parachute forces had reached an exceptionally high level of airborne expertise, yet the Thirty Year War ended at the very point when they achieved their zenith. Although this expertise was divided between two camps, 44 Parachute Brigade and 1 Parachute Battalion appeared to be moving closer than they had ever been before, as was illustrated by Exercise PEGASUS. But was there any role for this formidable airborne force in the new dispensation that was dawning? The age of the securocrats was over; the war had ended; P.W. Botha, the hawk who had been the godfather of the military for 23 years, left office in 1989 after a palace coup; the defence budget shrank dramatically. The next chapter examines the uncertainty the airborne forces faced in the midst of these unfolding events.

CHAPTER 12

A CLIMATE OF CHANGE, UNCERTAINTY AND INSTABILITY: UNFULFILLED AIRBORNE POTENTIAL

12.1. INTRODUCTION

It is something of an irony that the SADF's airborne capability reached its highest level of sophistication as the so-called Thirty Year War in southern Africa came to an end. Except for the TALO that took place during Operation MERLYN in April 1989 (see Chapter 10), the powerful airborne force that had been built up in the crucible of conflict over almost three decades was not employed in its primary role when it was at its most potent.

This was partly due to the intensification of the war in the late 1980s, when a high threat environment and the loss of a favourable air situation by the SAAF severely restricted offensive air operations. Distance and the preponderance of Angolan and Cuban fighter aircraft, coupled with their sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons and the critical shortage of modern anti-aircraft measures by the South Africans, contributed to this.¹ In the words of veteran South African fighter pilot Brigadier-General Dick Lord, referring to the Angolan and Cuban fighter pilots, "for the first, and only time in the entire war, they controlled the air".²

However, there were at least three major airborne operations planned during this high point in the development of the South African airborne forces; two of them of strategic significance. It was only because of the unfolding political situation that these operations did not take place – not because of the military situation on the ground. They are therefore considered in this chapter because of their relevance to the the argument presented in this thesis.

The late 1980s, when the parachute capability of the SADF was reaching its zenith, were momentous times. For the paratroopers, the way this impacted on the history of South Africa specifically, was of tremendous import. The pending upheaval, with its social, political and economic repercussions affected them profoundly. Initially, however, it merely meant that they were deployed increasingly in an urban counter-insurgency role to help quell the growing unrest among the suppressed black majority in South Africa (see Chapter

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1. H-R. Heitman, *War in Angola: The Final South African Phase* (Gibraltar, Ashanti, 1990), pp. 310 and 330; L. Barnard, "The South African Air Force's Transport Aircraft: Acquisition and Utilisation during the Border War", Special edition on the Border War, 1966–1989 *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3 (December 2006), p. 250.
 2. D. Lord, *Vlamgat: The Story of the Mirage F1 in the South African Air Force* (Roodepoort, Covos Day, 2000), p. 183.

13). And while the resident fire force at Ondangwa was still provided by the paratroopers, they were largely excluded from the high intensity conventional fighting taking place in southeast Angola as the war lurched towards its anti-climactic conclusion. The armoured and mechanised battles around the Lomba River and Cuito-Cuanavale, where the Cubans and Angolans dominated the skies, were not considered suitable for the employment of airborne troops. Small elements of paratroopers did find themselves involved in that part of the conflict – the pathfinders provided protection to UNITA liaison teams,³ for example and a battery of paratrooper artillerymen from 18 Light Regiment was called up to deploy in Operation HOOPER (which became Operation PACKER) between February and April 1988.⁴ But these deployments were not in an airborne role.

12.2. THE END OF THE WAR IN ANGOLA: PLANNED AIRBORNE/ AMPHIBIOUS RAID ON THE PORT OF NAMIBE

The victory of the combined SADF/UNITA forces at the Battle of the Lomba River in September/October 1987 during Operation MODULÊR, leading to the advance towards Cuito-Cuanavale (where the outcome of the final battles became an ongoing controversy), resulted in a revision of the Cuban strategy in Angola by Fidel Castro. This strategy posed a direct threat to the South African presence in Namibia and gave rise to conditions for planning a classic airborne operation. Had the operation taken place, it would undoubtedly have been the clearest examples of a strategic airborne action in the whole of the Thirty Year War in southern Africa.

In the broader international picture, this was the time of *glasnost* and there can be little doubt that Castro's Angolan adventure was increasingly at odds with the initiatives of the USSR's Gorbachev in the light of the crumbling communist edifice in Moscow. Castro was almost certainly coming under pressure from his source of armament and military supplies because, in the words of L'Ange, "Moscow, though still pumping weaponry into Angola, was tiring of the costly fruitlessness of it all".⁵ But extracting one's self from a war is sometimes more complex than entering it. Castro's new strategy, according to Scholtz,

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3. SANDF Archives (hereafter DOD), 1 Para Bn (3), Top Secret 1 Para Bn/309/1, "Specific Ops, SA Army"; 44 Para Bde (1), Box 190, Top Secret 44 VALSK BDE/309/1/3 Vol. 1, Encl. 47, 26 February 1988; Bound Volume of Newsletters, Photographs, Orders and Articles, 44 Pathfinder Company, October 1989. E-mail letter, Col Fred Oelschig (ret'd), Plettenberg Bay, 24 March 2014.
 4. DOD, 44 Para Bde (1), Box 190, Top Secret 44 VALSK BDE/309/1/3 Vol. 1, Encl. 34, 15 January 1988, Encl. 55, 16 March 1988 and Encl. 47, 26 February 1988; Bound volume 44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure, "A Concise History of the South African Parachute Forces", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1.
 5. G. L'Ange, *The White Africans: From Colonisation to Liberation* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2005), p. 406.

rested on three pillars: engaging the Americans and the South Africans diplomatically in order to bring an end to the conflict in Angola without losing face; strengthening the crumbling FAPLA defences at Cuito-Cuanavale; and opening up a new theatre of war in south-western Angola in the Cunene Province. The third pillar was intended to pose a direct threat to the South African presence in Namibia and thereby compel the SADF to either deplete or completely withdraw their forces in south-eastern Angola.⁶ In line with this intention, additional Cuban fighter aircraft with their crews and the elite Cuban 50th Division began landing in Angola on 15 November 1987 and the Angolan air bases at Cahama and Xangongo were developed to accommodate greater numbers of MiG-23 aircraft.⁷

By then, in the light of Castro's second strategic pillar, the South Africans had reassessed their involvement in the Cuito-Cuanavale area. They had been repulsed on three successive occasions during attempts to take the Cuban/Angolan positions at Tumpo between February and March 1988.⁸ The South Africans did not take Tumpo, the single pocket held by the combined Angolan and Cuban forces east of the Cuito River. But the FAPLA/Cuban advance to take the UNITA Headquarters of Jamba had effectively been halted and driven back. It remains a moot point whether the South Africans actually intended taking the town of Cuito-Cuanavale on the other side of the river. This seems unlikely, because to do so would have cost them heavily in casualties; something they were not prepared to accept.⁹ As part of Operation DISPLACE, most of the SADF elements were withdrawn from south-eastern Angola after the Tumpo battles.¹⁰

Castro's first strategic pillar was also being implemented, and in this it coincided with a similar apparent strategic intent by the South Africans. Although such a strategy is not unambiguously stated in the triumphalist writings of Malan and Geldenhuys, it is certainly implied that South Africa also wanted out of Angola, particularly at a time that an exit could be linked to a Cuban withdrawal.¹¹ Archival sources leave no doubt that at this stage the

6. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War, 1966–1989* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2013), p. 365.

7. Heitman, *War in Angola*, p. 295; F. Bridgland, *The War for Africa: Twelve Months that Transformed a Continent* (Gibraltar, Ashanti, 1990), p. 343.

8. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, pp. 341–358; L'Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 406; Heitman, *War in Angola*, p. 280.

9. J. Geldenhuys, *At the Front: A General's Account of South Africa's Border War* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2009), p. 243 points out that the SADF in any case did not possess the bridging equipment needed to cross the Cuito River.

10. DOD, C Army (D Trg) Gp, Secret H LEËR/D OPL/G/309/1, "Nabetragting: Ops MODULËR/HOOPER/PACKER", 30 May 1988.

11. M. Malan, *My Life with the SADF* (Pretoria, Protea Book House, 2006), pp. 293–294; and Geldenhuys, *At the Front*, pp. 244–250.

SADF resources were by stretched to the limit.¹² The time was therefore right for negotiations to take place, and this is indeed what happened (see Chapter 10, Operation MERLYN). But hostilities continued in the area north of Ovamboland. The ongoing COIN operations conducted by the SADF's Sector 10 in the shallow area cross the Angolan border resulted in confrontations with Cuban armour and it soon became apparent that Havana's forces were deploying far closer to the border than was comfortable for the SADF.¹³ The South Africans sent armoured elements across the border in the region of Calueque and there were several intense clashes. Clearly, both sides mistrusted the motives of the other and both were expecting an offensive. More Cuban forces moved south and the Cuban 50th Division located its HQ at Cahama.¹⁴

Tension was running high, despite the negotiations and a climate of uncertainty predominated. Some commentators claim that the Cuban/Angolan forces deployed in southern Angola at that time comprised the heaviest yet seen in the region. According to De Vries, "there were more than two divisions worth of enemy forces deployed on the Southern Front of 21,000 combatants, which included 16,000 Cubans".¹⁵ The SADF began planning to seize the initiative and to pre-empt a possible Cuban invasion. The plan was known as Operation HILTI and the Chief of the Army was tasked with ensuring that the build-up of forces in southern Angola did not destabilise the area. An offensive was envisaged, to be followed by the establishment of UNITA dominance in the conquered area so that the SADF could again withdraw. However far-fetched the latter part of this strategy may sound, the archival sources indicate that it was certainly the intention.¹⁶

It was while the fighting in southeast Angola was still raging that 44 Parachute Brigade was tasked to cross-train its paratroopers for amphibious employment. The SA Navy had established a Marine Branch in 1979 to protect the country's harbours and Naval installations from attacks by land or sea. The marines were deployed in Namibia, both manning patrol boats on the Zambezi River and as infantry carrying out COIN operations.¹⁷ But the Navy was anxious for them to participate in a more offensive role, and took steps to

12. DOD, CS Ops Gp 9, Box 6, Top Secret HS Ops/309/4 Vol. 1, LABOTOMY/HILTI/ SEMI/PRONE, Op Instr 21/88 OP HILTI, p. 3, 30 May 1988.

13. Heitman, *War in Angola*, pp. 298-302.

14. R. de Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm: Strength Lies in Mobility* (Tyger Valley, Naledi, 2013), p. 475.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 721.

16. DOD, CS Ops Gp 9, Box 6: Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, H SAW Operasie Instr 6/88: HILTI, 1 June 1988.

17. B. Stockton (ed.), *A Navy for Three Oceans: Celebrating 75 Years of the South African Navy* (Cape Town, BP Southern Africa, 1997), p. 14.

acquire a limited amphibious capability. These included the development and production of Delta D-80 landing craft, built in South Africa, and the equipping of the Navy's two replenishment vessels, *SAS Tafelberg* and *SAS Drakensberg* with the modified decks to carry these boats and the davits needed to launch them.¹⁸

The D-80 was capable of landing 18 fully equipped troops or 2.5 tonnes of cargo, and had a top speed of 34 knots, fully loaded, on flat water.¹⁹ The Marine Brigade was established to exercise command and training functions over the various marine detachments that were deployed at about ten harbours and other installations along the coastline. In time an offensive Marine Amphibious Company (MAC) was formed along the lines of an infantry company, but equipped with heavier weapons. A specially trained Amphibious Boat Squadron (ABS) crewed the D-80 boats. However, the Marines did not have the manpower, the budget or the balanced, all-arms capability to provide a proper offensive amphibious force. Only the Army could fill this void. The Navy was comfortable with this arrangement, as it was accustomed to working with land forces; 4 Reconnaissance Regiment, had long been carrying out small-scale clandestine landings from Naval vessels.²⁰

It seems that in considering future strategy, the decision makers in the SADF felt that there was a need for an offensive amphibious capability. In 1987 a decision was made to establish such a capability within the Army. Budgetary and manpower constraints, however, negated any possibility of an exclusively amphibious formation. Sensibly, it was decided that the paratroopers would simply be cross-trained in this additional skill. There was already a fully functional parachute brigade and the equipment and vehicles of an airborne force were light and easily transported in both the replenishment ships and the D-80 landing craft. The concept of employment of the amphibious capability was in any case seen as being combined with an airborne operation. In September, 1987 the SO1 Operations at 44 Parachute Brigade was appointed as the project officer for Project TELJOY, the establishment of an SA Army amphibious capability.²¹

As part of the project, a team of officers from HQ 44 Parachute Brigade and one from 1 Parachute Battalion attended a Naval exercise code-named SAND PEBBLE in Saldanha Bay, where the MAC was twice landed, once by day and once at night from D-80 boats to establish a beachhead. The ship released the landing craft five nautical miles from

18. SADF, *South African Navy* (Pretoria, SADF Directorate Public Relations, 1989), pp. 15, 16, 18 and 19.

19. H-R. Heitman, *South African Armed Forces* (Johannesburg, Cental News Agency, 1985), p. 88.

20. See D. Steyn and A. Soderland, *Iron Fist from the Sea* (Solihull and Rugby, Helion and GG Books, 2014).

21. Confidential Letter of Appointment, C Army to OC 44 Para Bde (for attn: Cmdt Alexander): "Aanstelling as Projekoffisier: Projek TELJOY", Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/302/1, 22 September 1987.

the selected beach and the Navy provided a beachmaster organisation to control movement within the beachhead. The paratroopers brought certain items of equipment, including a Jakkals vehicle, to be tested, and it was found that the D-80 accommodated the little jeep as if the two had been built for each other. Over a period of five days in April 1988 a great deal of co-operative groundwork was done between the paratroopers and the Navy.²²

The project was interrupted on 7 June 1988 when the parachute brigade commander, Colonel Archie Moore and his SO1 Operations formed part of the planning group for Operation HILTI at HQ Sector 10 in Oshakati.²³ A conventional division, designated 10 SA Division, was put together for the operation, with the OC Sector 10, Brigadier Chris Serfontein as the commander and Colonel Roland de Vries as his chief of staff. The paratroopers provided a parachute battalion group and HQ 44 Parachute Brigade as part of this division.²⁴ Serfontein presented his command appreciation guidelines for the planning,²⁵ and an intense period of 10 days of planning took place.²⁶ The operation was to comprise three phases, each with its own code-name: Operation EXCITE entailed actions to gain greater freedom of movement for the SADF and UNITA in southern Angola; Operation FACTION was a deliberate 21-day offensive into Angola to occupy the area between the Cunene River in the west and the Kavango River in the east, with the high ground around Techumatete as the northern limit; and Operation FLORENTINE would establish UNITA in the area that the SADF had occupied. The focus of the planners was on Operation FACTION, the shock-action offensive to be launched against Cuban and FAPLA forces.²⁷

To the two paratrooper officers, it was immediately clear that the logistic line of the Cuban 50th Division ran from the port of Namibe (code-named VAALRIVIER for the operation), over the Leba Pass to the Humpata Plateau and on to Lubango, using both road and rail transport. Namibe seemed an obvious choice for a raid to inflict a serious blow on the Cubans. The specific destruction of certain facilities in the port would cripple them logistically until they could set up new supply lines from the port of Lobito, further north.²⁸ It would also strike a psychological blow, causing confusion, dislocation and a lowering of

22. M. Alexander, "Ex SAND PEBBLE: 11–15 April 1988", Photo Album, SADF 6 (44 Para Bde 1988).

23. DOD, 44 Para Bde (1), Box 190, Top Secret 44 VALSK BDE/309/4, OP LABOTOMY/OP HILTI, Encl. 28, Signal, C Army 12, 6 June 1988.

24. Ibid., Encl. 23, Op Instruction 21/88, OP HILTI, 30 May 1988, Appendix A: Magsamestelling SA Leër.

25. Ibid., Encl 108, Top Secret "Bevelswaardering vir die Opstel van Op Plan: Op FACTION", SEK 10/301/1/OP HILTI, 6 June 1988.

26. Diary, SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde, 7–17 June 1988.

27. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6, Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, SA Army Op Instruction 21/88 OP HILTI, 30 May 1988.

28. Diary, SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde, 8 June 1988.

morale among those opposing the SADF. This would give the main SADF force the window of opportunity they needed to launch their attack on the numerically superior CUBAN/FAPLA/SWAPO forces in the 5th Military Region, north of the border from Sector 10.²⁹

To be effective, such a raid would have to be far more than a small special forces incursion. It would require a sizeable force, capable of destroying much of the infrastructure in the harbour, and creating a presence, albeit briefly, that would be both an embarrassment to the Cubans and Angolans and a boost to the South Africans. But the distance from the Namibian border to Namibe (some 200km through the Namib Desert with no means of crossing the Cunene River) meant that the only means that could be seriously considered for the execution of such a raid was by parachute assault or amphibious landing.

The SA Navy was already preparing to provide support for a possible amphibious operation.³⁰ But Project TELJOY was still in its infancy and no troops other than the Navy's MAC had been trained for amphibious operations. The first joint amphibious exercise was in the pipeline, scheduled for Saldanha Bay later that year, but the concept had not yet been tested. The SAAF indicated that it could provide eight serviceable C-130/160 aircraft at short notice, but the radar and missile cover for the port and the fact that it was within easy range of fighter aircraft from Lubango was cause for considerable concern among the Air Force planners. The Air Force was not prepared to fly any closer than 50km to the harbour of Namibe (it later reduced this to 30km) but the paratroopers were given permission to plan the operation.³¹

The chief of staff, De Vries, himself a paratrooper and an officer who had made an extensive study of his profession, including writing a book on mobile warfare,³² had a thorough understanding of the value of achieving both psychological paralysis and physical disruption of the enemy's logistics and command capability through unexpected, rear-area shock action. He gave the paratroopers enthusiastic encouragement in their planning and fully supported the concept.³³ The proposed raid was given the code-name Operation KWÊVOËL (Grey Lourie).

29. DOD, 44 Para Bde (1), Box 190: Top Secret 44 VALSK BDE/309/4, OP LABOTOMY/OP HILTI, Encl. 95, Motivation for Raid on VAALRIVIER; Diary, SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde, 9 June 1988.

30. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6, Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, Naval HQ Top Secret Warning Order 4/88, Operation HILTI, VSH/UG/309/4/HILTI, 10 June 1988.

31. DOD, 44 Para Bde (1), Box 190: Top Secret 44 VALSK BDE/309/4, OP LABOTOMY/OP HILTI, Encl. 88, Hand-written notes by SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde, undated. Also Diary, SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde, 9 June 1988.

32. R. de Vries, *Mobiele Oorlogvoering: 'n Perspektief vir Suider-Afrika* (Pretoria, F.J.N. Harman Uitgewers, 1987).

33. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm*, pp. 750–752.

As more intelligence became available on Namibe, and better aerial photographs were provided, as well as reports from special forces reconnaissance missions, the plan for a raid took on a more finite shape. A parachute battalion group of some 1,000 men would be needed to carry out the assault with the aim of destroying the harbour facilities, storage warehouses and the large road and railway bridges over the Giraul River to the north of the town. To accomplish this, a significant number of explosives experts would have to be included in the force.³⁴

On Friday 17 June 1988 the plans were presented to the Chief of the SA Army (Lieutenant General “Kat” Liebenberg), the Chief of Defence Staff (Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson), the General Officer Commanding the SWA Territory Force (Major General Willie “Hoender” Meyer) and the Army General Staff. Liebenberg immediately grasped the importance of the paratroopers’ proposed raid on Namibe, as did Gleeson. Liebenberg enthusiastically approved the raid in principle, provided that the main Operation FACTION was given the political go-ahead to take place. He envisaged the raid as being launched about two weeks prior to the main mechanised operation directly north of Ovamboland, believing this would disrupt, confuse and dislocate the Cubans. He instructed the OC 44 Parachute Brigade to go ahead with detailed planning and rehearsals and granted him authority to liaise directly with special forces, the Navy and the Air Force.³⁵ The paratrooper officers returned to their base outside Pretoria and began to plan the details. They also called up 2 Parachute Battalion Group for August, when it was envisaged that the operation would take place.

By 24 June 1988 South African Military Intelligence had drawn up a recommendation for the destruction of the enemy logistic system in the Angolan 5th Military Region (the area in which the Cuban Forces were deployed opposite the Namibian border). It identified the port of Namibe as the key import point within the logistic supply system. Action against Namibe was seen as likely to have the single greatest disruptive effect on the primary logistic system. Four vital targets were identified within the Namibe objective area: the cranes and unloading equipment on the quays of the harbour; the fuel depot; the railway workshops; and the railway bridge across the Giraul River just outside the town.³⁶

34. DOD, 44 Para Bde (1), Box 190, Top Secret 44 VALSK BDE/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI; Diary, SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde.

35. *Ibid.*, 17 June 1988.

36. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6, Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, Encl. 2, “Ontwrigting van die Vyandelike Logistieke Stelsel van die Vyfde Militêre Streek”, MI/521/3/1/2/14 over MI/04/3/A6, 28 June 1988.

On 27 June 1988 a clash took place in Angola between South African and Cuban armoured/mechanised elements in which one South African and an unknown number of Cubans died. There were several wounded on both sides and a number of vehicles, including two Cuban tanks, were destroyed. The same day a Cuban air strike was carried out on the dam wall at Calueque on the Cunene River. Eleven South African soldiers were killed and three Cuban aircraft were hit, one of which crashed.³⁷

The negotiations between the South Africans, Cubans and Angolans, facilitated by the Americans and backed by the Soviets had reached a precarious point towards the end of June, and these incidents served to increase the brittleness of the situation. The South African politicians were anxious that the SADF should not be accused of provocation at this crucial stage. On 29 June 1988 the Chief of the SADF issued an instruction for Operation MIDRAND to be implemented. This was the withdrawal of all SADF forces and equipment from Angola and effectively placed Operations HILTI on hold.³⁸ The strategy now changed from one of aggressive offence to mobile defence. The threat of the Cuban 50th Division invading Namibia remained and intelligence had confirmed the overall strength of Cuban forces in the area to be the equivalent of two divisions. But plans were now made to meet them on Namibian soil and engage them in a destruction battle there. This became known as Operation HANDBAG.³⁹

On 30 June 1988, Colonel Moore and his SO1 Operations were summoned to the office of the Army's Director of Operations, Brigadier Frank Bestbier, and informed of this decision. But they were instructed to continue with the mobilisation of 2 Parachute Battalion Group, and to plan to group both national service and CF paratroopers to ensure that a viable airborne force would be in constant readiness to carry out retributive operations at short notice should the Cubans launch any attacks into Namibia. They were also told to continue with the contingency planning for Operation KWÊVOËL.⁴⁰

A closed, high-level meeting was convened on 5 July 1988, where the Defence minister, General Magnus Malan, gathered with his deputy minister and the Chief of the SADF, together with top officers from all the Arms of Service. During the discussions,

37. Ibid., Encl. 8, CS Ops to Military Secretary, "Aanvullende Inligting tov Insidente op 27 Junie 1988", 28 June 1988; Heitman, *War in Angola*, pp. 302–307; Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, pp. 370–381.

38. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6: Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, C SADF Op Instruction 7/88 MIDRAND, 29 June 1988.

39. Ibid., Encl. 10, Top Secret "Kernnotas vir Aanbieding aan H SAW op 4 Jul 88 mbt Operasies in SWA", H LEËR/ D OPS/309/4, July 1988.

40. Diary, SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde, 30 June 1988.

General Liebenberg raised the matter of the raid on Namibe, should the multinational negotiations break down. He pointed out the importance of cutting off the enemy's logistic lines and this met with Malan's approval in the event of a Cuban offensive into Namibia.⁴¹

The planned raid on Namibe was kept alive throughout the negotiations, just in case these should break down and the Cubans become aggressive. The paratroopers were therefore tasked to maintain a parachute battalion group in readiness for deployment within 48 hours for at least the next year.⁴² Because of the limited CF resources in terms of their time available for call-up, this meant that a hybrid, composite battalion group came into being, composed partly of NSM and partly of CF paratroopers. It was called 14 Parachute Battalion Group, taking the "1" from 1 Parachute Battalion, which provided the NSM, and the "4" from 44 Parachute Brigade, which provided the CF elements.⁴³ It was the first time in the Defence Force's history that such a balanced operational airborne unit had been permanently available for rapid deployment.

Operation KWÊVOËL thus remained a very real possibility, with additional instructions for contingency planning to be in readiness for action against the enemy rear areas, including Angolan harbours, should the enemy take the offensive.⁴⁴ The OC 44 Parachute Brigade was consequently instructed to do contingency planning in co-operation with the Navy for pre-emptive strikes against Angolan harbours.⁴⁵

The Joint planning cycle for Operation KWÊVOËL, involving the paratroopers, the Air Force, the Navy and special forces, commenced under strict security at the HQ of 44 Parachute Brigade at Murrayhill outside Pretoria on Monday 11 July 1988. The plan was ready by 20 July 1988. On Monday 25 July it was presented at Army HQ to the Chief of the Army, his General Staff, the GOC Special Forces, senior officers from the Defence Staff and the Operational Directors of the Air Force and Navy.⁴⁶

The plan entailed the delivery of the battalion group at night, partly by parachute and partly through an amphibious landing. The force was to stage from the airfield and port

41. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6, Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, Encl. 25, "Bevestigende Notas oor Vergadering op 4 Jul 88 oor Ops en Krygstuigaangeleenthede met betrekking tot Noord-SWA en Suid-Angola", MS/UG/309/1, p. 7, 5 July 1988.

42. DOD, 44 Para Bde (1), Box 190, Top Secret 44 VALSK BDE/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI, Encl. 96, hand-written note by Col D.J. Moore.

43. Bound volume 44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure, "A Concise History of the South African Parachute Forces", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1.

44. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6: Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, Encl. 17, SA Army Op Instruction 29/88: Op PRONE, H LEËR/D OPS/309/4 – PRONE, 13 July 1988.

45. Ibid., Encl. 18, SA Army Op Instruction 32/88, Op PACT, H LEËR/D OPS/309/4 – PACT, 13 July 1988.

46. M. Alexander, "Operational Planning Cycle, Op KWÊVOËL, Murrayhill, 11–20 July 1988", Photo Album, SADF 6 (44 Para Bde 1988); Diary, SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde, 11, 23 and 26 July 1988.

of Walvis Bay on the Namibian coast. Eight transport aircraft were to be used in a single lift. Four C-130 Hercules aircraft would drop four Ferret anti-tank light armoured cars and 12 Jakkals jeeps with trailers (six equipped with 12.7mm machine-guns, five as logistic movers and one fitted for radio as a command vehicle), while four C-160 Transall aircraft would drop a total of 256 paratroopers. This drop would take place in the desert about 30km south of Namibe, the transport aircraft flying at low level over the sea to avoid radar and pitching up to dropping height for the parachute release.⁴⁷

The distance from Lubango, the nearest Cuban/Angolan fighter base (150km) meant that the MiG 21 and 23 fighters could operate easily within their range⁴⁸ and certainly posed a serious threat to the vulnerable SAAF transport aircraft. However, the Cubans and Angolans were known not to operate these aircraft at night, and the South Africans would have the advantage of surprise.⁴⁹ Of far greater concern was the presence of enemy radar and anti-aircraft missiles around Namibe.⁵⁰ The port was well-protected from air attack by an SA-3 Goa site and batteries of AAA guns of various calibres. The SA-3 surface-to-air missile (SAM) system with a range of 25km. It utilised the P-12 Spoon Rest early warning radar, the P-15 Flat Face 250km range acquisition radar and the Low Blow 85km range tracking and missile guidance radar.⁵¹ The Air Force was therefore not prepared to take any chances by flying closer than 30km to the objective. There were ways for them to minimise their vulnerability to the radar, but they would be courting disaster to enter the range of the missiles. At a distance of 30km in the night, the guns posed no threat. There were also sub-sonic Sukhoi Su-25 ground attack aircraft based at the airfield near Namibe, but these would not operate at night.⁵²

The transport aircraft could not expect any fighter escort during their flight and the paratroopers would have no close air support during their attack. The distance from AFB Ondangwa and Namibe was such that the Mirage F-1 aircraft would have no time at all over

47. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6: Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, Appx C to HS OPS/D OPS/UG/309/4-PRONE, "SALM Deelname aan die Landgeveg", p. 3, July 1988.

48. B. Gunston, *An Illustrated Guide to Modern Fighters and Attack Aircraft* (London, Salamander, 1980), pp. 98–105; Heitman, *War in Angola*, p. 363.

49. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6, Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, Appx C to CS OPS/D OPS/309/4-PRONE, "SALM Deelname aan die Landgeveg", p. 3, July 1988; 44 Para Bde (1), Box 190, Top Secret 44 VALSK BDE/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI, Encl. 73, List of Intelligence Requirements for 44 Para Bde.

50. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6: Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, Map showing Cuban/FAPLA deployments in the 5th Military Region, Appx to Top Secret "Kernnotas vir Aanbieding aan H SAW op 4 Jul 88 mbt Operasies in SWA", H LEËR/D OPS/309/4 July 1988.

51. B. Blake (ed.): *Jane's Weapon Systems, 1987–88* (London, Macdonald & Janes, 1987), pp. 170–171, 255, 257 and 258; Heitman, *War in Angola*, pp. 360–361 gives the range of the SA-3 as 29km, but *Jane's* can be regarded as more authoritative.

52. D. Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle* (Johannesburg, 30° South Publishers, 2008), pp. 382–383.

target, Mirage III aircraft would have very little time and the Buccaneers, although they had the range, would be easy targets for the highly manoeuvrable Angolan and Cuban MiG-23s.

The Cubans were thought to have a regiment deployed at Namibe to defend it from possible attack, but it was not a front-line, combat regiment. Because of the distance and the inhospitable terrain separating Namibe from the SADF forces in Namibia, and the fact that there was no bridge across the Cunene anywhere between the Ruacana Falls and the river mouth, they were not expecting a conventional attack.⁵³

The Naval force allocated for the operation included six strike craft to provide Naval gunfire support (NGS), two submarines to prevent Angolan Naval intervention, two replenishment vessels to transport the amphibious landing force, a hydrographic survey vessel, two minesweepers, the Marine ABS to crew the D-80 landing craft, and the MAC to establish and hold the beachhead.⁵⁴ The *SAS Tafelberg* carried six D-80 boats capable of landing 96 paratroopers or six Jakkals jeeps and their trailers at a time. It also carried two Puma helicopters, capable of transporting 32 paratroopers or slinging four Jakkals jeeps and their trailers in one lift. The *SAS Drakensberg* carried two D-80 boats, capable of landing 32 paratroopers or two Jakkals jeeps and their trailers at a time, and also had two Puma helicopters with the same capacity as those on her sister ship.⁵⁵ This meant that between the two replenishment vessels being used as amphibious assault ships a total of 128 troops could be landed in one wave from the landing craft, and at the same time this was taking place, approximately three lifts could be flown by the four helicopters, placing another 192 troops ashore. This would mean 320 soldiers delivered from the sea and 256 by parachute, giving 576 soldiers, plus 16 vehicles (including four ferrets). A second wave from the ships could deliver another 320 soldiers, and a third wave could land the outstanding 104 to bring the total to 1,000, and could also deliver a further two Jakkals jeeps.⁵⁶

Although the amphibious force could be placed ashore fairly close to the objective, the airborne force could not. The problem that had to be overcome was for the paratroopers to cover the 30km from their DZ to their objective in order to launch their attack at first light. It required a seven-hour forced march, heavily laden with full first-line

53. DOD, 44 Para Bde (1), Box 190, Top Secret 44 VALSK BDE/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI, Encl. 72, List of EEIs (essential elements of intelligence).

54. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6, Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, SA Naval Headquarters Warning Order No. 4/88: Operation HILTI, VSH/UG/309/4/HILTI, 10 June 1988.

55. A. du Toit, *South Africa's Fighting Ships, Past and Present* (Rivonia, Ashanti, 1992), pp. 243–244 and 316–322.

56. DOD, 44 Para Bde (1), Box 190, Top Secret 44 VALSK BDE/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI, Encl. 88, Hand-written Movement Calculations.

ammunition and rations and water for 24 hours. This could be partially resolved by transporting approximately 80 of the paratroopers on the 16 vehicles that were to be dropped with them, and for the remainder to be shuttled forward during the night by the four Puma helicopters from the ships, moving 64 paratroopers at a time in three lifts, or by slinging some expendable Land-Rovers from ship to shore with the Pumas. Another possibility was the employment of special forces sabotage teams in advance of the drop to neutralise radar and missile sites, making it possible to drop the paratroopers much closer to the objective.⁵⁷

The attack was planned for first light, by which time the two amphibious assault ships would sail beyond the horizon. There would be NGS onto the targets within the objective, directed by artillery observers forming part of the attacking force, and the battalion group's own 120mm mortar fire from its light artillery battery would provide additional support. The first target to be attacked would be the airfield, and while one company was dealing with this, the remainder of the force would enter the town and occupy the harbour, where the quay installations, fuel depot, railway workshops and warehouses would be demolished and set alight. One company would then be sent out with engineers to lay charges on the railway bridge across the dry Giraul River. By nightfall, the whole force would withdraw to the harbour area, from where everyone would be evacuated to the two ships, which would by then have again approached the shore. A shuttling by the helicopters and D-80 boats would accomplish this. The Jakkals jeeps would be recovered by the Delta boats, but the Ferrets would have their armament removed and then be blown up. By daybreak, it was estimated that the whole Naval Task Force, with all the paratroopers, would be beyond the horizon and on its way back to Walvis Bay.⁵⁸

It was a highly risky operation with some important intelligence still missing. Liebenberg appeared sceptical and was not prepared to give final approval.⁵⁹ In fact, by then the tempo of contact between the negotiating parties was accelerating.⁶⁰ Discussions between Angola, Cuba and South Africa, under the auspices of the USA and with the participation of the USSR were at a crucial stage and there was no way that Liebenberg, who scowled throughout the presentation, could have obtained the political go ahead for such an operation, even if the military risks were not as high. Only days before the presentation

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Diary, SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde, 26 July 1988.

60. C.H.R. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born: The Inside Story of Namibia's Independence* (Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2004), p. 26.

by the paratroopers a secret meeting of military delegations on the Cape Verde Islands had convened in an attempt to end the hostilities officially.⁶¹ And earlier that same month delegates from South Africa, Angola and Cuba had signed a document titled “Principles for a Peaceful Settlement in Southwestern Africa” in New York.⁶² Little wonder that Liebenberg was scowling!

Nevertheless, he instructed the paratroopers to carry out their planned amphibious exercise (which had been scheduled as part of Project TELJOY) in Walvis Bay rather than in Saldanha Bay. After a visibly angry Chief of the Army had left, the Chief of Army Staff Operations, Major General Jan Klopper called Moore and his SO1 Operations aside. He explained to them that Liebenberg was prevented from approving the plan because of political restrictions that had been imposed upon the SADF. Any future decisive battle with Cuban/Angolan forces would now be on Namibian territory, and not, as had been the strategy until then, in Angola.⁶³ The South African politicians involved in the negotiations were particularly anxious that South Africa should not be seen as the aggressor, or as having provoked a clash that would endanger the negotiations. But the plan to attack Namibe, Klopper explained, was not to be cancelled; it was to be retained as a contingency in the event of the negotiations breaking down.⁶⁴ The exercise at Walvis Bay should still be seen as a rehearsal for the operation. So by the end of July, Namibe was still, despite the negotiations, regarded as a viable objective, and the SA Navy continued to prepare for an attack on the port.⁶⁵

A Naval exercise, code-named MAGERSFONTEIN, was conducted the following month as a cover for the Naval deployments in and around the port of Walvis Bay in Namibia.⁶⁶ It was one of the largest Naval exercises held by South Africa and tested the full spectrum of SADF maritime capabilities.⁶⁷ It was also part of the muscle-flexing that the South Africans felt was necessary during the negotiations: it would indicate that there was also a maritime dimension to any potential conflict and that the SADF did indeed have a

61. Stiff, *Nine Days of War: Namibia Before, During and After* (Alberton, Lemur Books, 1989), p. 45.

62. C. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood* (New York, Norton, 1992), pp. 499–511; L’Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 407.

63. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6, Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, Encl. 15, SADF Op Instruction 9/88: PRONE, HS OPS/UG/309/4, 12 July 1988 and Encl. 18, SA Army Op Instruction 29/88: Op PACT, H LEËR/D OPS/309/4 – PACT, 13 July 1988.

64. Diary, SO1 Ops, 44 Para Bde, 26 July 1988.

65. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6, Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, Encl. 31, Op Instr 36/88: Op PLACABLE, H LEËR/D OPS/304/1/3 – OP PLACABLE, p. 3, 30 July 1988.

66. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6, Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, SA Naval Headquarters Warning Order No 4/88: Operation HILTI, VSH/UG/309/4/HILTI, 10 June 1988.

67. Du Toit, *SA’s Fighting Ships*, p. 244.

force to be reckoned with in this sphere.⁶⁸ The airborne/amphibious operation rehearsal was incorporated into this exercise under the code name STRANDLOPER. The paratroopers, with the Air Force and the Navy, therefore continued with their planning and went ahead with their rehearsal for the attack on Namibe under the cover of Exercise MAGERSFONTEIN.

The HQ of 44 Parachute Brigade and 14 Parachute Battalion Group participated at Walvis Bay, where the exercise was held. A week was spent training in the desert and practising embarking and disembarking from the *SAS Tafelberg*. Amphibious landings were carried out using the D-80 boats and the helicopters, enabling the paratroopers to hone their new skills, learning to cooperate with the Navy and working closely with the Marines and the beachmaster organisation.⁶⁹ The rehearsal for Operation KWÊVOËL took place on the night of 23 August 1988, through the next day and concluded the following night. Live ammunition was used, simulating almost every aspect of the plan, including the amphibious landing at night, but using the desert to the south of Walvis Bay as the objective.⁷⁰

The final withdrawal to the ship, however, as had been planned for the intended operation on Namibe, took place from the urban port area of Walvis Bay. A Joint Operations Centre (JOC) was set up in the chart room on the bridge of the *Tafelberg* and the Joint HQ that conducted the exercise was manned by the three service commanders: the Commander Amphibious Task Force (CATF), Captain Eric Green, who was also the OC *SAS Tafelberg*; the Commander Army Landing Forces (CALF), Commandant McGill Alexander, who was also the Acting OC 44 Parachute Brigade; and the Air Force Mobile Air Operations Team (MAOT) Commander, Major Grant Geddes. Throughout the exercise they maintained excellent radio communication with the parachute battalion group on shore and with all the Naval and Air Force elements that were participating. The ship remained at sea throughout the day, up to 180km from Walvis Bay, but when night fell it was again just 8km off the coast for the withdrawal. Using the two Puma helicopters and the six Delta boats, the whole force of 1010 soldiers, airborne and amphibious, was brought aboard the *Tafelberg* within four-and-a-half hours. The paratroopers had to clamber up the boarding nets on the ship's sides in the dark and each soldier was given a paper cup of hot soup, a sandwich, fruit and rusks from the ship's galley as he arrived on board. With exhausted paratroopers lying sleeping, crammed into every conceivable nook of the ship's pipe deck and wherever else

68. C. Bennett, *Three Frigates: The South African Navy Comes of Age* (Durban, Just Done Publications, 2006), p. 178.

69. M. Alexander, "Exercise STRANDLOPER, August 1988", Photograph Album, SADF 6 (44 Para Bde 1988).

70. Diary, Acting OC, 44 Para Bde, 23–27 August 1988; Alexander, "Exercise STRANDLOPER".

they could be accommodated, the *Tafelberg* weighed anchor and before 01h00 on 25 August it was steaming out to sea. The exercise, despite many hiccups, was an outstanding success with no fatalities or serious accidents.⁷¹

Between the parachute brigade and the Navy the viability of an amphibious assault as envisaged in the plan for Operation KWÊVOËL had been clearly demonstrated. On conclusion of the exercise, 14 Parachute Battalion Group was deployed to the operational area to form part of the defensive force in Sector 10 for Operation LINGER while the negotiations continued.⁷² The Cubans did not attempt to cross the border into Namibia. As was the case with the South Africans at Cuito-Cuanavale, this was probably never their intention. To do either would have exacted a toll far higher than either side seemed prepared to pay.⁷³ However, the posturing appeared to have been part of the respective withdrawal strategies that preceded or formed part of the negotiations that brought the war to a close.

In retrospect, the raid on Namibe was probably never a likelihood because of the risks that it would have entailed. The same can be said for the operations planned by 10 SA Division against the Cubans and Angolans in southern Angola and even those later planned for northern Namibia. The hard fact was that the South Africans had lost control of the air, and regardless of what their ground and Naval forces were capable of doing, they would not have been able to wage war successfully if the Cuban and Angolan fighter aircraft were operating above the open countryside of Ovamboland and over the sea with impunity. Operations simply could not be restricted to the hours of darkness.

Clearly, the prolonged operations in southeast Angola over the previous year or more had seriously emasculated the South African Air Force. Its limited ability to deploy aircraft in support of ground forces had become critical. Even more critical was its limited ability to carry out autonomous air operations (operations against the enemy Air Force). In the documents outlining this state of affairs, the SAAF admitted its inability to neutralise the enemy air threat in the air or on the ground and stated that because of the priority that had to be given to autonomous air operations it would not be in a position to provide close air support to the ground forces. It also admitted that it would be unable to sustain operations for more than a few days. The limited and obsolete anti-aircraft missiles and guns employed

71. Diary, Acting OC, 44 Para Bde, 27 August 1988.

72. Secret "Operasie Instruksie No 2/88: Ontplooiing van 14 Valsk Bn Gp", Ref. 10 DIV/309/1/OP LINGER, 23 August 1988.

73. H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2003), p. 615.

by the SADF, the poor radar coverage, its sub-standard and highly unreliable air-to-air missiles, a severe shortage of long-range drop tanks and a critical shortage of pilots and other key operational personnel all added to the woes of the SAAF at this stage of the war.⁷⁴

The Angolans and Cubans, on the other hand, had massive radar coverage of southern Angola and were deploying some of the most modern Soviet anti-aircraft systems in existence. The Cubans were known to have more modern fighter aircraft deployed at forward airfields close to the Namibian border than the SAAF, and the number of these aircraft was growing all the time.⁷⁵ The SAAF was already badly outnumbered, and unlike its opposition, was not in a position to replace aircraft lost due to combat attrition.

The concept of Operation KWÊVOËL, the planned SADF airborne/amphibious raid on the Angolan port of Namibe, nevertheless remained a prime example of a possible strategic action by a relatively small contingent of paratroopers, completely independent of any other ground forces. It was a classic example of the indirect approach, aimed at paralysing the enemy by severing his logistic lines. If successful, it would certainly have made the intended main thrust by 10 SA Division far more viable.

The following year, 1989, another amphibious exercise, code-named VLAKWATER (shallow water) was held by the SA Navy and 44 Parachute Brigade on the coast near Saldanha, again employing 14 Parachute Battalion Group and again including an airborne side to the exercise.⁷⁶ However, the period of conventional war was long past, the perceived threat from the Cubans had disappeared and Namibia was inexorably and irreversibly moving towards independence. There was no longer a need for an offensive amphibious capability and the defence budget was being heavily slashed. Project TELJOY was terminated, the Marines were disbanded a year later and the SADF's brief venture into amphibious operations came to an end.

12.3. THE FULL-TIME PARACHUTE BATTALION GROUP

What did emerge from this period of uncertainty was a decision by the SA Army to constitute 14 Parachute Battalion Group permanently as a full-time force in readiness, based at Murrayhill, close to the HQ of 44 Parachute Brigade. Augmenting it with CF

74. DOD, CS Ops (9), Box 6, Top Secret HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE, Appx C to HS OPS/D OPS/UG/309/4-PRONE, "SALM Deelname aan die Landgeveg", p. 2, July 1988; Appx D to HS OPS/D OPS/UG/309/4-PRONE, "SALM Outonome Operasionele Vermoë", pp. 1–2, July 1988.

75. Ibid., Intelligence Appreciation, 26 July 1988.

76. M. Alexander, "Amphibious Exercise VLAKWATER, 30 August to 15 September 1989", in Photograph Album, SADF 7 (44 Para Bde 1987).

elements was not sustainable for an indefinite period of time; it now needed to be composed only of full-time elements. As early as March 1988 Army Headquarters issued an instruction for the implementation of the Force Design for Parachute Forces, as set out in the 1984 Decision Brief (see Chapter 11: Unresolved Command and Control Issues). The OC 44 Parachute Brigade was tasked to draw up a short, medium and long-term implementation programme for the parachute forces of the SA Army and to give specific attention to extending the Army's concept of a full-time "force-in-readiness" availability to include a parachute element.⁷⁷

This design was completed by the brigade towards the end of June that year. A core requirement was the establishment of a balanced, full-time parachute battalion group, composed of Permanent Force and national service elements, as well as black voluntary service soldiers. The intention was for the paratrooper national servicemen in their second year of service to be allocated to this full-time battalion group. At this stage, with the war in Namibia/Angola to all intents and purposes over, conscripts showed a discernible decrease in enthusiasm to volunteer for parachute training. The brigade therefore recommended that one of the three rifle companies in the infantry component of the battalion group should be made up of black short-service volunteers to make up the shortfall, and that a programme be introduced of training an increasing number of black paratroopers. The full-time unit would continue to be called 14 Parachute Battalion Group and would fall directly under the command of the brigade. The intention was to accommodate it in the Pretoria area in close proximity to the brigade, making use of mainly temporary tented accommodation until proper facilities could be developed. The force design also set out how the brigade would implement its three-pronged responsibility, imposed by Army HQ, for the provision of an operational parachute, heliborne and amphibious capability for the future.⁷⁸

Predictably, there were objections from 1 Parachute Battalion in Bloemfontein. There was resistance to losing the second-year national servicemen and an appeal was made for the entire full-time parachute battalion group (not just the infantry elements), to be accommodated by 1 Parachute Battalion.⁷⁹ Although the reason given for this was that the facilities to accommodate them were available in Bloemfontein, the suggestion was strongly opposed by 44 Parachute Brigade, because it was felt the motivation for the appeal

77. Confidential Instruction, "Implementering van die Magsontwerp vir Valskermmagte", Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/302/5, 8 March 1988.

78. Confidential "Magsontwerp vir Valskermmagte: Implementeringstudie", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/C/305/2/1, 28 June 1988.

79. Confidential letter OC 1 Para Bn to C Army (D Plan), Ref. 1 VALSK BN/V/305/2/1, 19 July 1988.

was in fact the increased number of soldiers that would be available for sporting and other competitive and social activities at the local territorial command. There was little credibility in 1 Parachute Battalion's commitment to promote the operational concept, because nothing had been done to establish the battalion group since 1 Parachute Battalion had won a previous round in its clash with the brigade to maintain the status quo.⁸⁰ All that had happened was that an Engineer Branch had been established at 1 Parachute Battalion in January 1987.⁸¹ This existed on paper for two years, but nothing was done to build a proper operational battalion group with a headquarters and other supporting arms. In fact, the Engineer captain who was transferred to 1 Parachute Battalion was made the second-in-command of an infantry company while the trained engineer troops who were transferred to the battalion were merely used as additional infantry.⁸²

But on this occasion, it was 44 Parachute Brigade that won the battle. Planning for Operation KWÊVOËL had seemingly convinced the Director of Operations of the value of an immediately available airborne force located close to Pretoria. Over this time the temporarily constituted 14 Parachute Battalion Group fielded by the brigade had shown up the inability of 1 Parachute Battalion to fulfil such a role. The success of Exercise STRANDLOPER had apparently opened the eyes of many senior officers to the potential of the proposed full-time parachute battalion group and the precarious military situation that South Africa found itself in must have lent an air of urgency to the matter. At the behest of the Chief of the Army, ministerial approval was sought on 6 October 1988 and granted on 9 November 1988 for the establishment of a full-time parachute battalion group, located at Wallmanstal (close to Murrayhill), under command of 44 Parachute Brigade and formed principally from the Operational Wing of 1 Parachute Battalion. The Operational Wing was immediately placed under operational command of the brigade.⁸³ Clearly, Liebenberg, as Chief of the Army, was showing greater decisiveness about his paratroopers than either of his two predecessors.

80. Secret Decision Brief, "Beslissingsvoordrag aan Hoof van die Leër oor Rasionalisering van die SA Leër se Valskermmagte", Ref. 1 VALSK BN/503/2/1 22 October 1984; Confidential Document, "Presentation to D Plan and Commission of Inquiry into the Proposed Location of a Full-Time Parachute Battalion Group to serve as Chief of the Army's Reserve", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/305/2/1, 16 June 1989, p. 5.

81. 1 Para Bn, Unit History File/Annual Historical Report (Jaarlikse Geskiedkundige Verslag) for 1987 and 1988.

82. Confidential, "Presentation to D Plan and Commission of Inquiry into the Proposed Location of a Full-time Para Bn Gp to serve as Chief of the Army's Reserve", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/305/2/1, 16 June 1989, p. 5.

83. Letter C Army to C SADF, "Establishment of a Full-Time Parachute Battalion Group", Ref. C ARMY/D PLAN/502/1/1, 6 October 1988; Memo C Army to C SADF: "Submission re the Establishment of a Parachute Battalion Group", Ref. C ARMY/D PLAN/502/1/1, 6 October 1988; Conf. letter C Army to OCs 44 Para Bde and 1 Para Bn, "Command and Control: Parachute Forces", Ref. C ARMY/D PLAN/501/5/2 over C ARMY/D PLAN/502/6/1, 6 October 1988.

The decision caused major unhappiness at 1 Parachute Battalion and a staff target compiled by the brigade and setting out the personnel requirements led to great resistance from the battalion in Bloemfontein.⁸⁴ Several individuals transferred by Army HQ from 1 Parachute Battalion to fill posts in the battalion group HQ simply refused to move, citing personal situations as the reason.⁸⁵ No such resistance was encountered from the other corps such as artillery, anti-aircraft and engineers.⁸⁶ However, the battalion lost its Operational Wing at the end of 1988⁸⁷ and was tasked to provide key personnel on detached duty to 14 Parachute Battalion Group until permanent appointments were made. Despite this, 1 Parachute Battalion failed to provide a battalion commander, a battalion second-in-command and a regimental sergeant-major (RSM), sending only very junior officers, such as lieutenants, to serve as company commanders.⁸⁸

This obstructionist attitude by 1 Parachute Battalion looked as if it might sink the whole attempt to establish 14 Parachute Battalion Group in the Pretoria area. But another solution was found at this crucial juncture. The disbandment of the SWA Territory Force was in process in terms of the agreements reached for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435. One of the units being disbanded was 2 SWA Specialist Unit, which was a parachute battalion. As many of the key personnel in this unit were SADF members on secondment, they now had to be accommodated back in South Africa. In this way, a battalion commander (Commandant Nic van den Berg), a second-in-command (Major Jan Lerm) and an RSM (WO1 Lodewyk Pietersen) were found for 14 Parachute Battalion Group. Some 20 other officers and NCOs were obtained by 44 Parachute Brigade from this source and from other elements of the SWA Territory Force.⁸⁹

An SA Army Instruction was promulgated on 27 January 1989, outlining how 14 Parachute Battalion Group would in future be employed as the Chief of the Army's Reserve,

84. Confidential "Staf teiken: 14 Valsk Bn Gp", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/502/1/1, 14 November 1988.

85. Conf. Signal DSMPS/969, 22 November 1988, C Army 12 to 44 Para Bde and 1 Para Bn, "Bevelsvoorafskrifte: Valsk Magte", Ref. H LEëR/DSMPS/501/5/2 over DSMPS/105/6/1/1 over DSMPS/105/6/2/1, 22 November 1988; Name List: "Pers Requirements (PF): 14 Para Bn Gp/HQ 44 Para Bde: 1989", Unreferenced, 1 December 1988.

86. Conf. Signal 10 Art Bde/264, 24 November 1988, 10 Art Bde to C Army 61, "Verplasings en Aanstellings Offisiere en Manskappe SAA"; Conf. Letter OC 44 Para Bde to C Army (D Plan), "Investigation into Move of Supporting Arms Elements of 14 Para Bn Gp", Ref. 44 PAR BDE/502/1/1, 9 December 1988; Conf. Letter C Army to OCs 44 Para Bde, 10 Arty Bde, AA School/10 AA Regt, 2 Fd Engr Regt and 1 Para Bn, "Plasing van Ondersteunings elemente: 14 Valsk Bn Gp", Ref. H LEëR/D PLAN/502/1/1, 21 December 1988.

87. 1 Para Bn, Unit History File/Annual Historical Report (Jaarlikse Geskiedkundige Verslag) for 1988.

88. Conf. "Presentation to D Plan and Commission of Inquiry into the Proposed Location of a Full-Time Para Bn Gp to serve as Chief of the Army's Reserve", 44 PARA BDE/305/2/1, 16 June 1989, p. 7.

89. Military Computer Printout, "Nuwe Standplaas per Nuwe Eenheid per Bevolkingsgroep: Report 1: Index", p. 46, 31 March 1988.

under command of 44 Parachute Brigade.⁹⁰ It was essentially a recognition of the strategic value of an airborne force. Because the new, full-time 14 Parachute Battalion Group, once in place, could not simply sit around waiting for something to happen, it was soon deployed on border protection duties as part of Operation XENON. But the transfers of the personnel from 2 SWA Specialist Unit had not yet taken place, so the unit deployed with interim leaders. Provided by 1 Parachute Battalion, they were too junior and inexperienced for the appointments and their lack of control resulted in a serious breakdown in discipline in the companies that had come from Bloemfontein. One of the company commanders and the acting RSM were relieved of their positions and the GOC Far North Command (under whose jurisdiction they fell during the deployment) wrote a damning report on their performance to the Chief of the Army.⁹¹

This was a serious indictment of the Officer Commanding and the Permanent Force officers and NCOs of 1 Parachute Battalion with their stubborn recalcitrance towards the parachute battalion group concept. It was 1 Parachute Battalion that had trained these soldiers; and it was 1 Parachute Battalion that had sent inexperienced or incompetent leaders to command them, rather than the highly experienced officers and NCOs that were in available at the time. The image of the paratroopers as professional, highly trained, motivated and elite soldiers suffered a shameful dent. A harsh reprimand from the Chief of the Army followed. The OC 1 Para Bn was castigated for his failure to provide the required levels of leadership to 14 Parachute Battalion Group and was instructed to correct the negativity in his unit towards the concept of Chief of the Army's Reserve.⁹²

By then the growing manpower shortage in the SADF was beginning to take on serious proportions and this had a negative effect on 14 Parachute Battalion Group. The twice-yearly intakes of national service conscripts were decreasing in number. This in turn meant that there were fewer volunteers to undergo parachute training; so no more than one company was being trained from each intake. For much of the time, therefore, 14 Parachute Battalion Group was only able to field one company. The recommendation from 44 Parachute Brigade, in line with what it had been propagating since 1988, was to recruit

90. SA Army Ops Instruction No 6/89, 27 January 1989, quoted in H LEËR/D OPS/309/1 XENON 9 May 1989.

91. Confidential Letter, "Verslag oor Operasionele Diens van 14 Valskermataljon te Soutpansberg Militêre Gebied oor Periode 26 Januarie tot 24 Maart 1989", Ref. V NOORD/309/1 ALG, 12 April 1989.

92. Confidential Letter C Army to OCs 1 Para Bn and 44 Para Bde: "Disipline: Verslag oor Operasionele Diens van 14 Valsk Bn Gp te Soutpansberg Militêre Gebied", Ref. H LEËR/D OPS/309/1 XENON 9 May 1989.

more black volunteers.⁹³ The new OC 44 Parachute Brigade, Colonel MGill Alexander drew up a staff requirement for the training of a company of black paratroopers that led to the recruitment of the first such company for training by 1 Parachute Battalion at the end of 1989. (See Chapter 11: Expanding Training Commitment of 1 Parachute Battalion).

The struggle for control of the infantry troops of 14 Parachute Battalion Group, however, was far from over. The OC 1 Parachute Battalion, backed by the OC OFS Command, approached the Deputy Chief of the Army, Major General Georg Meiring about the matter, again using the empty accommodation in the 1 Parachute Battalion base in Tempe as the lever. Meiring, a man with a logistic background and no conventional forces experience, appointed a commission of brigadiers, excluding the Director of Operations, to investigate the matter. Despite Colonel Alexander arguing his case for retaining the battalion group at Murrayhill, under direct command of the brigade,⁹⁴ based on the terms of his command directive,⁹⁵ and requesting orders with the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant-General “Kat” Liebenberg,⁹⁶ the three brigadiers recommended that 14 Parachute Battalion Group be disbanded as a permanently constituted entity and that all its elements return to their respective national service training units.⁹⁷ This was simply a reversion to the former status quo. Liebenberg accepted this with the rider that 1 Parachute Battalion would eventually be placed under command of 44 Parachute Brigade and that the latter’s commander would be upgraded to the rank of brigadier. In the meantime, 1 Parachute Battalion would be responsible for keeping the dispersed elements of parachute battalion group in a state of readiness for employment by the brigade.⁹⁸ Predictably, this never eventuated; after the dissolution of 14 Parachute Battalion Group the concept of a full-time unit of that nature simply disappeared and with it the Chief of the Army’s airborne reserve. The decision was the death-knell of the airborne battalion group. In the words of the OC 44 Parachute Brigade at the time, “We have taken a step 10 years backwards!”⁹⁹

However, because of the operational jitters in the Army resulting in the planning for Operation SKYDART (see below) and the commitment to participating in the amphibious

93. Confidential “Magsontwerp vir Valskermmagte: Implementering studie”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/C/305/2/1, 28 June 1988, pp. 10 and 11.

94. Confidential, “Presentation to D Plan and Commission of Inquiry into the Proposed Location of a Full-Time Para Bn Gp to serve as Chief of the Army’s Reserve”, Ref. 44 PARA BDE/305/2/1, 16 June 1989.

95. Command Directive, OC 44 Para Bde (Secret), Ref. C ARMY/D PLAN/501/5/2, 1 March 1990.

96. Hand-written document by OC 44 Para Bde, “Orders with C Army: Monday 26 June 1989”.

97. Diary, Bde Cmdr, 44 Para Bde, Entry for 4 July 1989.

98. Letter C Army to C SADF, “Stigting van Voltydse Valskermbataljongroep”, Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/502/1/1, 30 August 1989.

99. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 4 July 1989.

Exercise VLAKWATER, the final disbandment of 14 Parachute Battalion Group was delayed until the end of 1989. From the beginning of 1990 the Operational Wing of 1 Parachute Battalion again began to function, with companies being posted out for other HQs to employ in the internal unrest situation in the country.¹⁰⁰

During 1991, the OC Army Battle School, Brigadier Johan “Dippies” Dippenaar, propagated a Rapid Deployment Force (RDF), and the idea was accepted by the new Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Georg Meiring (see Chapter 13). But this was seen as a heavy mechanised force. Although it made provision for a parachute battalion group, the concept of employment meant that this was never more than a few companies grouped under a makeshift HQ to perform company-sized tasks in support of the mechanised elements. It was a tactical concept, showing no grasp of the strategic potential of airborne forces. In fact, the proposal and its design were based very much on an out-dated threat perception and took little cognisance of the rapidly changing political landscape in South Africa.¹⁰¹

12.4. THE END OF THE WAR IN NAMIBIA: PLANNED AIRBORNE RELIEF OF WINDHOEK

In the midst of the battle between brigade and battalion over the parachute battalion group concept, the operational situation continued to make demands on the paratroopers; this despite the official ending of hostilities. Yet another operation of strategic importance was being planned. The near-disastrous events of April 1989 (see Operation MERLYN in Chapter 10) did not derail the process towards Namibian independence. There were hiccups and hitches, but the dismantling of the South African military presence in Namibia and the demobilisation of the SWA Territory Force continued throughout 1989. Because of the SWAPO incursion the ceasefire and confinement of SADF forces to bases only took effect from 13 May instead of 1 April. Nevertheless, by 24 June the SADF presence was reduced to 1,500 of all ranks confined to bases at Oshivello and Grootfontein.¹⁰²

Through all this, South Africa, not surprisingly, exploited the anomaly of the port of Walvis Bay. Through a quirk of colonial history, the Cape government annexed Walvis Bay and an area around it as part of the British Empire in 1878 and when German colonisation of Namibia began in 1884, Walvis Bay was already a British possession. That same year the British government placed it under the administration of the Cape Colony and with the

100. “Operasionele Onplooings: Die Stedelike Situasie”; “Operasionele Ontplooiing: 1990”; “C Company in Natal”; “B Company’s First Operational Deployment”, all in *Ex Alto Vincimus*, 2, 3 (Third Quarter 1990). See also “A-Komp in Pongola” and “C-Kompanie”, in *Ex Alto Vincimus*, 2, 1 (First Quarter 1990).

101. Secret document, “Konsep van die Snelontplooingsmag”, Ref. L GEVEG S/502/1/1, 11 March 1991.

102. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp. 155–156.

Union of South Africa in 1910 it became part of the Cape Province. For practical purposes, the administration of Walvis Bay was moved to the mandated territory of South West Africa in 1922, although politically it was still part of the Cape Province. In 1977, the decision was made to revert to complete control of Walvis Bay by the Cape Provincial Administration.¹⁰³

In terms of the mandate granted to South Africa to administer South West Africa, no military bases were permitted in the territory.¹⁰⁴ But technically, Walvis Bay was not part of South West Africa. A military base was set up there in the early 1960s. Located in the base was a unit of infantry, armour and artillery: 2 SA Infantry Battalion Group.¹⁰⁵ In 1989, when the SADF had to dismantle and repatriate its forces in Namibia in accordance with Resolution 435, the crack strike force, 61 Mechanised Battalion Group was still in its base at Oshivello, and 62 Mechanised Battalion Group was placed in Walvis Bay. A third unit, 63 Mechanised Battalion Group, was formed at the Army Battle School in the Northern Cape, with the intention of moving it to the Riemvasmaak close to the Namibian border if necessary. Together, these three units, undoubtedly the most experienced and lethal conventional force in the SA Army, formed what was called the Merlyn Brigade. Commanded by Brigadier Chris Serfontein, the brigade HQ was in Grootfontein and its sole purpose was to intervene in Namibia, should SWAPO again contravene agreements.¹⁰⁶ The South Africans remained extremely suspicious of their former adversary.

In the run-up to the UN-supervised elections, Namibia was a land in political turmoil, advancing, as it were, along a knife-edge. The South Africans, many of them very reluctantly, were loosening the grip that they had held over the territory for 74 years. SWAPO guerrillas and political leaders (a figure of 30,000 is given by Liebenberg and Spies¹⁰⁷), were emerging from a war that had been fought with varying intensity for 23 years and were returning from the countries that had provided them succour. They were buoyed with a sense of victory as they contemplated finally taking charge of their country. The political opposition to SWAPO, principally the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance, or DTA (according to L'Ange massively but

103. L. Hangula, *The International Boundary of Namibia* (Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1993), pp. 122–127.

104. T. Molnar, *South West Africa: The Last Pioneer Country* (New York, Fleet Publishing, 1966), pp. 157–158.

105. L. Engelbrecht, "Fact File: 2 SA Infantry Battalion", Defence Web, 1 March 2010, http://www.defenceweb.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6911:fact-file-2-sa-infantry-battalion&catid=79:fact-files&Itemid=159.

106. DOD, CS Ops (4), Box 160, Top Secret HS OPS/UG/309/4/OP MERLYN, "Ops Instruksie No 8/89: Op MERLYN", 4 August 1989; Top Secret "Bevelswaardering vir Op MERLYN: Gebeurlikheids beplanning vir Ingryping in SWA/Namibië", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/309/4/OP MERLYN, 27 August 1989.

107. B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies (eds), *South Africa in the 20th Century* (Pretoria, J.L. van Schaik, 1994), p. 538.

covertly funded by Pretoria¹⁰⁸) was making a concerted attempt to counter the liberation movement at the polls.

Although the respective political campaigns for Namibia's elections for its first Constituent Assembly took place in a generally peaceful environment, the suspicions and intrigues born of decades of bitter conflict were all too apparent. UNTAG, responsible for supervision and control of the process, was faced with many complaints from local people and organisations in Ovamboland who made allegations of intimidation and violence by the SWA Police, specifically the former Koevoet operatives. The UN Special Representative, Martti Ahtisaari, and his staff in UNTAG distrusted the South African administrator-general of the territory, Louis Pienaar. In terms of the agreements that had been reached, Pienaar would remain in charge of the administration of the territory, but UNTAG did not regard him as impartial; instead it saw him as an advocate of an anti-SWAPO cause. UNTAG felt that there were radical elements in both the South African and South West African Police, and in the SADF's Military Intelligence, who were doing their utmost to ensure that SWAPO did not win the elections and who were even trying to destroy the settlement process.¹⁰⁹

As distrustful as UNTAG was of the South Africans, the South Africans were equally suspicious of UNTAG's impartiality in view of the UN's long-time recognition of SWAPO as the "sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people".¹¹⁰ Certainly, there were some in the higher echelons of the military who refused to accept that SWAPO's victory at the polls was almost a foregone conclusion, and who were apparently convinced that the former insurgents would grab power by force rather than run the risk of losing the election.¹¹¹ The sense of mistrust between the parties appears to have been palpable.

After SWAPO's blatant flaunting of the Geneva Protocol by its April incursion, the SADF viewed its long-time enemy with extreme suspicion. It is therefore not surprising that when the SADF High Command received intelligence reports of the likelihood of SWAPO carrying out a coup d'état to short-circuit the process under the UN and take control of the administration of the territory, these were taken seriously.¹¹² This possibility was not as far fetched as some might have thought, given the drastic reduction of any SADF combat

108. L'Ange, *the White Africans*, p. 419.

109. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp 198–212.

110. *UN Chronicle*, 13, 8 (1976), p. 27; K. Smith and F.J. Nöthling, *Africa North of the Limpopo: The Imperial Experience since 1800* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 1993), p. 411.

111. H. Hamann, *Days of the Generals: The Untold Story of South Africa's Apartheid-era Military Generals* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2001), pp. 178–179.

112. DOD, CS Ops (4), Box 160, Top Secret HS OPS/UG/309/4/OP MERLYN, "Ops Instruksie No 8/89: Op MERLYN", 4 August 1989.

capability in the territory, the lack of cohesion and wide dispersal of the small and very heterogeneous UNTAG military contingent and the lack of effective UNTAG control over the SWAPO guerrillas (aspects that are apparent from Thornberry's account of the run-up to the elections). The events of April that year showed, for the SADF, the disdain that SWAPO held for the UN, and the UN's inability to exercise control over SWAPO.

Sam Nujoma's statement that SWAPO would "go back to the bush and fight" if the elections were not free and fair¹¹³ implied, for many, that he would accept nothing less than a SWAPO victory at the polls as "free and fair". It did nothing to dampen the climate of mistrust and suspicion prevailing in Namibia as the territory moved closer to elections and eventual independence. As a result, in addition to the Merlyn Brigade, a number of other SADF units in South Africa were placed on standby to intervene should the transitional process be hijacked by SWAPO.¹¹⁴ The intelligence staff from Army HQ, together with those from the SA Army Forces in SWA had identified four possible courses of action SWAPO might take in the run-up to, during and after the elections, scheduled for early November 1989. Firstly, full participation in the process; secondly, to carry out limited infiltration from Angola with the aim of getting the election postponed or of enhancing its image before the elections; thirdly, if the run-up to the election was not to its advantage, to carry out a large-scale incursion just before the election, and to effect a coup in order to wreck the election and settlement plan; and lastly, to participate in the election, but if it did not gain a two-thirds majority, to take power through violence, as happened in Angola in 1975.¹¹⁵

The document stated that should any of the last three eventualities ensue, the state president was likely to order the SADF to intervene. Contingency planning was therefore undertaken and a two-pronged operation was devised. The Merlyn Brigade would be responsible for the situation in the north of the territory (specifically SWAPO's power base in Ovamboland) and would have additional elements added to it as they became available. The disbanded SWATF units would also be mobilised as reinforcements. The occupation of Windhoek to ensure the continuance of the administrator-general's government and to prevent the intervention or escape of SWAPO leaders was to be the responsibility of 44 Parachute Brigade. This "design for battle" made it clear that the occupation of Windhoek was of cardinal strategic importance, and that because of time and distance constraints, it

113. A.E. Naón and L.D. Merizalde, *SWA/Namibia: Dawn or Dusk?* (Windhoek, self published, 1989), p. 214.

114. Scholtz, *SADF in the Border War*, pp. 433–434.

115. Top Secret document, "Bevelswaardering vir Op MERLYN: Gebeurlikheidsbeplanning vir Ingryping in SWA/Namibië", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/309/4/OP MERLYN, 27 August 1989.

could only be done by a parachute force. The Merlyn Brigade was dispersed across many hundreds of kilometres in three different territories and their mechanised capability was restricted by time and logistics. An overland intervention in Windhoek would simply take too long.¹¹⁶ Mindful of what had happened 14 years earlier in Angola, where the MPLA movement had been recognised as the legitimate government on the basis of their occupying the capital city, regardless of the fact that they exercised no control over much of the rest of the country, the South African government considered it vital to prevent SWAPO from doing the same.

On Monday 21 August 1989 three officers from 44 Parachute Brigade flew to Windhoek on a civilian airliner, wearing civilian clothes. They were the brigade commander (Colonel Alexander), his SO1 Operations (Commandant Les Rudman) and a CF intelligence officer (Lieutenant Jaco Coetzee). In terms of the agreements reached regarding the run-up to the elections, no SADF personnel were to wear uniform inside Namibia. The paratroopers carried out a feasibility study and reconnaissance for the relief of Windhoek, should SWAPO illegally seize power before, during or after the elections. The three officers spent three days in Windhoek.¹¹⁷ The SADF/SWATF HQ in the city was by then no more than a shell, with only a handful of SADF officers and NCOs, all wearing civilian attire, handling the administration of the remaining 1,500 SADF personnel in the territory and the final remuneration of the disbanded SWATF personnel. The GOC SWA Command, Major General Willie Meyer, remained in his office as the direct link with the head of the UNTAG military component, Lieutenant General Prem Chand. Should there be an intervention by the SADF, Meyer would be in overall command of the Merlyn Brigade and 44 Parachute Brigade.¹¹⁸

Not long afterwards, on 12 September 1989, the whole election process was faced with a crisis when Advocate Anton Lubowski, a white SWAPO lawyer, was assassinated outside his home in Windhoek.¹¹⁹ Subsequently, in the wake of revelations about the shady Civil Co-operation Bureau (CCB), there were allegations that the paratroopers had been involved in this deed, together with special forces. A newspaper report stated that ("special forces, such as 44 Parachute Brigade at Murrayhill, also filmed all the homes of Swapo

116. DOD, CS Ops (4), Box 160, Top Secret HS OPS/UG/309/4/OP MERLYN, "Ops Instruksie No 8/89: Op MERLYN", 4 August 1989.

117. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entries for 21–24 August 1989.

118. DOD, CS Ops (4), Box 160, Top Secret HS OPS/UG/309/4/OP MERLYN, "Ops Instruksie No 8/89: Op MERLYN", 4 August 1989.

119. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp. 265 and 268.

leaders on video and even obtained plans of certain of these houses”¹²⁰ (own translation from the original Afrikaans). This could have been a reference to the paratrooper officers conducting their reconnaissance. However, the allegations are suspect, because the parachute brigade was never classified as part of “special forces” and there is no evidence that the paratroopers were in any way involved in the incident. It certainly would not have fallen within the ambit of the operation they had been tasked to plan and the archival documentation makes no mention of the homes of SWAPO leaders. This crisis, like others, passed, and the independence process in Namibia continued.

Planning for Operation SKYDART (as the relief of Windhoek, a sub-operation of the on-going Operation MERLYN, was known) also continued at the 44 Parachute Brigade HQ at Murrayhill outside Pretoria. On 21 September 1989, at a high-level military conference in Pretoria, Military Intelligence stated that the PLAN 1st Mechanised Brigade and a large number of guerrillas were poised to cross the border from Angola and occupy Ovamboland at short notice.¹²¹ Whether SWAPO did in fact have such a force in Angola is open to question. Certainly, the UNTAG sources (including an element deployed inside Angola with the express purpose of monitoring the SWAPO elements deployed there) did not believe this. By early August 1989 the UNTAG representative in Lubango had reported that there were no more than one company of about 350 SWAPO guerrillas left in Angola and that there were no SWAPO military camps. The remaining guerrillas had all returned to Namibia. Yet he also admitted that he was heavily reliant on the Angolans for information and that this was not always forthcoming. Thornberry, the Director of the Office of the UN Special Representative was dismissive of the SADF fears, referring disparagingly to “all this SWAPO-is-about-to-invade nonsense”.¹²² However, given that the UN had suffered a major embarrassment when UNTAG had been caught with their pants down on 1 April, it does seem a trifle absurd for them to have regarded SWAPO as completely honourable!

Whatever the case, the parachute brigade commander continued with his planning and preparation for intervention in Windhoek should this become necessary. At his disposal he had two units: 14 Parachute Battalion Group, made up at that stage of national servicemen, and 2 Parachute Battalion, due to report for their annual CF camp. A number of clandestine tasks were identified, such as the manning of selected DZs in and around

120. J. Botha, “Rapport kan dit Bevestig, Agent Lubowski!”, *Rapport*, 4 March 1990.

121. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 21 September 1989.

122. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp. 240–242.

Windhoek, and a request was drawn up and submitted to Special Forces HQ to undertake these.¹²³

On Tuesday 3 October 1989 Alexander again visited Windhoek, accompanied by Rudman and the two battalion commanders (Commandants Nic van den Berg and Hoffman van Zyl). They presented their plan to General Meyer and his staff and it was approved.¹²⁴ The J.G. Strijdom Airport 40km outside Windhoek, the Eros Airport inside the city, the SWA Broadcasting Corporation Building and the Tintenpalast (the government building), as well as the Gross Herzog radio mast were identified as the key targets would be retaken in and around Windhoek in the event of a SWAPO coup. According to the brigade commander's appreciation, these targets would need to be under control of the paratroopers within six hours of carrying out a landing.¹²⁵ Also attending the presentation of the plan was Commandant Izan Leibbrandt, the OC 62 Mechanised Battalion Group, located in Walvis Bay. Army HQ, on the recommendation of Meyer, had placed a combat team from this unit under operational command of the OC 44 Parachute Brigade, should Operation SKYDART be activated. It consisted of a mechanised infantry company in Ratel infantry combat vehicles (ICVs), two troops of armoured cars and a troop of mechanised engineers; they would drive the 250km across the desert from Walvis Bay to link up with the paratroopers as soon as they carried out their drop.¹²⁶

Before leaving Windhoek the next afternoon, the officers from 44 Parachute Brigade undertook a detailed reconnaissance of the DZs they had identified and the routes to be followed from the DZs to the respective targets in the city. It was an unusual situation in the annals of airborne warfare that the commanders of the two battalions to be employed were able to make a physical examination in advance of the places where they would be landing, moving and fighting in the event of the plan being activated. They were able to make informed decisions on their respective deployment areas before returning to Pretoria.¹²⁷

In Pretoria, planning and preparations continued, and on 20 October two parachute companies joined 14 Parachute Battalion Group to bring it up to full strength, with three complete rifle companies. One of these new companies was attached from 1 Parachute

123. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 23 September 1989.

124. Ibid., Entry for 3 October 1989.

125. Top Secret document, "Bevelswaardering vir Op MERLYN: Gebeurlikheidsbeplanning vir Ingryping in SWA/Namibië", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/309/4/OP MERLYN, 27 August 1989.

126. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 3 October 1989.

127. M. Alexander, "Operation SKYDART: Contingency Planning for the Relief of Windhoek", Photograph Album, SADF 7 (44 Para Bde 1989).

Battalion, while the other was a CF company of 4 Parachute Battalion, and had been mobilised for 30 days, including the period when the Namibian elections would take place. The two parachute battalions and the supporting elements now began a period of intensive, focused training aimed at preparing them for Operation SKYDART.¹²⁸ The brigade commander and his SO1 Operations held planning sessions and co-ordinating conferences with the SAAF and with the commander of the SA Police Special Task Force. At the time, the SAPS Special Task Force was the only unit trained to release hostages, and this was identified as a likely task during the planned relief of Windhoek. On 23 October 1989, 2 Parachute Battalion reported for a 30-day camp. This made them available for employment over the period just prior to, during and immediately after the Namibian elections.¹²⁹

This force for Operation SKYDART comprised approximately 1,800 soldiers of all ranks.¹³⁰ To transport the airborne elements (in the region of 1,400 troops), the Air Force provided four C-130B Hercules, three C-160Z Transall, two DC-4 Skymaster and seven C-47 Dakota aircraft. Although more transport aircraft were available, there were insufficient crews for them. However, in addition, the civilian Safair Freighters charter organisation was prepared to provide three Lockheed L-100-30 Hercules and a Boeing 707 transport aircraft for air landing troops on condition that there was no chance of them coming under fire on the airport where they landed.¹³¹

The staging airfield for the operation was Upington, which would mean a distance of approximately 750km to Windhoek. It was assumed that SWAPO would block the runways of the two airports with obstacles like parked vehicles, oil drums and rocks, so the initial entry would have to be by parachute and the runways cleared as a priority to allow subsequent landings. As no anti-aircraft weapons other than shoulder-launched SA-7 missiles were anticipated, and SWAPO would have no early warning radar, the SAAF was prepared to carry out the drop in daylight.¹³²

The brigade order for the operation could not be traced in the DOD archives, but based on references in the diary of the brigade commander, the medical support order¹³³

128. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 20 October 1989.

129. Ibid., Entry for 23 October 1989.

130. Top Secret, "Bevelswaardering vir Op MERLYN: Gebeurlikheidsbeplanning vir Ingryping in SWA/Namibië", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/309/4/OP MERLYN, 27 August 1989.

131. Ibid., Appendix A: SAAF Planning Data.

132. Ibid..

133. Top Secret "MEDO 4/89 OPS MERLYN: Gebeurlikheidsbeplanning", Ref. 7 Med Bn Gp/UG/309/4, 12 October 1989.

and data gleaned from authoritative publications,¹³⁴ the following load calculations have been done. The distance involved meant that the Dakota aircraft needed to take off with full fuel tanks, so they were restricted to carrying only 15 paratroopers each. In theory, this meant that the seven Dakotas could transport 105 paratroopers; the seven C-130/160 aircraft, each able to carry 64 paratroopers, could accommodate 448; and one Skymaster could carry 30 free-fallers with their combat equipment. This translated to a total of 583 paratroopers, or a full battalion in one lift. However, in practice some heavy equipment and vehicles had to be dropped from at least three of those aircraft, reducing the number of paratroopers in the first lift to less than 400.

The turnaround time to fetch a second lift of troops from Upington (including time for refuelling) was in the region of three to three-and-a-half hours for the C-130/160 aircraft; six to seven hours for the Skymasters; and seven to eight hours for the Dakotas. This meant that the first lift could be synchronised so that all the aircraft arrived over the DZs at the same time, but that the second lift would have to be staggered over a considerable period of time. A second lift of paratroopers to jump was therefore only feasible should there be resistance on the ground or no urgency in bringing that lift in.

A better option was for the first lift to secure both airports and the second lift could then carry out an air landing, using the Safair aircraft, possibly as little as one hour later. This would be more viable at the J.G. Strijdom Airport, only 40km from the city and easily isolated and cleared. With some vehicles landed by the aircraft and commandeering others at the airport, the troops could then be transported to the city. The L-100-30 Hercules could transport 100 troops or three Ferrets each and the Boeing 707 could accommodate 215 troops, giving a total of 515 in one lift. The turnaround time for the Boeing would be less than two hours, and for the L-100-30 aircraft it would be about four hours.

Because the SAP Special Task Force hostage release team required guides and back-up should their services be needed, it was decided that the Pathfinder Platoon would fulfil this role. Fortunately, as the Task Force policemen were all trained in free-fall parachuting, and as the pathfinders were all qualified tactical free-fallers, they would all be inserted together by means of free-fall. One of the Air Force DC-4 Skymasters was allocated for this

134. J.W.R. Taylor (ed.), *Jane's All the World's Aircraft, 1976-77* (London, Macdonald & Janes, 1976) and J.W.R. Taylor, *Jane's All the World's Aircraft, 1987-88* (London, Macdonald & Janes, 1976); W. Green and G. Swanborough, *The Observer's Basic Military Aircraft Directory* (London, Frederick Warne, 1974); B. Fitzsimonds, (ed.), *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of 20th Century Weapons and Warfare*, Volumes 7 and 12 (New York, Phoebus Publishing, 1971).

purpose. The pathfinders and SAP Task Force policemen trained and did rehearsal jumps together from a Skymaster during the period of 30 October to 1 November 1989.¹³⁵

The plan for the operation involved the dropping of the battalion HQ, one rifle company and support weapon elements of 14 Parachute Battalion Group with the pathfinders and SAP Special Task Force on the western edge of the city. This grouping was to immediately commence movement through the city to the Tintenpalast to retake the seat of administration. The SAP Special Task Force was to be on hand if the administrator-general or others had been taken hostage. A second company would be dropped just south of Eros Airport in the city. They would take and hold the airport. A third company would jump onto the J.G. Strijdom Airport, taking and holding it. The Safair aircraft were then to land with over 400 paratroopers from 2 Parachute Battalion, who would immediately move to Windhoek. The brigade Tac HQ would be in the second Skymaster, circling above Windhoek, monitoring progress on the ground, making decisions where necessary and maintaining a radio link back to Pretoria. As soon as the Eros Airport was secure, this aircraft would land and the Brigade Tac HQ would be established in the control tower. In the meantime, the combat team from 62 Mechanised Battalion Group would drive at speed from Walvis Bay to block the northern road from Windhoek to Ovamboland. Their task would be to cut off any SWAPO elements trying to escape, and to prevent any interference from that quarter. The Boeing would return to Upington to collect the last of the paratroopers, while the C-130/160 and L-100-30 aircraft would bring additional vehicles, other equipment and specialist technical personnel.¹³⁶

It was an ambitious plan, but it was no more complex than the exercises that the brigade had been successfully conducting in the previous few years. If successful, it could secure the capital city within a few hours.

On 1 November the South African Foreign minister, "Pik" Botha, flanked by Defence minister Magnus Malan and Chief of the SADF, Jannie Geldenhuys, called a conference of foreign representatives in Pretoria and announced that the SADF had been placed on alert to intervene in Namibia. The SADF radio intercepts of UNTAG messages, they claimed, had revealed a SWAPO build-up in Angola with the express purpose of invading Namibia to ensure that free and fair elections did not take place. The transmissions that were allegedly

135. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 2 November 1989.

136. Top Secret "MEDO 4/89 OPS MERLYN: Gebeurlikheidsbeplanning", Ref. 7 Med Bn Gp/UG/309/4, 12 October 1989; Alexander, "Operation SKYDART: Contingency Planning for the Relief of Windhoek", Photograph Album: SADF 7 (44 Para Bde 1989); Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entries for October and November 1989.

intercepted were by the Kenyan battalion of UNTAG. According to Geldenhuys, they implied that the Kenyans were to close their eyes to certain dubious activities by SWAPO.¹³⁷ This caused a flurry of diplomatic activity in Windhoek, where the UN Special Representative requested copies of the texts of the intercepts. When these were provided, he had them examined by the UNTAG communications experts in front of the South Africans who had brought them, and they were pronounced to be “crude forgeries”.¹³⁸ Geldenhuys, in his memoirs, flatly denies that the intercepts were forgeries,¹³⁹ while Malan makes no mention of the incident in his memoirs. Geldenhuys claimed that the tapes on which the intercepts had been recorded were accidentally wiped clean and reused, so that only transcripts were available as evidence. Tensions were simmering, but the South African generals no longer had the strong-arm, hard-line power of President P.W. Botha to back them up.

South Africa was undergoing massive political upheaval at the time. The year 1989 was not only pivotal for Namibia; it was the year that State President P.W. Botha, the ultimate hawk, suffered a stroke and was replaced by F.W. de Klerk. Botha had resigned in August and just three weeks later, on 6 September, a general election was held among the white electorate. De Klerk won the election on a platform of fundamental change: that South Africa move towards ending racial discrimination and negotiating a new constitutional dispensation while maintaining law and order. Walter Sisulu of the ANC and other Robben Island political prisoners were released in October.¹⁴⁰ The new president was not a securocrat and according to Hamman, almost immediately began to squeeze the military out of the influential and even controlling position they had held in the government.¹⁴¹ In light of this, the likelihood of South African military adventurism taking place in Namibia was rapidly diminishing.

Whatever the authenticity of the alleged intercepts might have been, the training and rehearsals of the airborne force were briefly interrupted on Friday 3 November 1989 when Major General Georg Meiring, Deputy Chief of the Army, presented national colours to 2 Parachute Battalion at a parade at Murrayhill.¹⁴² During his speech he referred to the possibility of intervention in Namibia if things should go wrong.¹⁴³

137. Geldenhuys, *At the Front*, p. 295.

138. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp. 312–314.

139. Geldenhuys, *At the Front*, pp. 295–296.

140. L’Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 418.

141. Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, pp. 182–184.

142. Programme, 2 Parachute Battalion, Presentation of the National Colours by Maj Gen G.L. Meiring, SSAS, 3 November 1989.

143. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 3 November 1989.

But on 7 November 1989, the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Liebenberg, called an urgent closed meeting of his General Staff and Command Cadre to discuss F.W. de Klerk's pending financial cuts and his decision to reduce conscription from 24 to 12 months. These held huge implications for the SADF. However, he began the meeting by speaking about the embarrassment caused by the intercepted UNTAG messages. While insisting that the messages had indeed been intercepted, he admitted that the SADF had no proof that they had been sent, and claimed that it appeared that the Kenya Battalion of UNTAG may have deliberately deceived the SADF with the messages. Liebenberg went on to say that the De Klerk had intimated that he had no intention of becoming embroiled in any military adventures and that the SADF could expect to be faced with major cutbacks.¹⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the brigade commander, who was present at the meeting, was instructed to continue with his preparations and to maintain his force on a constant state of standby as before, to carry out the operation within 24 hours of being given the go-ahead.¹⁴⁵ That same day, 7 November, the election in Namibia commenced.¹⁴⁶ It was held over a period of five days and SWAPO made no attempt to disrupt the process. But that the military authorities remained suspicious of their former adversaries, both during and particularly after the election, was apparent from another visit by the OC 44 Parachute Brigade to Windhoek on 9 November, while ballots were still being cast, this time to liaise with the SWA police about Operation SKYDART. Also in Windhoek over this time were the Chief of the Army and his Director of Operations.¹⁴⁷

The elections were concluded without major incident, but on 13 November 1989, with not all the results yet known, it was reported on the SABC News in South Africa that SWAPO had called a press conference to complain that the elections were not free and fair, that SWAPO had been disadvantaged and that it reserved the right to make its own judgements once the results were announced. Convinced that this indicated SWAPO's intention to take over the administration by force if they either lost the election or did not gain the two thirds majority necessary to steamroll their own constitution into being, the brigade commander tightened up the standby of his force. He anticipated that SWAPO would wait for the departure of the remaining SADF elements in Namibia before acting (the

144. *Ibid.*, Entry for 7 November 1989.

145. Top Secret "MEDO 4/89 OPS MERLYN: Gebeurlikheidsbeplanning", Ref. 7 Med Bn Gp/UG/309/4, 12 October 1989.

146. EISA (Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa), "Namibia: Independence Elections in 1989", <http://www.content.eisa.org.za/old-page/namibia-independence-elections-1989>.

147. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entries for 9 and 10 November 1989.

SADF had to leave the territory within seven days of the announcement of the final results of the election), but noted his doubts whether F.W. de Klerk would authorise an intervention.¹⁴⁸ Thornberry, writing from the perspective of UNTAG, makes no mention at all of SWAPO's statement or press conference.¹⁴⁹

The final results were made known on 14 November 1989. SWAPO took 57% of the vote, which gave the organisation 41 of the 72 seats in the National Assembly, while its nearest rival, the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), won 21 seats.¹⁵⁰ SWAPO accepted the outcome with euphoria, and this signalled the end of Operation SKYDART – what would have been the biggest airborne operation in South African history. The parachute brigade stood down and less than five months later Namibia was an independent country. It was prophetically noted in the brigade commander's diary: "Perhaps this puts the final nail into the coffin of 'the era of the security forces' in SA politics; the final bowing out of Pretoria's Praetorians?"¹⁵¹

The political changes in South Africa and the new direction that De Klerk was taking had an immediate effect on 44 Parachute Brigade. On 17 November 1989 the brigade commander was instructed to disband 14 Parachute Battalion Group immediately. Within ten days it had been done. The companies were sent back to 1 Parachute Battalion in Bloemfontein, the light artillery battery to Potchefstroom, the engineers to Bethlehem and the anti-aircraft gunners to Kimberley. The potent, balanced and immediately available airborne strike force, after a short lifetime of barely 18 months, disappeared.¹⁵² Similarly, 4 Parachute Battalion was disbanded on 31 December 1989.¹⁵³ The transition from a wartime to a peacetime army had truly begun.

As with Operation KWÊVOËL, Operation SKYDART would probably never have taken place, because the political risks in this case would have simply been too high. An aggressive intervention in a country where the UN was supervising the independence process would have been seen as inexcusable by the international community and would have set South Africa back by a decade or more (not to mention providing an excuse for counter-intervention by other countries because of the international outrage it would have caused). Although the SADF leadership was probably anticipating that there might be a repeat of the

148. *Ibid.*, Entry for 13 November 1989.

149. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp. 329–333.

150. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

151. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 14 November 1989.

152. *Ibid.*, Entries for 17 and 27 November 1989.

153. *Ibid.*, Entry for 4 November 1989.

UN requesting SADF help to stabilise the situation, as happened with the 1 April incursion by SWAPO, this was highly unlikely at the time of the election. UNTAG was firmly in place and whether SWAPO was planning a coup or not, its support among Namibians was such that serious analysts had no doubt that SWAPO would win the election.

Nevertheless, seen from a military viewpoint, the parachute brigade, reinforced by the single mechanised combat team from Walvis Bay, certainly had the means to carry out the operation. There was no significant threat to the transport aircraft and SWAPO had no heavy weapons in Windhoek to deploy against the paratroopers. The DZs were carefully reconnoitred and the terrain over which the paratroopers were to operate was known in detail. Street maps and aerial photos were available and paratroopers fighting on foot were ideally suited for such an urban operation. The forces involved were well trained, had rehearsed and were highly motivated. From a military point of view, taking Windhoek would have been a strategically astute move in terms of re-establishing South African control over the territory – but it would have been politically disastrous, giving those opposed to the apartheid government *cause célèbre* to mobilise world opinion and possibly even invite UN military action against South Africa. Nevertheless, given the time and distance constraints, an airborne force was the only way to undertake a strategic operation such as this. No other force could have acted as effectively within those limitations and the plan was an absolute validation of the strategic value of an airborne force.

Just after midnight on Wednesday 21 March 1990, Namibia became an independent state. The South African paratroopers had been carrying out operations in the territory or launching them there for 23 years, but that was henceforth in the realms of history. Yet the paratroopers remained active and even as Namibia achieved its independence another, far smaller operation was being planned on the other side of the continent.

12.5. TURBULENT NEIGHBOURS: CONTINGENCY FOR A RESCUE MISSION IN MAPUTO

On 15 March 1990, the OC 44 Parachute Brigade was summoned to Blenny, the underground complex that housed the SA Army's Directorate of Operations. The new Director of Operations, Brigadier Chris Serfontein, informed Colonel Alexander that he had been appointed commander of a force to be prepared for intervention in Maputo, Mozambique. As a result of on-going instability in that country, it was deemed necessary to

make contingency arrangements to extract the South African diplomats and officials who were stationed in Maputo, as well as their families.¹⁵⁴

At the time Mozambique was embroiled in a civil war between the forces of the FRELIMO government and the rebel RENAMO movement. The economic situation in the country was dire. South African Military Intelligence reported increasing internal unrest, with protest actions and strikes taking place from January 1990 and protesters plundering the Maputo market on 12 March. Both harbour workers and teachers were striking because they had not been paid. There was tension reported between the Mozambican Armed Forces (FAM) and the Border Guard (TGF).¹⁵⁵ The instability that this created was seen as posing a threat to the small contingent of South Africans stationed in the capital. Although the relationship between Mozambique and South Africa was at best brittle, it had improved to the point where an official, though low profile South African trade mission had been established in Maputo. The South African officials included a total of 28 people (including 16 women and children) from the departments of Foreign Affairs, National Intelligence, Internal Affairs, Trade and Industry, Customs and Excise and the SADF. A contingency plan known as JACKTREE had been in place for some time,¹⁵⁶ but the Chief of the SADF, concerned about reports of increasing unrest in Maputo, had instructed the Chief of the Army to update it urgently.¹⁵⁷

The OC 44 Parachute Brigade was informed that no specific enemy had been identified, but that anyone who opposed his actions should be regarded as enemy. The Mozambican government was not seen in this light so no air threat was envisaged. The contingency plan was renamed Operation OVERCAST.¹⁵⁸ In the guidelines received by the OC of the brigade it was stressed that combat with any forces on the ground should as far as possible be avoided and the focus was to be the safe evacuation of the South African civilians. He was to make provision for the evacuation of personnel from the missions of other countries too, if this was approved at a political level. It was emphasised that the decision to carry out the operation would be made at a political level because of its

154. Thornberry, *A Nation is Born*, pp. 369–370. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 15 March 1990.

155. DOD, CS Ops (7A), Box 8, Top Secret HS OPS/304/1/3 OP OVERCAST Vol. 1, Encl. 18, Appx A to “Op Instr 7/90: Gebeurlikheidsplan OVERCAST”, Ref. H LEËR/D OPS/UG/304/1/3 OVERCAST, 16 March 1990.

156. *Ibid.*, Encl. 7, “Gebeurlikheidsplan: JACKTREE”, Ref. H LEËR/D OPS/UG/304/1/3 JACKTREE, 2 October 1989.

157. *Ibid.*, Encl. 9, Fax CS Ops to C Army 31, Ref. HS OPS/304/1/3 JACKTREE, 13 March 1990.

158. *Ibid.*, Encl. 16, “Hoof van die Leër Bevelswaardering: Gebeurlikheidsplan OVERCAST”, Ref. H LEËR/D OPS/UG/304/1/3 OVERCAST, 15 March 1990.

sensitivity and implications.¹⁵⁹ By then the special forces from 4 Reconnaissance Regiment (Seaborne) had already begun preliminary actions in support of the operation, including a reconnaissance of the area in Maputo and the provision of a protection team for the Trade Mission.¹⁶⁰

An operational planning cycle was conducted by the brigade commander over the period 15 to 22 March 1990, with his brigade staff and officers from Army HQ, the Air Force, Navy, Medical Services, Military Intelligence, Special Forces, 1 Parachute Battalion, 1 SA Infantry Battalion, the SAP Special Task Force and even the deputy head of the SA Trade Mission in Maputo.¹⁶¹ Medical planning by the airborne 7 Medical Battalion Group received particular attention because of the provision made for the envisaged civilian evacuees.¹⁶² Alexander's force comprised 62 Mechanised Battalion Group (minus two companies) and a battalion Tac HQ and two companies as well as a pathfinder platoon from 1 Parachute Battalion. The Air Force component consisted of six Puma helicopters, three Super Frelon helicopters, a Hercules C-130 airborne CP, two Hercules C-130 aircraft for a parachute reserve; one Boeing 707 for Electronic Warfare, a Dakota C-47 for tactical air supply, a light aircraft as a Telstar radio relay and an unspecified number of Impala strike aircraft for CAS, if needed. The Naval component that would stand by offshore comprised two strike craft and a replenishment ship with a fully equipped hospital. The special forces had additional elements on board the Naval vessels, including four Barracuda boats with crews, while the SAP Special Task Force provided two six-man hostage release teams. All elements were supported by 7 Medical Battalion Group.¹⁶³

The South African nationals at the Trade Mission in Maputo were now given as 32 (10 women, 10 children and 12 men). It was envisaged, in addition, that up to 200 other South Africans as well as diplomats from other foreign missions in the city might request evacuation too.¹⁶⁴

159. Ibid., Encl. 31, "Op Instr 7/90: Gebeurlikheidsplan OVERCAST", Ref. H LEËR/D OPS/UG/304/1/3 OVERCAST, 16 March 1990.

160. DOD, CS Ops (7A), Box 8, Secret HS OPS/304/1/3 OP OVERCAST Vol. 1, Encl. 57, BG SM/UG/ 304/1/3/OVERCAST, "Koördinerings Op OVERCAST by Spes Magte HK", 3 March 1990; Encl. 39, BGSM/UG/304/1/3/OVERCAST, Special Forces "Waarskuwingsinstruksie: Operasie OVERCAST", 20 March 1990.

161. M. Alexander, "Contingency Planning: Operation OVERCAST March 1990", Photograph Album, SADF 8 (44 Para Bde 1990); Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entries for 15–22 March 1990.

162. DOD, CS Ops (7A), Box 8, Top Secret HS OPS/304/1/3 OP OVERCAST Vol. 1, Encl. 48, "Mediese Plan Operasie OVERCAST: Gebeurlikheidsbeplanning", Ref. GG(3)/UG/304/1/3, 27 March 1990.

163. Top Secret "Contingency Op Plan 1/90: Op OVERCAST", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/UG/304/1/OVERCAST, 29 March 1990.

164. Top Secret Contingency Plan Comd Appreciation: Op OVERCAST, Ref. 44 PARA BDE/TS/304/1/OVERCAST, 19 March 1990.

The plan that was drawn up entailed the positioning of two or three special forces soldiers in Maputo at the SA Trade Mission to ensure that personnel would be properly controlled and that helicopter LZs would be identified and manned in the event of a crisis developing. The two companies of paratroopers from 1 Parachute Battalion would be positioned at Mkuze in Northern Natal, together with six Puma and three Super Frelon helicopters, a hostage release team from the SAP Special Task Force and the necessary medical support. In the vicinity of Komatipoort there would be a mechanised combat team from 62 Mechanised Battalion Group. The OC 44 Parachute Brigade would man the joint Tac HQ at Mkuze airfield, with the C-130 airborne CP on standby on the airfield.

In the event of the situation deteriorating to the level where the political decision was made to evacuate the Trade Mission personnel, the brigade commander and the Air Force commander would take off in the airborne CP and control the operation from the air. At the same time, the Boeing 707 would take off from AFB Waterkloof to commence electronic jamming and interception of radio nets. One platoon of paratroopers and the policemen earmarked for the rescue would take off at night from Mkuze in the Puma helicopters and would be flown to the Trade Mission complex just north of Maputo. The remainder of the paratrooper company would at the same time move with the three Super Frelon helicopters to the vicinity of Kosi Bay, right next to the Mozambique border, where they would establish a forward HAA and stand by for further deployment. The reserve company of paratroopers would wait at Mkuze airfield, ready for deployment by parachute or helicopter, should the situation require it. The pathfinder platoon would be on standby at AFB Waterkloof for deployment on emergency combat search and rescue tasks, for which they could be parachuted into the area where they would be needed.¹⁶⁵

The Special Forces operators were to guide the helicopters of the rescue force onto the LZs and the paratroopers would secure and hold the complex. If necessary, the police would then carry out any hostage release actions. The rescued civilians would be flown to the HAA back across the border, accompanied by a stick of paratroopers for protection. The helicopters would then return to pick up the remaining paratroopers, police hostage release teams and special forces and fly them back to South Africa, with the whole operation

165. Top Secret "Contingency Op Plan 1/90: Op OVERCAST", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/UG/304/1/OVERCAST, 29 March 1990.

complete before daybreak. Although there was no envisaged air threat, it was decided that the operation should preferably take place at night.¹⁶⁶

Should anything go wrong, the short distances involved made it feasible for the mechanised combat group to intervene by forcing its way through to the Trade Mission complex, linking up with any beleaguered paratroopers and civilian personnel, and extracting them overland. There would also be Impala strike aircraft on standby, should there be a counter-attack by armoured or mechanised forces. Lastly, a Naval element, with two additional helicopters on board the *SAS Tafelberg*, would be standing by off the coast of Mozambique. Evacuees could therefore be flown to the HAA, the *SAS Tafelberg* or Komatipoort. In the event of additional civilians needing to be evacuated, the second company of paratroopers and the three Super Frelon helicopters would be tasked with this, and the Pumas could return for subsequent evacuation flights.¹⁶⁷

The plan was presented to and approved by the Army's Director of Operations on Friday 23 March 1990.¹⁶⁸ A request was made by the Army for a clandestine reconnaissance of Maputo to be carried out by the parachute brigade commander, the commander of the SAAF's 17 Squadron (Puma helicopters) and the commander of the SAP Special Task Force.¹⁶⁹ However, no record could be found of this having taken place.

Operation OVERCAST, like Operations KWËVOËL and SKYDART, was never executed. The need for the contingency appears to have receded and ultimately disappeared because the situation in Maputo stabilised. But the plan and the circumstances that prompted it are a clear example of the strategic value of a vertical envelopment manoeuvre using paratroopers transported by helicopters to carry out a rescue and evacuation mission. It had to be approved at the highest political level; it would have had an impact on international relations and if successfully executed, would have showed South Africa's ability to protect its interests and citizens in a neighbouring country. Snatching the official representatives from the midst of a chaotic situation would have been seen not only as a military achievement, but as the confirmation of a strategic intervention capability.

166. Top Secret Contingency Plan Comd Appreciation: Op OVERCAST, Ref. 44 PARA BDE/TS/304/1/OVERCAST, 19 March 90.

167. Top Secret "Contingency Op Plan 1/90: Op OVERCAST", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/UG/304/1/OVERCAST, 29 March 1990.

168. Diary of OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 23 March 1990.

169. DOD, CS Ops (7A), Box 8, Top Secret HS OPS/304/1/3 OP OVERCAST Vol. 1, Encl. 50, Chief of the Army (D Ops) to Chief of the SADF (Ops Division), "Op OVERCAST: Request to Perform a Reconnaissance in Maputo", Ref. C ARMY/D OPS/ TS/304/1/3 OVERCAST, 10 April 1990; Encl. 65, Chief of the Army to Chief of Staff Intelligence, "Verkenning vir Gebeurlikheidsbeplanning: Maputo", Ref. H LEËR/D OPS/UG/520/4/7 29 November 1990.

Only an airborne force would have been able to carry out such an operation. Time was of the essence, and any other means of evacuation would simply have taken too long. The airborne insertion would have been a stiletto operation – rapidly in, rapidly out, with minimum collateral damage. Had it been necessary to resort to the employment of the standby mechanised force, it would have become a cudgel operation, bludgeoning its way through a heavily built-up urban area and conceivably causing damage that would have had material and diplomatic repercussions. The planned operation exemplified the altering role and emphasis of the armed forces in a rapidly changing political climate. No longer were aggressive military offensives the most likely task of an airborne force; instead their unique capabilities could be harnessed to execute the vertical envelopment manoeuvre in carrying out rescue missions in the often-unstable situations elsewhere on the African continent. Under the new democratic dispensation, as South Africa became increasingly involved in Peace Support Operations (PSO) in Africa under the auspices of the UN and AU, this became even more apparent.

12.6. A LOST CAUSE: EXERCISING AT BRIGADE LEVEL

Military forces, however, are not maintained just for rescue and evacuation tasks. Waging war in defence of the country remains their *raison d'être*. And training for this should occupy most of their time. The contingency planning and rehearsals as the war ended, interrupted the programme of exercises that 44 Parachute Brigade followed. Between 1988 and 1990, the focus was on the amphibious role and preparing for the three cancelled operations outlined above. Although there was no longer a need for amphibious training, the primary role of preparing for airborne operations continued to receive priority at the brigade.

In the period June/July 1990 the brigade called up 3 Parachute Battalion Group for a 12-day camp. This was specifically to participate in Exercise IRON EAGLE 90.¹⁷⁰ It was a continuation of the battalion group exercises that commenced in 1987 and entailed a night parachute drop, first light attack, occupying of defensive positions and warding off of a counter-attack.¹⁷¹ Held at the training area adjacent to the brigade base at Murrayhill, the exercise was preceded by a full daylight rehearsal before it took place as a night action.¹⁷²

170. Information Leaflet, 44 Parachute Brigade: "Exercise IRON EAGLE 90", 2 July 1990.

171. Confidential "Bevelswaardering vir Oef YSTERAREND 90 (Lugstormoefening te Murrayhill)", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/308/1/1/YSTERAREND 90, 8 March 1990.

172. M. Alexander, "Exercise IRON EAGLE 90, 26 June–4 July 1990", Photo Album: SADF 8 (44 Para Bde 1990).

On the night of 1 July a group of 12 special forces commandos, acting as pathfinders, carried out a night free-fall insertion from a Dakota aircraft flying at 12,000 feet (3720m) AGL.¹⁷³ The next night the drop of the main force took place. Using ten aircraft (two Hercules C-130s, two Transall C-160s and six Dakota C-47s) a total of more than 560 troops were dropped, as well as four Ferret armoured vehicles, 18 Jakkals jeeps, a Miskruier fork lift combat tractor and about 20 tonnes of ammunition and other miscellaneous items of equipment and weaponry. The total air supply effort was 70 tonnes of cargo. Three lifts were required to get the entire force onto the ground, staging from AFB Waterkloof. By first light the whole force had formed up 12km away from the DZ and an attack was launched on a simulated enemy regimental HQ. It was the largest airborne night exercise ever held by the SADF.¹⁷⁴

The exercise was attended by the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Georg Meiring, who observed the marshalling at AFB Waterkloof, was on the DZ during the dropping of the first lift, slept the night in the field with the brigade commander and his staff and witnessed the first light attack.¹⁷⁵ It was the first time any South African Army Chief had attended a full airborne exercise of this nature and he later remarked to his General Staff on the phenomenal amount of sustained firepower delivered by the paratroopers on the objective.¹⁷⁶ It was a highly successful exercise, showing the ability of the paratroopers to carry out a battalion group airborne assault at night, with heavy support weapons and light vehicles. However, the shortcoming remained the shortage of sufficient suitable transport aircraft.¹⁷⁷

Numerous media reporters and foreign military attachés were present to witness it¹⁷⁸ and the exercise received wide media coverage,¹⁷⁹ including broadcasts on national TV. Exercise IRON EAGLE 90 was a clear example of an independent airborne operation, emphasising the strategic potential of paratroops. But the brigade also exercised the tactical

173. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entries for 30 June and 2 July 1990.

174. Ibid., Entry for 2 July 1990.

175. C. van der Berg, "Parachute Force Shows its Magnitude: Massive Exercise was a Success", *Uniform*, August 1990.

176. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 6 July 90; "Exercise Iron Eagle: Firepower, Mobility and Surprise", *Armed Forces*, August 1990.

177. Confidential Debriefing Minutes: "Notule van 44 Valskermbrigade Eenheids-Nabetragting: Oefening YSTERAREND 90", Unreferenced and undated.

178. C. Kotze, "400 Parabats, 24 Vehicles Drop out of the Dark", *Star*, 3 July 1990.

179. D. Lamprecht, "On a Wing and a Prayer...", *Pretoria News*, 4 July 1990; "Staal Getoon in Ysterarend", *Volksblad*, 4 July 1990; "SAW begin Oefening Ysterarend by Pta", *Beeld*, 3 July 1990; C. Kotze, "Mighty SADF Parabats Still Pack a Punch", *Star*, 5 July 90; H. van Blerk, Nagaanval op die Vyand : Valskermsoldate hou Oefening", *Transvaler*, 4 July 1990; "Parabats Show Muscle", *Gerbera*, August 1990; and N. Bissekler, "Parabats Jump into Action", *Paratus*, August 1990

role of paratroops in support of other ground forces. At the Army Battle School near Lohattha in the Northern Cape there were exercises with other conventional units and formations. These included the SWEEPSLAG and EXCALIBUR series of exercises. In 1988, as part of Exercise SWEEPSLAG II/88, the newly established 14 Parachute Battalion Group had carried out a night drop with heavy equipment after a 500km flight from Pretoria, followed by assaults on several objectives and the occupation of a bridgehead.¹⁸⁰ The whole battalion group was dropped in two lifts, using C-130/160 and Dakota aircraft. It was the first time a complete national service parachute battalion group had been employed in an exercise.¹⁸¹

In all these exercises the paratroopers were placed under operational command of other conventional HQs. They were used in support of mechanised conventional forces to facilitate their advance during an exercise. The paratrooper tasks included the occupation of defiles, the establishment of bridgeheads across rivers, deception drops to distract the enemy and attacks on lightly defended localities on the periphery of the main operations. There was no question of independent action, no role for the parachute brigade HQ and unfortunately, little imagination in the employment of the paratroops. Generally, they were employed within supporting range of ground forces' artillery and the battalion group requirement was lost as they were reduced to a purely infantry role. Seen in the larger picture, although there is without any doubt a place for the employment of paratroopers in such roles, the undue emphasis given to this by the rest of the Army to the detriment of the strategic airborne capability was a retrograde step for the airborne forces.

The ultimate intention at 44 Parachute Brigade was to build up its capability to the point where it could function as a brigade in the field, and between 27 September and 3 October 1990 a skeleton brigade exercise was conducted. The area chosen for the exercise was the missile range at St Lucia on the coast of northern Natal, and it was dubbed Exercise LEVIATHAN.¹⁸² Deployed for the exercise were the brigade HQ, two skeleton battalions provided by 1 and 2 Parachute Battalions, a skeleton artillery regiment provided by 18 Light Regiment, an anti-aircraft troop from 44 Anti-Aircraft Regiment and an engineer troop from 44 Parachute Engineer Regiment. In addition, there were signallers and a logistic echelon

180. Confidential "44 Valskermbrigade: Nabetragtingsverslag: Oef SWEEPSLAG 2/88", Ref. H LEËR/D OPL/308/3/2 SWEEPSLAG 2/88, 26 April 1989; Bound volume 44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure, Appx A to "A Concise History of the South African Parachute Forces", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1.

181. Confidential "Debriefing Report: Exercise SWEEPSLAG 2/88", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/308/3/2/SWEEPSLAG 2/88, 22 December 1988.

182. Confidential "Command Appreciation: Ex LEVIATHAN 90", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/308/1/LEVIATHAN, 17 August 1990.

system, all provided by the units within the brigade. There were also a MAOT from the Air Force and a Mobile Naval Operations Team (MNOT) from the Navy.¹⁸³ The intention was to carry out an airborne infiltration assault using helicopters and parachute descents on a simulated enemy brigade HQ and logistic elements behind the lines with two battalions, supported by airborne artillery, air strikes and Naval gunfire.¹⁸⁴

A Brigade Administrative Area was set up at Dukuduku airfield south of Lake St Lucia and using Super Frelon helicopters the whole force, excluding the artillery, was shuttled out into the dense forest between the lake and the coast. This included a number of Jakkals command jeeps, fitted for radio, for use by the brigade HQ and the two battalion HQs. There were also Jakkals jeeps with trailers for transporting engineer equipment and others for towing the 20mm anti-aircraft guns. The Super Frelon, flying as it was at virtually sea level, could lift 27 fully equipped troops or two Jakkals vehicles with trailers. The next night the force moved out of the forest, guided by a special forces team that had been in the area for several days. The engineers then erected a pulley mechanism with a platform for crossing over a channel between the lake and a marsh to the north of the main body of water. The vehicles and guns were all transported across the channel by means of this pulley system and the advance continued in the dark through clouds of mosquitoes and light rain.¹⁸⁵

The two battalions took up positions under cover of the bushes at dawn, while the brigade HQ and other troops moved into their own positions. They all lay low through the day and during the next night the skeleton artillery regiment was flown into the area by three C-130 and C-160 aircraft to drop directly onto their selected gun positions so that they could provide supporting fire during the dawn attack. At dawn an air strike on the objective by four Impala aircraft had to be postponed because of heavy mist, which eventually cleared to allow a bombardment to take place by four Naval strike craft just off the coast, using their 76mm guns. The Impalas were then called in to do their strike. As the two battalions launched their attack, the artillery provided fire support with 120mm mortars. The fires of the Air Force, Navy and Army were all controlled from a fire support co-ordination centre at

183. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 26 September 1990.

184. Confidential "Command Appreciation: Ex LEVIATHAN 90", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/308/1/LEVIATHAN, 17 August 1990.

185. M. Alexander, "Exercise LEVIATHAN (Skeleton Brigade), St Lucia, 24 September–3 October 1990", Photograph Album: SADF 8 (44 Para Bde 1990).

the brigade Tac HQ. After taking the objective, the battalions were withdrawn and the artillery commenced an extended day and night firing exercise with the Naval strike craft.¹⁸⁶

The Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Georg Meiring and the Inspector General of the Army, Major General Hennie Roux, as well as various other staff officers attended the exercise. They slept under the bushes with the paratroopers and some of them marched the 38km through swamps and forests.¹⁸⁷ Unfortunately, bad weather adversely affected much of the exercise; yet it had successfully shown that a brigade-sized airborne operation was feasible. However, once again, the shortage of suitable aircraft had been glaringly obvious. It was the last time the Super Frelon helicopters were utilised for an exercise before they were withdrawn from service at the end of 1990.¹⁸⁸

The airborne forces of the SADF reached a significant capability level; but it was also the crest of the wave. From there onwards, there was an increasing downward spiral. The end of the war, the demise of the securocrats in the South African government, the rapidly changing political landscape, the termination of conscription, the drastic reduction of the defence budget and the disbandment of the full-time parachute battalion group all contributed to a marked decrease in the airborne capability. There were no more airborne exercises at brigade level.

12.7. DEDUCTIONS

The three operations discussed in this chapter were all ultimately cancelled on political, not military grounds. The political decisions have not been interrogated in any detail here, as it is the military capability that is being investigated. The operations were all approved as militarily viable, and have been used in this thesis to illustrate the value of a balanced, flexibly composed airborne force in achieving a strategic aim in three entirely different situations.

In the first, the SADF faced a formidable and superior conventional Cuban force. But 44 Parachute Brigade planned a combined airborne and amphibious strike on the harbour of Namibe that would have cut off the Cuban logistic sustainment at its vital choke-point. The raid by a parachute battalion group would have caused physical paralysis and psychological dislocation, gaining the initiative for the SADF and restoring to it the balance of power on

186. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entries for 2 and 3 October 1990.

187. Alexander: "Exercise LEVIATHAN", Photograph Album: SADF 8 (44 Para Bde 1990).

188. D. Becker, *75 Years on Wings of Eagles: South African Military Aviation History* (Pretoria, South African Air Force, 1995), p. 141.

the battlefield. In the second, the SADF perceived a danger of a coup d'état by SWAPO in Windhoek to derail the elections. The counter-action planned by 44 Parachute Brigade involved an airborne operation with two battalions to restore the situation. In the third operation, the possibility of having to rescue South African diplomats from conditions of civil unrest and mayhem in Maputo led to 44 Parachute Brigade planning an airborne evacuation at night, using two companies of paratroopers and helicopters.

Embodied in these three plans is the application of the principles of surprise, shock action, the indirect approach and striking at the *schwerpunkt*, or centre of gravity. Within the restricted timeframes, the distances involved and the terrain, only an airborne force could have carried out these operations. This recognition of the strategic value of an airborne force lent an urgency to the creation of a parachute battalion group that could be used as the Chief of the Army's Reserve, to be deployed at short notice, over long distances to any place where a crisis emerged. But changing circumstances and the perennial personality clashes among senior paratrooper commanders led to its disbandment at the end of 1989. With that, the South African Army lost its first and only immediately available balanced airborne force.

A high standard of airborne and amphibious expertise had been built up by 44 Parachute Brigade on the technical and tactical levels, and its headquarters was primed to function on the operational level to carry out strategic missions. This expertise burgeoned just as South Africa was entering the most portentous period of its history and the paratroopers were already feeling the chill wind of change and uncertainty sweeping across the country.

CHAPTER 13

INTERNAL OPERATIONAL EMPLOYMENT AND LESOTHO INCURSION: NADIR OF THE STRATEGIC AIRBORNE CONCEPT

Because this final research chapter deals with the most recent period covered in the thesis, archival material to verify certain aspects or to obtain accurate details of dates and locations was not generally accessible. Classified documents for most of this period remain closed. However, some original documents were traced and where possible use was made of diaries, personal interviews and correspondence with participants. Considerable use has been made, particularly in the second half of the chapter, of secondary sources, such as newspaper reports, other published accounts and a variety of miscellaneous documents, as well as sources from the Internet. It is nevertheless essential to the thesis that this period of transition is included because it portrays the effect of the momentous political, economic and social changes of the 1990s on the South African airborne forces. This chapter concludes the narrative by showing how democratisation influenced the airborne forces of South Africa within the greater organisational and doctrinal changes experienced by the Defence Force. It also gives some indication of the how residual thinking from the apartheid mindset in the period of the Thirty Year War, clashed with the concept of defence in a democratic South Africa, and the effect this had on the airborne capability's likely tactical or strategic employment.

13.1. INTRODUCTION

In a sense, the end of the war in Angola and Namibia heralded a crisis of identity for the paratroopers. There was no more fire force at Ondangwa for 1 Parachute Battalion; there were no more contingencies for 44 Parachute Brigade to plan for. More than two decades of NP propaganda about the war suddenly disappeared. Who was the enemy now? Where would the threat come from? What would be the role of the airborne forces? *Quo vadis*, the South African paratroopers?

It was clear that the new president of South Africa, F.W. de Klerk, was taking the country on a far different course than that charted by his predecessor. The appointment of a civilian as the new Defence minister in 1991 caused a shudder of uncertainty throughout the SADF. General Magnus Malan had been the political head of the SADF for more than a decade and before that he was its military chief. But besides the political changes, there was a drastic cut in the defence budget. A stark awareness of new priorities took hold as the organisation of the SADF was transformed to conform to the reduced budget and the

operational focus shifted to dealing with the seething internal unrest in the country.¹ Organisationally, on 18 June 1990, Project READHEAD commenced, to re-design the entire Army for the next 20 years, based on the new economic and operational realities.² This had pivotal consequences for the paratroopers. Response to the internal unrest was manifested in increased military support to the police in a land that was burning.

In this chapter the internal deployments of the paratroopers on so-called township duties, leading to an attempt at urban airborne operations, are examined. The establishment of a so-called rapid deployment force (RDF) at the time of the move by the parachute brigade back to Bloemfontein is then considered to establish its impact on the eventual loss of the strategic airborne capability. An analysis is also made of the effect on the paratroopers of the integration of armed forces during the formation of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) with the advent of democracy in 1994. Finally, a review of the airborne part of the incursion into Lesotho in 1998 and the eventual downgrading of the parachute brigade to a regiment, brings the thesis to a conclusion.

13.2. STRIFE AND CONFLICT IN SOUTH AFRICA: INTERNAL DEPLOYMENTS AND THE EAGLE FORCE

Even before the end of South Africa's involvement in the war in Angola and Namibia, internal unrest had seen the paratroopers being deployed from time to time on what became known among the troops as "township duty". They were also deployed internally in certain of the rural areas and as early as 1981 a company from 1 Parachute Battalion was deployed during the independence ceremonies held in the Ciskei. They carried out two parachute drops from C-130 aircraft as part of a show of force, and conducted patrols through the urban areas. There were also two Super Frelon helicopters on hand for rapid reaction, should it prove necessary.³ It was a portent of things to come.

Beinart regards the period from late 1984 to early 1986 as the turning point for the apartheid state.⁴ The growing political mobilisation of the masses in South Africa, fuelled by economic recession and the angry rejection by black people of the government's new tri-cameral parliament in 1983, led to the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and

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1. Confidential document, "Bevelswaardering: Korttermyn Brigade Beplanning 1991/1992/1993", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/301/2, 16 September 1991; SADF, *Suid-Afrikaanse Oorsig/South African Defence Force Review, 1991* (Durban, Walker-Ramus on behalf of the SADF, 1992), pp. 107–115.
 2. Confidential document "Projek READHEAD: Rasionalisasie van die SA Leër", Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/502/1/1 READHEAD, August 1990.
 3. Telephonic interview, Col Vion Hattingh (who commanded the company), Pretoria, 3 March 2015.
 4. W. Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 234.

widespread insurrection.⁵ This was the prelude to real change. For the paratroopers, it meant increasing deployments internally, to suppress the unrest. This was a far cry from the airborne operations they had been trained for. Internal Security (IS) duties are invariably distasteful for soldiers, particularly in an urban environment,⁶ and the paratroopers were no exception in this regard.

But the situation in the country was dire, and the police were unable to handle it on their own. They were under-staffed and under-resourced.⁷ It was unavoidable, given the state of emergency that was introduced, that the SADF would have to assist the police internally. In the words of L'Ange:

The partial state of emergency that had first been imposed for five months in 1960 and again on a smaller scale for eight months in 1985, was renewed in June 1986 for the full year allowed by the law, and applied to the whole country except the Bantustans. Thereafter it became a feature of life in the country for the next four years, being renewed every year until June 1990, when it was extended for five months in Natal only.⁸

Increasingly, from 1984 onwards, the parachute battalions of 44 Parachute Brigade and the companies of 1 Parachute Battalion were now being deployed internally, either to patrol the borders with Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique as part of Operation PEBBLE, to do IS duties in the turbulent black townships (Operations PONCHO and XENON) or in the rural homelands (Operation WINDMEUL).⁹ It was certainly not the sort of work that the elite paratroopers relished. The deployment of 4 Parachute Battalion as part of Operation PEBBLE along the border with Zimbabwe and Botswana for several months in both 1986 and 1987 epitomised these often frustrating periods of duty.¹⁰ Their operational activities were now mainly centred on patrols to prevent illegal immigrants from the adjoining countries from entering South Africa. Occasionally, the boredom was relieved

5. G. L'Ange, *The White Africans: From Colonisation to Liberation* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2005), pp. 386 and 388; Beinart, *Twentieth-Century SA*, pp. 229–230 and 236.

6. F. Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency Peace-keeping* (London, Faber & Faber, 1971), pp. 200–201. Kitson, in his classic and widely acknowledged study, sets out the reluctance of some officers to approach counter-insurgency operations of this nature with sufficient earnestness, largely because of their training and resultant mindset. The specific reluctance of SANDF soldiers is reflected in D. Williams, *On the Border, 1965–1990 The White South African Military Experience, 1965–1990* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2008), pp. 93–95.

7. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2003), p. 624.

8. L'Ange, *The White Africans*, p. 412.

9. SANDF Archives (hereafter DOD), 1 Para Bn, Unit History File/Annual Historical Reports for 1985, 1986, 1987 and 1988; Bound volume 44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure, "A Concise History of the South African Parachute Forces", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1, 1 November 1991.

10. War Diary, 4 Para Bn, Soutpansberg Military Area, 4 September–30 October 1986 and 8–30 October 1987.

when a mine planted on a lonely farm road was discovered.¹¹ These were the work of the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), but there were no direct confrontations between the paratroopers and MK, because these cadres would disappear back across the border immediately after planting a mine.

By the end of 1990 the situation was so dire that more infantry companies were being deployed on operations inside South Africa than had ever been deployed at any one time in the Namibian/Angolan war.¹² For 44 Parachute Brigade this was manifested by the deployment of even its non-infantry elements in an infantry role for 60-day IS camps. The artillerymen of 18 Light Regiment found themselves deployed as an infantry battalion in KwaNdebele as part of Operation WINDMEUL (windmill). The demands placed on the brigade by Army HQ to provide troops for such deployments eventually compelled it to constitute a composite battalion of technical, maintenance, signals and other logistic personnel for deployment as infantry in Soweto as part of Operation XENON.¹³

And yet Project READHEAD, faced with the continuing budget cuts, was recommending reducing the size of the SADF. The six other brigade HQs in the SA Army were disbanded, retaining only the divisional HQs. The paratroopers now had the only remaining brigade HQ, but they too, were to be rationalised. On 9 February 1991 the OC 44 Parachute Brigade announced to his unit commanders that the brigade HQ was to amalgamate with 1 Parachute Battalion in order to cut down on staff, and that the OC 1 Parachute Battalion's post would be downgraded to the rank of commandant. This meant that the brigade HQ had to move back to Bloemfontein and relinquish all the facilities it had built up at Murrayhill over more than a decade.¹⁴

The negativ operational effect of the disbandment of 14 Parachute Battalion Group was also being felt. It meant the disappearance of the immediately available airborne reserve that could be deployed at short notice for the Chief of the Army. A proposal to the Army's Director of Operations by the OC 44 Parachute Brigade on 20 September 1990, suggesting that in exchange for not scheduling any of the CF units of the brigade for IS

11. War Diary, 4 Para Bn, SMA, 4 September–30 October 1986, Entries for 8 and 9 October 1986, and Incident Log in same diary for period 8–30 October 1987.

12. Secret Commander's Diary, 44 Para Bde, 25 August 1990–22 February 1991, "Bevelswaardering vir Instandhouding van Arendmag (H Leër Valsk Reserwe) op Bystand vir 1991: Op EARDRUM", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/301/3/EARDRUM, 21 November 1990.

13. Bound volume 44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure, "A Concise History of the South African Parachute Forces", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1, 1 November 1991.

14. Restricted "Notule van Bevelvoederskonferensie Gehou te 44 Valskerbrigade Hoofkwartier Murrayhill op 090800B Feb 91", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/BS1/522/1/1, 7 March 1991.

operations he would guarantee a standby force that could be called up at short notice, was accepted.¹⁵ This reserve became known as Eagle Force.¹⁶

Throughout 1991, the brigade ensured the constant availability of a CF skeleton battalion HQ and two parachute companies to report for duty within 72 hours if called up. Special arrangements were put in place to bring them together from every part of the country.¹⁷ This placed a considerable strain on the part-time paratroopers who were holding down full-time jobs. Given the state of political flux in the country, it was not surprising that there was resentment among some of these elite soldiers.¹⁸ It was a very different war and many paratroopers were questioning their own involvement¹⁹ – something that had been rare when they were fighting SWAPO, FAPLA or the Cubans.

Who was the enemy in this situation? In its short-term planning for 1991 this was spelled out by the OC 44 Parachute Brigade as follows:

The unbanning of the ANC, SACP, PAC and other previously illegal organisations has resulted in “the enemy” changing from a specific organisation or organisations, to any organisation, group or individual who promotes or engages in illegal or violent activities which threaten to break down law and order, or to overthrow the government.²⁰

In the meantime, the brigade called up the officers and NCOs of the Eagle Force for a series of weekends of cadre training in preparation for the possibility of the force being activated.²¹

13.3. URBAN AIRBORNE OPERATIONS IN 1991: LIMITED TACTICAL APPLICATION

Operational commitments from before the implementation of the new Eagle Force arrangement still had to be complied with before the end of 1990. One of these involved 2 Parachute Battalion, scheduled for a 60-day deployment in Natal over December 1990 and January 1991.

15. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, entries for 19 and 20 September 1990.

16. Secret Commander's Diary, 44 Para Bde, 25 August 1990–22 February 1991, Secret “Bevelswaardering vir Instandhouding van Arendmag (H Leër Valsk Reserwe) op Bystand vir 1991: Op EARDRUM”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/301/3/EARDRUM, 21 November 1990.

17. Ibid., Secret “Operasie Instruksie 5/90”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/301/3/EARDRUM, 12 December 1990.

18. J.H. Thompson, *An Unpopular War. From Afkak to Bosbefok: Voices of South African National Servicemen* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2006), pp.220–221.

19. J. Delaney with J. Greenough, *Staying Alive: The Paratrooper's Story* (Oxford, Monarch Books, 2004), p. 107.

20. Secret Commander's Diary, 44 Para Bde, 25 August 1990–22 February 1991, Confidential “Command Appreciation: Short-Term Planning for 1991”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/301/1, 18 January 1991.

21. Confidential “Operasieorder 1/91”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/301/3/EARDRUM, 22 January 1991; Confidential “Operasieorder 2/91”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/301/3/EARDRUM, 22 February 1991.

13.3.1. Parachute Drop and Heliborne Insertion North of Durban, January 1991

In an attempt to remain relevant under changing circumstances, the parachute brigade was considering ways and means of using its unique capabilities in the now unfamiliar operational environment. The paratroopers needed to find a new role. The brigade commander instructed his battalion commander, Commandant Stef du Plessis, to look for opportunities during the deployment of 2 Parachute Battalion in Natal for applying vertical envelopment by means of either parachuting or helicopters.²²

For its deployment in the sprawling townships to the north of Durban as part of Operation EARDRUM, the battalion was under operational command of Group 10. With the battalion HQ located at Mount Edgecombe, its constituent companies operated in the KwaMashu, Inanda, Maqaweni, Oakford Priory and Umhloti River areas. Though much of the area was regarded as rural, it had in fact long since ceased to be open countryside. The burgeoning population growth and the incessant flow of people from the KwaZulu homeland to the Durban metropole in search of work had turned these areas into an urban sprawl of squatter communities and crowded hillside slums.²³

In this time of political uncertainty in the country, the soldiers were faced with a sense of ambiguity on the purpose of their deployment. Negotiations between the unbanned ANC and the South African government had begun. When the government agreed to the release of certain political prisoners and lifted of the state of emergency in Natal in August 1990, the ANC announced that it was “now suspending all armed actions with immediate effect”. Yet it later declared that this did not mean that such actions had to be abandoned completely.²⁴ Against whom, then, were the paratroopers to the north of Durban deployed? Paratroopers were trained for a violent contest between belligerents, with a clearly defined enemy opposing them. But exactly who were these enemies, and where were they now?

In effect, the paratroopers found themselves incongruously playing the part of peacekeepers. The conflict between the ANC and its rival in Natal, Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) had reached violent proportions. With the inevitable ending of white rule finally in sight, there was a bitter struggle between these two organisations for the

22. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 9 January 1991.

23. Report by Cmdt S.K. du Plessis, OC 2 Para Bn, “Oorsig Januarie tot 30 Oktober 1991”, October 1991; “A Concise History of the SA Parachute Forces “ (as at 1 September 1991), in Bound volume 44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure, 1991.

24. B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies, *South Africa in the 20th Century* (Pretoria, J.L. van Schaik, 1994), p. 528.

support of the black masses in this province.²⁵ The purpose of the deployment of the security forces (police and military) was given to the paratroopers as “to maintain stability, law and order so that a political settlement [can] ... be reached.”²⁶

The paratroopers carried out foot and vehicle patrols in areas of high tension. Vehicle checkpoints and roadblocks were established, together with police elements, to stop and search suspect vehicles and individuals. Naturally, this did not endear them to the locals; but the soldiers were only engaged if they were seen as coming between the protagonists in the greater struggle for control of the black majority.²⁷ How could airborne actions be relevant in this situation?

The presence of large amounts of illegal light weaponry, much of it homemade and improvised, made the area extremely volatile, and the paratroopers found themselves assisting the police in searches for these weapons. Searches were usually done on the strength of intelligence received by the police, and the task of the paratroopers was generally to form a cordon around the suspect neighbourhood while the police conducted the search through the houses. The paratroopers also provided protective elements for the police while they were searching. But whenever a large convoy of military and police vehicles converged on an area, it was a clear warning that a search was about to be conducted. With their early warning systems in place, the insurgents determined from the roads being used where the convoy was heading. While the vehicles were winding their way through the hills and along the narrow roads and tracks, armed individuals in the community would be warned and the birds had flown by the time the cordons were in position. Few weapons were being recovered, despite huge expense and effort.

The battalion commander then came up with an innovative idea for the application of vertical envelopment to achieve the surprise that was frequently lost during cordon and search operations. By sending only one or two police vehicles out with a handful of policemen to do the searching, suspicions would not be aroused – police vehicles frequently carried out random patrols in the area. The paratroopers could then deploy rapidly at the last minute, without warning, by helicopter. They could then speedily seal off the designated area to be searched, ensuring that no insurgents escaped and that no weapons were removed. But helicopters were very limited in the number of troops they could carry,

25. Beinart, *Twentieth-Century SA*, pp. 248–249 and 256.

26. Secret Commander’s Diary, 44 Para Bde, 25 August 1990–22 February 1991, “Bevelswaardering vir Instandhouding van Arendmag (H Leër Valsk Reserwe) op Bystand vir 1991: Op EARDRUM”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/301/3/EARDRUM, 21 November 1990.

27. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 8 January 1991.

and were in any case rarely available. So Du Plessis decided to insert his troops by parachute.

On 29 January 1991, under the command of Major Richard Breytenbach (son of Colonel Jan Breytenbach), A-Company, 2 Parachute Battalion carried out the first-ever urban operational parachute drop by the SADF.²⁸ It was done at Charlottedale on the Natal North Coast, just south of Stanger (now KwaDukuza). The DZ was an open field, surrounded by shacks and settlements, and the police were waiting on the ground to link up immediately with the paratroopers.²⁹ It was a successful insertion; the local people had no prior inkling of the arrival of troops to assist the police. Several weapons were found (see Appendix 79) and after the search the paratroopers conducted patrols and set up vehicle checkpoints (VCPs) with the police.³⁰ The drop had the added advantage of being a show of strength. Belligerent actions in the area immediately decreased in the period after the surprise drop.³¹

The battalion also carried out a similar airborne operation in the peri-urban areas, but here it used helicopters and a much smaller force of only a platoon.³² Helicopters had many advantages over a parachute insertion: it was not necessary to utilise an airfield for the force to take off, nor was a large open field needed as a DZ adjoining the area to be cordoned off because the helicopters could land in any relatively small clearing; they could also wait nearby to re-position troops at short notice; and recovery of the parachutes was not necessary. But one Puma helicopter could only transport 12 to 16 troops, while a C-130 Hercules could transport 64 paratroopers. Two C-130 aircraft could drop a full company of almost 130 soldiers, while to transport the same number in one lift would require at best eight Puma helicopters. This meant that with the usual availability of only two helicopters, it would require four lifts to get the same number of troops onto the ground. Such shuttling back and forth would totally negate the element of surprise, which was after all the whole reason for an airborne insertion. There were never enough helicopters concentrated at one spot for such an operation, because they were in demand throughout the country.

28. Restricted document, "The Role of the Parachute Battalion Group During Urban Operations", prepared by Cmdt S.K. du Plessis, unreferenced and undated; Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 29 January 1991.

29. Media Release by 2 Para Bn, January 1991.

30. M. Alexander, "South African Airborne Operations", Chapter prepared for publication by Darlington Productions, Inc., November 1995.

31. M. Alexander, "Parachute Infantry: Operational Employment 1960-1994", Document prepared for K. van der Merwe to use in a History of the South African Infantry for the Infantry Association, , 18 April 2002.

32. Restricted document: "The Role of the Parachute Battalion Group During Urban Operations", prepared by Cmdt S.K. du Plessis, unreferenced and undated.

These tentative experiments proved that air mobility could indeed achieve surprise in carrying out urban counter-insurgency operations. At a tactical level, it was an excellent way of sowing uncertainty among insurgents and disrupting them both in terms of their activities as well as psychologically. The potential of vertical envelopment in urban operations gave fresh impetus to the concept of vertical envelopment and to the morale of the paratroopers.

But the problem of finding suitable DZs in built-up areas remained a stumbling block. The brigade commander initiated investigations into the feasibility of utilising the “square” ram-air parachutes used by the pathfinders in free-fall parachuting. His intention was to train ordinary paratroopers to carry out static-line jumping with these parachutes (at the time something not yet done in the military), thereby obviating the problem of free falling, a technique which many otherwise competent paratroopers were unable to master. Such parachute canopies were highly manoeuvrable and could be steered by an experienced jumper into a small DZ such as a soccer field. But opposition from the more conservative, non-airborne officers at Army HQ resulted in a refusal to authorise such experiments.³³ Whether such a technique would have met with success is questionable. Although “square” parachute canopies were subsequently introduced as an advanced form of static-line parachuting, it was only highly trained specialist paratroopers such as the pathfinders or special forces that employed them.

13.3.2. Parachute Drops on Soweto, May and June 1991

The urban airborne approach was developed further when Eagle Force was activated in May 1991. At that stage, 3 Parachute Battalion was responsible for providing the HQ and two companies on stand-by.³⁴ The crucible of conflict had, from 1990 onwards, shifted from Natal to the Witwatersrand. Besides the ongoing virtual civil war between the ANC and Inkatha, there were escalating “taxi wars” over transport routes.³⁵ Violence in the gigantic black urban ghetto of Soweto, just outside Johannesburg, was particularly rife during 1991.³⁶ By the middle of May it was becoming apparent that the local community had lost all

33. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entries for 14 and 16 May 1991.

34. Secret Commander’s Diary, 44 Para Bde, 25 August 1990–22 February 1991, Confidential “Operasieorder 2/91”, Ref. 44 PARA BDE/301/3/EARDRUM, 22 February 1991.

35. Beinart, *Twentieth-Century SA*, p. 256.

36. Liebenberg and Spies (eds), *SA in the 20th Century*, p. 517.

confidence in the SA Police, that the violence was getting out of hand and that drastic action was needed.³⁷

The Army's Director of Operations obtained permission to mobilise Chief of the Army's Reserve: Eagle Force. On Friday 17 May 1991 he tasked the OC 44 Parachute Brigade to call up the paratroopers who were on standby.³⁸ They were to deploy in Soweto for 30 days.³⁹ In the event, it took four days, not three, for all the troops to report, be issued with equipment and weapons and undergo some refresher parachute training. Before they deployed, the brigade commander addressed the paratroopers, and afterwards he recorded:

I gave them what I fancied to be a rather stirring speech, telling them that I fully understood their inconvenience at being called up at such short notice, but that there was a pressing need for them, that their time would not be wasted, nor would they be kept any longer than was absolutely necessary. If only I could believe what I was telling them! I heard one of them mumbling in one of the rear ranks, and I guess I should have immediately placed him under close arrest; but I let it slide.⁴⁰

Their deployment formed part of Operation FAGGOT, and the brigade commander was determined that his troops would not only be used constructively, but would also carry out airborne operations during their deployment. He was begrudgingly granted authority to go ahead.⁴¹

The troops were placed under the operational command of Group 42. Although himself not a part of the deployment, the brigade commander identified a major gathering at the First National Bank Stadium, that was due to take place on Sunday 26 May 1991, as an excellent opportunity to broadcast the arrival of the paratroopers in the township by means of a mass parachute jump. The occasion was an address by the King of the Zulus, and the crowd would consist largely of Inkatha followers.⁴² The adjoining Crown Mines Golf Course, in plain view of the crowd, was selected as a DZ.

The brigade made the arrangements, intending to use two C-130/C-160 and two Dakota aircraft, dropping onto the one DZ. But the Chief of the Army cancelled the drop, refusing to allow it to take place on a Sunday and saying it could be done on the Monday

37. Secret Signal C Army 31 to Wit Comd and 44 Para Bde, "Op Instr 12/91: Verdigting van Magspeile", Ref. H LEËR/D OPS/309/1-FAGGOT EEN, 17 May 1991.

38. Ibid.; Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 17 May 1991.

39. Bound volume 44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure, "A Concise History of the South African Parachute Forces", Ref. 44 PARA BDE/514/2/9/1, 1 November 1991.

40. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 22 May 1991.

41. Ibid., Entries for 22 and 23 May 1991.

42. Ibid., Entry for 23 May 1991.

instead!⁴³ Presumably it was considered more important to avoid offending Calvinist Afrikaner sensitivities than to carry out an operational drop on the day when it would have the greatest impact. It was again postponed on the Monday, there being no point in dropping the force next to an empty stadium, and eventually it took place on Tuesday 28 May 1991. In the event only two Dakotas were used and it was carried out in a completely different area, this time with a greater operational purpose. The platoon was dropped onto a golf course in the violence-wracked Pimville township, and a company of paratroopers immediately set up VCPs on the roads leading into and out of the area.⁴⁴

Pimville had been declared an “unrest area” by the government less than a month earlier,⁴⁵ and four days before the drop, eight people had been killed in factional violence,⁴⁶ with two people arrested in possession of hand grenades the day before the drop. Now, with the police who had been waiting nearby while they jumped, the paratroopers stopped and searched cars, confiscating illegal weapons and arresting suspects. Their actions immediately elicited an angry response from the now very vocal unbanned ANC. Ronnie Mamoepa, a spokesperson for the organisation, complained that they had not been consulted about the drop and that the people living in Pimville had been given no warning of what was to take place. He accused the SADF of “limiting the civil liberties” of the local residents.⁴⁷ From a military perspective, such statements were ludicrous, as to do this would have negated the whole operation. The GOC Witwatersrand Command, Major General Wessel Kritzing, countered these outbursts by retorting that the jumps were simply routine training exercises.⁴⁸ This was clearly untrue and equally disingenuous. Of course, it could be claimed that every jump is considered a training jump, but if these were only training jumps, they would not have taken place in a crowded urban area, now would they be followed by a search for illegal weapons.

The following day, 29 May, the other company of paratroopers was dropped from Dakotas, this time over Dobsonville, landing on an open field behind the bus terminus, and

43. *Ibid.*, Entry for 25 May 1991.

44. M. Alexander, “Para Drops in Soweto by 3 Para Bn, 28–29 May and 11 June 1991”, Photograph Album, SADF 9 (44 Para Bde 1991).

45. Secret Signal C Army 31 to Wit Comd and 44 Para Bde, “Op Instr 12/91: Verdigting van Magspeile”, Ref. H LEËR/D OPS/309/1-FAGGOT EEN, 17 May 1991.

46. University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter Wits), Historical Papers, Collection AG 2543, Independent Board of Inquiry into Informal Repression, “Report of the Independent Board of Inquiry into Informal Repression for the Month of May 1991”, p. 19.

47. L. Rademeyer, “Soweto uit Lug Binnegeval: ANC Kla ná Valskermsoldate se Optrede”, *Beeld*, 29 May 1991; “Paratroops Land in Soweto, Set up Road Blocks”, *The Citizen*, 29 May 1991; “Valskermsoldate Daal op Soweto Neer”, *Uniform*, September 1991.

48. J. van Wyk, “Valskerms in Soweto is nié Magsvertoon”, *Beeld*, 30 May 1991.

adjacent to Meadowlands. Again, they linked up with a small police contingent and set up VCPs, also carrying out patrols, initially on foot, but later, when their Buffel (buffalo) mine protected vehicles were brought forward, in vehicles. For the paratroopers, mostly veterans of the war in Angola and Namibia, many of whom had carried out jumps in combat conditions, it was difficult to see these descents as operational jumps! Local black schoolchildren, enthralled by such an exciting spectacle in their own back yards, ran about to get a closer view, cheering each time another stick of paratroopers exited the aircraft and rushing enthusiastically onto the DZ to welcome the nonplussed paratroopers as they landed! Kritzinger, in an effort to quell the ANC accusations, was on the DZ this time with an invited media group. But the ANC merely increased the volume and intensity of their objections, expressing “outrage” at the operation being carried out in an atmosphere of fear and violence and demanding that the SADF put a stop to all further jumps by paratroopers in the urban areas.⁴⁹ Kritzinger, himself a paratrooper, appeared on TV news, wearing his parachute wings and aggressively declaring that he would not consult with any political party in making operational decisions.⁵⁰ It seems that the pretext of “training” had now been abandoned.

The brigade commander succeeded in arranging one more parachute operation in Soweto, and on this occasion jumped with the troops. The drop took place at 11h15 on Tuesday 11 June 1991. The DZ was small: an open area known as Emdeni between the northern edge of Dobsonville and a large slimes dump from the nearby goldmines.⁵¹ At one end were tall bluegum trees and at the other power lines. Because the DZ was too small to drop 64 men, the aircraft had to circle and do a second run-in for the last of the paratroopers to jump.⁵² See Appendix 80.

The drop was watched by hordes of schoolchildren⁵³ and the 128 paratroopers immediately rolled up their parachutes, assembled and set off to carry out patrols and to establish VCPs.⁵⁴ Again, some illegal weaponry was found, but more importantly, the level of violence dropped. Not many days later the Eagle Force was withdrawn and demobilised.

49. Ibid. See also M. McGhee, “Second Parabat Drop on Soweto”, *Citizen*, 30 May 1991; “ANC Demands: Stop Jumps”, *Star*, 30 May 1991; G. Jepson, “Parabats Make Another Jump in Soweto”, *Weekly Mail*, 30 May–6 June 1991.

50. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 29 May 1991.

51. Parachutist’s Logbook of Col McGill Alexander, Entry for 11 June 1991.

52. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 11 June 1991.

53. “Just Dropping In”, *The Citizen*, 12 June 1991.

54. M. Alexander, “Para Drops in Soweto by 3 Para Bn, 28–29 May and 11 June 1991”, Photograph Album, SADF 9 (44 Para Bde 1991).

The violence had dissipated sufficiently in Soweto for Army HQ to feel this was justified. Despite the objections from the ANC, it appeared that the urban parachute operations did achieve some success.

13.3.3. The End of Urban Airborne Operations

There was one more “urban airborne operation” that year. It was again executed in Natal. A company of CF paratroopers consisting of university and college students was mobilised over December 1991/January 1992 for 60 days and attached to Group 10 in Durban. In the half-light of dawn on 18 December 1991 two platoons jumped from a C-130 aircraft onto a field just outside Groutville on the North Coast.⁵⁵ They proceeded to do a sweep through the still sleeping township (which consisted mainly of shacks), searching for weapons.⁵⁶

It was to be the last urban parachute operation. In terms of this thesis, these operations were purely tactical in nature and had no strategic significance whatsoever. Even in tactical terms, their value was limited. However, such airborne actions certainly enabled the security forces to regain some initiative; they were also an outstanding way to make use of surprise to dislocate the procedures and thinking of opponents; and although the spectacular show of force that such mass parachute descents provided certainly resulted in a drop in the levels of violence in the immediate area, they did not have any drastic effect on the unrest that prevailed in the country as a whole at the time.

There was little enthusiasm for the concept at Army HQ and with the vociferous objections from the ANC in a rapidly changing political landscape, it was probably felt that such operations were simply not worth the trouble and controversy they caused. During this time of negotiation between the beleaguered government and its former enemies, these actions were seen as overtly aggressive and thus politically incorrect.⁵⁷

13.4. THE RAPID DEPLOYMENT FORCE AND THE BRIGADE’S RETURN TO BLOEMFONTEIN

While the urban deployments were taking place the restructuring in terms of Project READHEAD was continuing. The idea of a full-time rapid deployment force (RDF) was mooted and the OC 44 Parachute Brigade had made a strong case for such a force to be

55. Parachutist’s Logbook of Col McGill Alexander, Entry for 18 December 1991.

56. E-mail letter, Col Brian Adams (ret’d), 26 November 2015. See also Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 18 December 1991; M. Alexander, “Para Drop, Groutville by Student Company, 18 December 1991”, Photograph Album, SADF 9 (44 Para Bde 1991).

57. M. Alexander, “The Liberation Struggle in Southern Africa: Airborne Tactics in an Insurgency War”, in P. Dennis and J. Grey (eds), *An Art in Itself: The Theory and Conduct of Small Wars and Insurgencies. Proceedings of the Chief of Army Military History Conference* (Canberra, Australian History Military Publications, 2006), p. 115.

airborne, pointing out that it was only by air that a force could be deployed rapidly to any location in southern Africa. However, the senior non-airborne officers in Army HQ disagreed and laid down that the RDF would only have paratroopers as one of its components, but would consist principally of heavy mechanised forces.⁵⁸ Such thinking sounded the death-knell of a strategic airborne capability. This was not the only setback that the paratroopers faced. READHEAD's final recommendations included moving 44 Parachute Brigade back to Bloemfontein and placing under its command: 1 Parachute Battalion Group (as a full-time unit), 2 Parachute Battalion Group (as a part-time unit), a separate Parachute Training Centre and a Support Unit. All other parachute units would be disbanded.⁵⁹

In September 1990, there was a revision of the SA Army's Strategic Plan and the OC 44 Parachute Brigade was tasked to draw up a philosophy for rapid deployment forces.⁶⁰ His suggestion, based on the reasoning that a RDF would need to be strategically capable of deployment over thousands of kilometres within a matter of hours, was that it should consist of an air-transportable force, with a limited amphibious capability, all resorting under 44 Parachute Brigade. The proposed 60 Brigade, with its tanks, armoured cars and armoured fighting vehicles and their substantial logistic systems, would not form part of the RDF, but rather form a follow-up force to take over from the RDF once such a heavy force had been able to reach the area of operations.⁶¹ This was met with immediate opposition from those who favoured heavy armoured and mechanised forces – a school of thought that was much in favour in the Army at the time, largely because of the final battles in southeast Angola during the 1980s.

On 25 February 1991, on instructions from the Chief of the Army, the OC 44 Parachute Brigade, Colonel McGill Alexander, had to hand over all the documentation and planning he had done until that time to Brigadier Dippenaar, OC Army Battle School.⁶² The concept formulated by Dippenaar was presented to and accepted by the Defence Command Council on 17 May 1991. Dippenaar envisaged the RDF as having a divisional-level HQ, provided by the Army Battle School, with two brigade-level tactical HQs operating under it. One would be a mechanised HQ and the other a parachute HQ, with the constituent units all

58. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entries for 20 and 21 June 1990.

59. Ibid., Entry for 23 July 1990.

60. Restricted document, "Hersiening van SA Leër se Strategiese Plan", ref H LEër/D OPS/307/1, 24 September 1990.

61. Hand-written notes, "Thoughts on Rapid Deployment Forces (RDF)", by OC 44 Para Bde, Unreferenced and undated, in Folder Titled "Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) Concept".

62. Memo from OC 44 Para Bde to OC A Battle S, "Die Snelontplooiingsmag (SOM) Konsep", 25 February 1991, in Folder Titled "Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) Concept".

full-time forces. Henceforth, 44 Parachute Brigade would lose its status as Chief of the Army's Reserve. Operationally, the paratroopers would now fall under command of the OC RDF, an Armoured Corps or mechanised infantry brigadier. This brigadier would provide all inputs on the employment of the airborne forces. Dippenaar was an officer with a wealth of operational experience commanding mechanised forces; but like most armour and mechanised officers, he viewed airborne operations purely from a tactical perspective. To such officers, taking and holding defiles like bridges or mountain passes, or establishing a bridgehead, all to facilitate the passage of heavy armoured or mechanised forces, was the principal role of paratroops. Independent airborne operations with their specific logistic and command and control requirements did not form a part of their thinking. The airborne forces to be employed would therefore generally be of no more than company strength. This was reflected in the organisation of the RDF. The parachute brigade's combat support and combat service support units had no part in this organisation and there was little allowance made for flexibility in the employment of airborne forces. This made a parachute brigade HQ effectively redundant.⁶³

At the same time that the airborne RDF proposal was rejected, the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Georg Meiring, dropped another bombshell on the paratroopers on 26 February 1991. He appointed Brigadier Reginald Otto to investigate the future organisation of the parachute forces.⁶⁴ The following month he issued his guidelines to Otto, instructing him to align the investigation with that of the OC Army Battle School being done around the RDF.⁶⁵ Otto too, was an Armoured Corps officer and the OC Orange Free State Command. Although parachute qualified, he no experience of airborne operations. The parachute brigade would be located within his territorial command. After some consultation⁶⁶ he drew up his recommendations. The parachute brigade would be relegated to a position of subservience to the territorial command for routine and administrative matters, while operationally it would provide elements from time to time under command of the RDF as subsidiary to the mechanised elements. OFS Command would control its

63. Confidential Document "Aanvullende Beplanningsinstruksie No 5/91: Konsep van die Snelontplooiingsmag en die VTM Formasie", Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/502/1/1 (SA LEËR ONTWERP 2000), 7 June 1991.

64. Diary, OC 44, Entry for 26 February 1991.

65. Confidential Document "Beplanningsinstruksie No 2/91: Ondersoek na die Valskermformasie", Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/502/1/1 (SA LEËR ONTWERP 2000), 20 March 1991.

66. Confidential Letter "Ondersoek na Valskermformasie", Ref. KMDMT OVS/V/502/1/1 (SA LEËR ONTWERP 2000), 25 March 1991.

budget and it would lose its autonomous logistic support capability.⁶⁷ The brigade commander's protests about what he considered to be the unhealthy command and control arrangement had by then been brushed aside.⁶⁸ Otto submitted his recommendations to Meiring on 17 June 1991, with the OC 44 Parachute Brigade present and going some way to address the brigade commander's concerns. Meiring accepted this and instructed that the brigade move to Bloemfontein by the end of that year.⁶⁹ The Chief of the Army submitted his recommendation regarding this to the Chief of the Defence Force in June 1991.⁷⁰

The relocation of 44 Parachute Brigade to Bloemfontein was made the responsibility of OC OFS Command and the restructuring of the brigade as part of the RDF was placed in the hands of OC Army Battle School. The parachute brigade commander managed to ensure that command and control was clearly spelled out in a supplementary instruction issued under Meiring's signature (my translation from the original Afrikaans):

In the case of a purely airborne or maritime operation 44 Para Bde must be in command of the operation. 44 Para Bde provides the Tac HQ, which will be manned by members of the HQ and also 1 Para Bn. In the case of a predominantly landward operation with 44 Para Bde in a supporting role, the formation will be placed under operational command of the mechanised forces' HQ, whether the RDF HQ or the 60 Bde Tac HQ. The Parachute Formation remains under command of C Army, but is permanently in area of OFS Comd.⁷¹

By October that year the first batch of the brigade's vehicles and equipment was on its way to Bloemfontein and the CF units were moving into their new offices in Pretoria.⁷² By early 1992 the move to Bloemfontein had been completed, the brigade commander handed over the sword of command to his successor and was transferred elsewhere.⁷³ The OC OFS Command subsequently succeeded in having the brigade placed under his command.

Dippenaar had in the meantime been working on the future organisation of the parachute forces. On 8 August 1991 he made a decision to disband or downgrade six of the

67. Confidential, "Bevestigende Notas van 'n Beplanningskonferensie oor die Ondersoek na die Valskermformasie gehou te HK Kmdmt OVS" 5 June 1991, Ref. KMDMT OVS/V/502/1/1 (SA LEËR 2000), 7 June 1991.

68. Memorandum from OC 44 Para Bde to OC OFS Comd, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/302/6, 3 June 1991; Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 4 June 1991.

69. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 17 June 1991.

70. Confidential Memo C Army to C SADF: "Voorlegging oor die Hervestiging van 44 Valskermbrigade en die Herstrukturering van 44 Valskermbrigade en 1 Valskermbataljon", Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/502/1/1 44 BDE, June 1991.

71. Confidential Document "Aanvullende Beplanningsinstruksie No 2/91 en No 5/91: Ondersoek na die Valskermformasie", Ref. H LEËR/D PLAN/502/1/1 (SA LEËR ONTWERP 2000), July 1991.

72. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 23 Oct 91; Confidential "Stafvereiste: Hervestiging, van 44 Valskermbrigade, te Bloemfontein", Ref. KMDMT OVS/V/502/1/1 (SA LEËR 2000), 5 August 1991.

73. Diary, OC 44 Para Bde, Entry for 10 March 1992.

CF units of the brigade.⁷⁴ Faced with severe financial constraints, he felt that artillery, engineer, anti-aircraft and logistic support for the paratroopers could be provided by the mechanised units of the RDF. This effectively destroyed the parachute brigade's ability to operate independently and put an end to the paratroopers being employed for strategic purposes. The outgoing brigade commander lodged a protest, outlining the need to retain a certain capability and offering four options for the organisational restructuring of the brigade.⁷⁵ Again, he was fobbed off; all the combat support and combat service support units gradually disappeared, either being disbanded or being returned to their respective corps. Financial considerations were playing a far greater role than operational requirements. The Defence Budget in 1983/1984 had accounted for 4.3% of the country's GDP. Ten years later, in 1993/1994 it had been reduced to 2.6% of the GDP.⁷⁶ It would continue to decrease in the years ahead.

In line with the RDF requirements,⁷⁷ from 1993 certain combat support elements were again grouped into what became known as 1 Parachute Battalion Group. But this arrangement only lasted for four years, and in 1997 it again lost its non-infantry elements and reverted to being just a purely infantry unit, albeit airborne.⁷⁸ The paratroopers thereafter were merely deployed according to a schedule, like any other infantry battalion, though in theory at least they were still part of the RDF.

With reduced resources at his disposal, the new brigade commander, Colonel Les Rudman worked on an idea that he called Oscar Force. The Eagle Force had ceased to exist once the brigade moved to Bloemfontein and was essentially replaced by the Oscar Force as an immediately available airborne capability for quick deployment. In actual fact, this was the only real rapid deployment capability within the much-vaunted RDF, because the heavier mechanised elements could certainly not deploy over thousands or even hundreds of kilometres within a few hours of being activated. The Oscar Force, according to one of the company commanders at the time, was of more balanced composition than the Eagle Force had been, comprised of a combat team, based on a company HQ, but with elements

74. Ibid., Entry for 8 August 1991.

75. Confidential "Stafgeskrif aan Bevelvoerder Leërgevegskool oor Toekomstige Organisasie van 44 Valskermbrigade", Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/502/1/1, 4 September 1991.

76. B. Sass, "An Overview of the Changing SADF", *S A Defence Review*, 13 (November 1993).

77. Confidential Document: "Bevelswaardering: Korttermynbeplanning: 1991/1992/1993", Ref 44 VALSK BDE/301/2, 16 September 1991, Appendix A to "Brigade Instruksie 2/91: Jaarprogram (Konsep)", Ref 44 VALSK BDE/301/1 26 November 91, in Staff Appreciation: "44 Valskermbrigade Korttermynbeplanning 1991/1992/1993.

78. "Short History of the South African Airborne Forces", Airborne Seminar folder, 44 Parachute Regiment, Bloemfontein, 31 May 2002.

of infantry support weapons (mortars, heavy machine guns, anti-tank missiles and rockets), engineers and even at times light artillery. It had no fixed composition and was extremely flexible, being put together according to the envisaged threat or mission at any given time (as well as the available forces). The constituent elements were drawn from the various sub-units of 1 Parachute Battalion Group on a rotational basis.⁷⁹ The OC 1 Parachute Battalion at the time, Commandant John Brooks, described the Oscar Force as:

An “air landed” force that could respond very quickly to crises situations, either from C130 aircraft or delivered by freight trucks! The Oscar Force consisted of a command and alternative command Jakkals vehicle manned by Bn HQ personnel. Then we had a number of Jakkals vehicles that carried elements of the arty, AA, engrs, support, and rifle company teams and their support weapons and equipment! The idea was one of mobility with maximum firepower!⁸⁰

It was a very far cry from the potent parachute battalion group of days gone by, but it was something. The drastically slashed defence budget was having an equally drastic effect on the airborne forces. But this retrograde step was also largely imposed on the paratroopers by the requirements of the RDF to which they were now subject. Trained to carry out air landed operations at night on an existing airfield, this small force could be used to provide backup to special forces or to capture an airfield for use by conventional forces (provided there was no anti-aircraft capability deployed by an enemy around the airfield). It was employed as part of the RDF for an air landing at the Sishen Airfield in the Northern Cape during Exercise SOMBRÉ on 3 September 1993.⁸¹

13.5. THE END OF CONSCRIPTION AND INTEGRATION OF THE NEW SANDF

The removal of General Magnus Malan as the Defence minister (he was moved to the portfolios of Water Affairs and Forestry and Housing and Works on 31 August 1991⁸²) had been symptomatic of the demise of the seurocrats under the presidency of F.W. de Klerk. From that time onwards the successive Defence ministers were civilians. The influence of the SADF on the affairs of South Africa was rapidly decreasing and the military claim to a substantial portion of the national budget had come to an end. Still struggling to come to terms with the reduction in 1990 of conscription from two years to one, the Defence Force was soon faced with an even greater shock. On 24 August 1993 the Defence minister

79. E-mail, Maj Johnny Kerswill (ret), Mbombela, 25 March 2015.

80. E-mail, Lt Col John Brooks (ret), 31 March 2015.

81. Diary, McGill Alexander, Entry for 3 September 1993.

82. “Generaal Malan neem Afskeid”, *SADF Info Bulletin*, No 91/7, 30 August 1991.

announced the end of conscription. From 1994 there would be no more call-ups for the one-year initial training; only volunteers would be accepted. However, the call-ups of CF soldiers who were still under a legal obligation to complete their annual “camps” would continue.⁸³

With no more national servicemen to train, 1 Parachute Battalion’s white companies soon ceased to exist, leaving it with mainly locally recruited black volunteers and black former Angolans from 32 Battalion (see Chapter 11). It also meant that it was only a matter of time before the CF units of the brigade withered and died, as their feeder source had disappeared with the abolition of conscription. Both full-time and part-time units were now totally reliant on volunteers.

The next big change came hard on the heels of the end of conscription. On 27 and 28 April 1994 South Africa held its first fully democratic elections, heralding a victory at the polls for the Tripartite Alliance of the African National Congress (ANC), the SA Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). An immediate process of integration took place, with the former states of Transkei, Ciskei, Bophuthatswana and Venda being reincorporated into South Africa under the new government. Each of these had an army of its own, which now had to be integrated, together with the SADF and the armed wings of the two main liberation movements, to form a new South African National Defence Force (SANDF). Later the former KwaZulu Self Protection Force was also integrated.⁸⁴

In terms of numbers, the SADF had more than double the manpower of all the other participant groups combined and in terms of infrastructure such as facilities, equipment, armament, standard operating procedures, training and logistic systems there was no comparison. Initially at least, the process more closely resembled absorption by the SADF than integration of all the forces. For the most part, the existing SADF structures, systems and units were retained, and the other forces were integrated into them.

For the parachute brigade, this meant a sudden expansion as the paratroopers from the Transkei Defence Force (TDF), Ciskei Defence Force (CDF) and Boputhatswana Defence Force (BDF) began to arrive in Bloemfontein. The establishment and training of these parachute units was dealt with in Chapter 11. The two non-statutory forces, the ANC’s Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) and the PAC’s Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA), did not

83. Sass, “An Overview of the Changing SADF”, *S A Defence Review*, 13 (November 1993).

84. L. Heineken, “The Challenges of Transformation: SANDF Officers’ Attitudes Towards Integration, Affirmative Action, Women in Combat and Language Usage”, *Scientia Militaria*, 28, 2 (1998).

have any paratrooper units. That is not to say that there were no trained paratroopers in their ranks, but on integration none of these opted to serve in airborne units.⁸⁵

Technically, it was not a major challenge to integrate the various parachute elements from the four statutory forces that fielded them: the SADF, TDF, CDF and BDF. By this time, they were all using the same techniques, based on those of the SADF, and for the most part, the same South African equipment. In effect, what happened was that the SADF's 44 Parachute Brigade, by far the largest organisation, simply absorbed the other three. But it was on the personal, disciplinary, traditional and cultural levels where the challenges lay. The difficulties of integrating the two companies from 32 battalion the year before⁸⁶ had shown just how sharply the cultures differed between two units of the SADF; now the integration involved units that were from completely different armies, each with its own corporate culture. From the beginning of 1994 command of the brigade was taken over by Colonel Piet Nel.⁸⁷ Probably the most widely experienced officer to command the paratroopers, he was well-equipped for the demands of integration. During an interview with Nel in 1995, while the integration process was underway, he provided an overview of what had happened in the early stages.⁸⁸

A decision had been taken at Army HQ (presumably in consensus with the senior commanders of all the integrating forces) that the three smaller parachute bases with their parachute training apparatus in Transkei, Ciskei and Bophutatswana would be closed down and all paratroopers would be centralised at the much bigger facility used by 44 Parachute Brigade in Tempe, Bloemfontein. This also meant that their airborne units would cease to exist.

In terms of agreements reached in principle regarding the integration process, the former SADF would not be permitted to question the *bona fides* of any members of the other statutory forces. They would be accepted at the same rank level that they held in their respective forces on 27 April 1994.⁸⁹ Nel, who retained his position as brigade commander, knew that his officers and NCOs would view the newcomers with suspicion and that they would question their standards. The selection phase of the SADF paratroopers was of an extremely high standard. They prided themselves in accepting only the best men to become

85. Interviews, Lt Col David Watson (MK *nom de guerre* "Stewart"), Pretoria, 12 June 1995 and Yusuf Thika (APLA alias Bush Alexander), Johannesburg, 26 June 1995.

86. E-mail, Maj Johnny Kerswill (ret'd), 24 March 2015.

87. Alexander, "The Establishment of South Africa's 44 Parachute Brigade".

88. Interview, Col Piet Nel, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

89. Anon., "Integration and Demobilisation in South Africa", *Strategic Comments (IISS)*, 1, 6 (1995).

paratroopers. But now they were being compelled to accept people who had never been through their stringent selection and whose own selection process was considered by some of the SADF instructors as below their own standard. Nel had a window of time before the arrival of the troops for integration was to start, during which the administrative aspects would be dealt with and the various bases closed down.

He therefore arranged for those in the rank groups of sergeant and higher among the NCOs, and officers up to the rank of major from the TDF, CDF and BDF airborne units to attend an orientation programme at the 44 Parachute Brigade base in Tempe. Not only were they given lectures about the brigade and its organisation and shown all its facilities, but they were also thoroughly briefed on the implications of moving to Bloemfontein. One of the most important issues that had to be addressed was the shortage of military housing in Bloemfontein and what it would entail to buy a house in the city. There was also the question of schooling, as there was no schooling available in the isiXhosa language; only English, Afrikaans, Sesotho and Tswana. These officers and NCOs then returned to their respective units in Transkei, Ciskei and Boputhatswana and briefed their soldiers.

Major Andy Mhatu, trained by the former Rhodesian Selous Scouts and at the time of integration the second-in-command of the TDF Special Forces Regiment, described his experience of the process:

Those of us in the Transkei Special Forces Unit were not accepted as Special Forces operators when integration took place. We were given the option of going to the SA Special Forces in the new SANDF and doing the old SADF selection course in order to gain a recognised qualification, or we could go to 44 Parachute Brigade to be integrated. I was the 2IC of the TDF Special Forces Unit and a major at the time. My OC, a lieutenant colonel, was not prepared to take either of the options, so he resigned. I went to Durban to see what things were like at the SA Special Forces, but decided I was not prepared to do repeat selection. So I went to Bloemfontein and was appointed a company commander in 1 Parachute Battalion.⁹⁰

Nel claimed that there were about 400 qualified paratroopers in the TDF, about 170 in the BDF and maybe 150 in the CDF. Eventually, however, only 171 from the TDF, 92 from the BDF and 60 from the CDF requested a transfer to 44 Parachute Brigade in Bloemfontein.⁹¹ This gave the brigade a total of 329 “outside” paratroopers to integrate with the existing four companies of 1 Parachute Battalion (including a Support Company), which totalled close to 500. About half of these former SADF paratroopers were ex-32 Battalion

90. Discussions with Col Andile Mhatu, Grahamstown, 19 November 2014.

91. Interview, Col Piet Nel, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

soldiers and half were locally recruited former SADF blacks.⁹² At the time, integration of the former 32 Battalion soldiers had not yet been fully achieved, and now the brigade had an even bigger challenge of integration. The new arrivals from the TDF, CDF and BDF reached Bloemfontein during June 1994, accompanied by their leaders, who had almost all attended the earlier orientation.⁹³

The sheer logistic reality had determined that the SADF uniforms would be retained for the new SANDF, so Nel immediately tried to kit out all his new troops with a single uniform. However, here he ran into difficulties. Long before integration had commenced, the SA Army had accepted a new camouflage pattern field uniform to replace the old brown “nutria” uniform that had been worn throughout most of the war. But the new uniforms were not yet available in sufficient quantities, and the logistic system had prematurely ceased the acquisition of the old nutria field dress. OFS Command, responsible for the logistic support of the brigade, simply was not able to provide the uniforms that were now required for the new arrivals. As a consequence, Nel’s brigade had a mixture of strange camouflaged uniforms floating about within its lines (see Appendix 81). Each of the former armies had its own camouflage-pattern uniform and some of the former SADF soldiers still wore the old brown uniforms. This mix of five different uniforms was hardly conducive to a spirit of unity and emphasised differences rather than resolving them.

But Nel realised that one way to achieve a feeling of oneness among paratroopers was for them to jump together. He therefore prepared an induction programme that included orientation briefings similar to those he’d presented to the leader cadre; synthetic parachute refresher training in the training hangar; and actual parachute jumps from the aircraft they would be using in future (Dakotas and C-130 Hercules). There were also shooting exercises and a general introduction into the standards and requirements of the brigade. This done, they were then addressed by the brigade commander and given the opportunity to back out if they felt that serving in this formation was not for them. Those who remained were divided up among the units of the brigade, with most of them going to 1 Parachute Battalion Group. Some of these opted for being re-mustered and retrained as artillerymen, anti-aircraft gunners or engineers, and were sent to the respective corps schools to undergo this specialist training before returning to become a permanent part of 1 Parachute Battalion Group. Nel says that he deliberately mixed the troops so that there

92. Maj J.R. Kerswill, Memorandum to Col M. Alexander, 30 November 1994.

93. Interview, Col Piet Nel, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

would be no remaining exclusive grouping of former forces in any one sub-unit. He also mixed the former 32 Battalion paratroopers with the rest, so that they too, lost their exclusive identity in the interests of integration.

One of the major integration problems that Nel faced was that about 80% of the soldiers who had come from the TDF, CDF and BDF were corporals or lance-corporals, yet most had never attended a section leader's course, nor had they ever qualified as infantry instructors. This meant that they could not be used in posts that required their ranks. It would take several years to sort that problem out by gradually qualifying them for the ranks that they had been awarded. Coupled to this was the fact that both officers and other ranks from the TDF, CDF and BDF received salaries that were significantly higher than those received by their former SADF counterparts. The integration agreement had stipulated that no person who was integrated should suffer a reduction in remuneration, and the fact that the former SADF members were generally better qualified than those from the other three forces caused grave dissatisfaction.⁹⁴

Nor were these the only sources of friction among the integrating paratroopers. At the time that the former Rhodesian Selous Scouts were training the TDF Special Forces, they had largely been responsible for a raid carried out on the Ciskei in 1987.⁹⁵ A number of people were killed in the raid, widely believed to have been orchestrated by SADF Military Intelligence (Operation KATZEN). As a result there was a great deal of anger in Umtata (Mthatha) and Major General Reid Daly and his Selous Scouts were all fired.⁹⁶

A few years later, on 20 August 1991, eight CDF paratroopers (part of a stick of 16, who were carrying heavy equipment) were drowned when they jumped next to the Fish River. Ten of them were blown into the water as they landed and only two survived the ordeal.⁹⁷ The Transkeians believed that they were in fact rehearsing for a retribution attack and that their jump next to the river was because they were intending to jump next to the Umzimvubu River to attack the TDF Special Forces. But when that disaster occurred, the operation was cancelled. At the time of integration there was thus a strong feeling of bitterness from the former CDF paratroopers towards the TDF. According to a former TDF

94. Interview, Col Piet Nel, Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

95. "'Homeland' Leader is Target of Raid", *The New York Times*, 20 February 1987; "S. African Homeland Leader Banishes Brother to Village Amid Coup Rumors", *Los Angeles Times*, 12 May 1987.

96. J. Cilliers, "An Overview of the Armed Forces of the TBVC Countries", *SA Defence Review*, 13 (1993).

97. *Daily Dispatch*, 21 August and 26 September 1991. The memorial obelisk to those killed in training, which stands beside the parade ground of the parachute base in Tempe, reflects only seven names.

officer, during the integration process, some paratroopers from the two former forces even refused to speak to one another.⁹⁸

Such undercurrents clearly exacerbated Nel's difficulties. His approach of mixing even the senior ranks, and of appointing former TDF and BDF officers and warrant officers to key positions in the brigade met with much resistance from the former SADF equivalents. Nel would not be swayed, but when interviewed he stated that there was a general feeling among the white NCOs that the black NCOs were incompetent, and the white RSMs particularly, appeared to feel threatened by the integration.⁹⁹ He later attempted to recruit former members of non-statutory forces, MK and APLA, but few responded.¹⁰⁰ This was perhaps not surprising, because he insisted that every person recruited had to undergo the full paratrooper selection, and many were no longer very young.

It was a difficult time for the South African airborne forces as their world struggled to achieve a modicum of normality after the years of apartheid. While Nel was juggling to integrate the centrifugal forces that had been thrown into his lap, he had to continue to provide elements to participate in the SWEEPSLAG exercises at the Army Battle School as part of the RDF.¹⁰¹ The annual division-sized exercise code named SOMBRÉ was again held at the Army Battle School during September/October 1994. As divisional commander, Brigadier Dippenaar saw it as a full-scale RDF exercise. He had two brigades in his division: 60 Mechanised Brigade and 44 Parachute Brigade. However, the parachute brigade was far below full strength and Nel's paratroopers were simply used to facilitate and back up the mechanised actions.¹⁰²

13.6. THE GHOST OF CASSINGA AND THE ARMS THEFT: PARATROOPERS AND POLITICIANS

Before his three-year term as OC 44 Parachute Brigade drew to a close at the end of 1996, Colonel Nel found himself embroiled in a controversy that was destined to haunt the paratroopers for many years. Ever since the raid on Cassinga in 1978, the paratroopers had commemorated the day, celebrating the largest airborne operation ever carried out by the SADF and remembering those paratroopers who fell in battle. In time, 4 May came to be

98. Discussions with Col Andile Mhatu, Grahamstown, 19 November 2014.

99. Interview with Col Piet Nel in Bloemfontein, 29 June 1995.

100. Restricted Memo, OC 44 Para Bde to SSO Ops, F North Comd, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/B/512/2/3, 31 March 1998.

101. Loose-leaf Folder, "44 Parachute Brigade", in "Short History: Army Commands and Formations", .

102. Restricted Volume, "SD Tak Handelwyse vir die Praktiese Fase: 1994", Appendix G, Doelwit 1.1.3.7: Praktiese Divisie Oefening), Ref. SA LEËRKOL/B/522/1/1, 30 September 1993.

known by the paratroopers of the SADF as Cassinga Day – just as it is known in Namibia by the same name and is celebrated as a public holiday for entirely different reasons. For the Namibians the day is a symbol of their suffering during their struggle for the liberation of their country from South African control.¹⁰³ Cassinga, for the Namibians, was a brutal slaughter of innocent refugees. But for the South African paratroopers, the day was a symbol of daring heroism; a classic airborne operation where they had jumped into a cauldron of enemy resistance in a military base and achieved a victory against heavy odds. The controversy continues to rage.¹⁰⁴

In 1996, two years after the ANC government had come to power in South Africa, the paratroopers in Bloemfontein were still celebrating Cassinga Day. By then, the day had, for the paratroopers, become the annual occasion on which not only those who had died in the fighting at Cassinga were remembered, but all South African paratroopers who had died in action were honoured.¹⁰⁵ But on this occasion the parade made headlines in the media. When it came to the notice of the ANC that the paratroopers had held a parade in Bloemfontein to commemorate the raid on Cassinga, the Chief of the SANDF, General Georg Meiring, was summoned to appear before parliament's Joint Committee on Defence to explain how he could allow such an event to take place.¹⁰⁶ Meiring denied knowledge of the parade, but was instructed by the ANC Defence minister, Joe Modise "that steps must be taken ensure that no other similar celebrations take place in the SANDF". Modise then undertook to apologise to the government and people of Namibia for the celebration, which he called "an insensitive act".¹⁰⁷

Whether insensitive or not, the parade was certainly unwise. It drew negative attention to the paratroopers and branded 44 Parachute Brigade as stubbornly resistant to the transformation the country was undergoing. The ANC would in future no doubt watch the formation with hawk eyes. It was thus hardly surprising that when further cuts in the Defence Budget were announced the parachute brigade was targeted.¹⁰⁸ Nel left the Defence Force at the end of his three-year term as brigade commander and accepted a

103. "Namibia Remembers Horror of Cassinga", *Pretoria News*, 6 May 1998.

104. See E.G.M. Alexander, "The Cassinga Raid", MA, Unisa, 2003, a dissertation that itself sparked further controversy.

105. "The Significance of Cassinga Day", an explanatory summary in a programme for the Cassinga Day Parade held by 44 Para Bde, undated, circa 1990; Bound volume, "44 Parachute Brigade Information Brochure", 4 November 1991

106. "Meiring to Clarify 'Celebration' of SADF Raid", *Star*, 4 June 1996.

107. P. Bulger, "SA to Say Sorry after Celebrating Defence Force Raid", *Star*, 6 June 1996.

108. N. Chandler, "Cash Cut Threatens Paratroops: First-strike Troops Come under Money Microscope", *Star*, 14 August 1997.

lucrative position in the private sector. It was not possible to obtain his inputs on the matter, because he was murdered in a car hijacking outside his home in 2000.

Although the paratroopers appear to have heeded the warning by their political masters during the year following the fracas over Cassinga Day, they foolishly again tried to hold a commemorative parade in 1998. The OC 44 Parachute Brigade at the time, Colonel “Skillie” van der Walt, bore the brunt of the repercussions, which were the first in a series of unfortunate events that ultimately ended his military career. Van der Walt was a career soldier who took over command of the brigade from Nel in January 1997.¹⁰⁹

Apparently, Van der Walt believed that by simply leaving out all reference to Cassinga, changing the name of the celebration to “Paratrooper Remembrance Weekend” and adding the names of the paratroopers killed in accidents (including those from the TDF, CDF and BDF) on the memorial next to the parade ground, the commemoration would become acceptable to the ANC government.¹¹⁰ Having discussed the matter with his officers, it was even decided to hold the celebration over the weekend closest to 4 May, the day which was in fact the 20th anniversary of the raid on Cassinga.

Predictably, Van der Walt stoked the ire of the governing party by what must have been seen either as his recalcitrance or his lack of sensitivity. He had been quite open about the celebrations, having notified the media of his intentions, broadcasting the event as the “New Paratrooper Remembrance Day” and proclaiming it to be a part of the brigade’s transformation programme. But it seems that the ANC, by then settling more confidently and comfortably into the seat of power, was looking for sticks to beat those who represented the *ancien régime*. The envisaged paratrooper celebration provided them with just such a stick. As pressure mounted, Van der Walt consulted some of the former brigade commanders who had been invited to attend the celebrations. Unanimously, they advised him to cancel the weekend.¹¹¹ He therefore did so, but it was too late to avoid the fallout.

Hard on the heels of this misadventure the paratroopers experienced a far more serious setback as they wrestled to adjust to the new political regime. Over the weekend of 16/17 May 1998, only a fortnight after the cancellation of the parade, the armoury at the

109. Confidential letter from OC 44 Para Bde to C SANDF, “Transformasie van die SANW. Magstruktuur van die SA Leër: Voortbestaan van 44 Valskermbbrigade”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/V/501/6/1, March 1998. Also e-mail correspondence with Col Skillie van der Walt (retd), Bloemfontein 30 March 2015.

110. Restricted Memo OC 44 Para Bde to SSO Ops, Far North Comd, “Valskermsoldate Herdenkingsdag: 3 Mei 1998”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/B/512/2/3, 31 March 1998; Letter OC 44 Para Bde to SSO Ops, Far North Comd, “Valskermsoldate Herdenkingsnaweek: 2 en 3 Mei 1998”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/B/512/2/3, 7 April 1998.

111. Letter SSO Ops, F North Comd to OC 44 Para Bde, Ref. KVN/B/513/7, 7 May 1998.

Tempe base of 44 Parachute Brigade was broken into and 117 weapons were stolen. In addition, a Mamba armoured personnel carrier (APC) and a military truck were taken.¹¹² This caused a countrywide uproar. The stolen weapons included ninety-three 5.56mm R4 and R5 assault rifles, six 7.62mm light machine-guns, several 12.7mm heavy machine-guns, three 60mm mortars, as well as manpack radios, compasses, binoculars and other military equipment. One source subsequently gave the number of weapons stolen as 220 (of which 123 were eventually recovered).¹¹³ Newspaper editorials reflected utter incredulity and astonishment that such a theft could have occurred.¹¹⁴

Within two days of the discovery of the theft, police had arrested six men.¹¹⁵ Lesotho, on the eve of holding a general election, expressed concern that the mountain kingdom might be the final destination of the stolen arms and that these might be used to destabilise the country. Their security forces were placed on full alert.¹¹⁶ Three of those arrested were released, but the other three, two of them black members of 44 Parachute Brigade, appeared in court and were charged.¹¹⁷ There was a great deal of speculation about whether the arms theft could be part of a plan by dissident blacks to carry out a coup;¹¹⁸ but it was then found that although the men had stolen the Mamba APC, this could not be coupled to the arms theft.¹¹⁹ The police soon arrested three white men who were positively linked to the arms theft, one of whom was a staff sergeant with 44 Parachute Brigade. All three were part of a right-wing group, bent on overthrowing the government.¹²⁰ There was then an outburst of anger among black South Africans, who saw the theft as a threat from unrepentant racists, rightwing supporters of the previous regime.¹²¹

112. "Honderde Outomatiese Wapens hier Gesteel", *Beeld*, 19 May 1998; "Massive Theft of Weapons", *Star*, 19 May 1998; "100 Military Weapons Stolen", *Pretoria News*, 19 May 1998.

113. C. Gould, G. Lamb, G. Mthembu-Salter, S. Nakana and D. Rubel, "Country Study: South Africa", in C. Gould (ed.) *Hide and Seek: Taking Account of Small Arms in Southern Africa* (Pretoria, Institute for Security Studies, 1999), p. 158.

114. Editorial comment, "Time to Double the Guard", *Pretoria News*, 20 May 1998.

115. R. Banda, "Military Vehicles Found as 6 Arrested over Weapons Heist", *Star*, 21 May 1998; M. Duma and K. Makhado, "Three Nabbed for Arms Theft", *Sowetan*, 21 May 1998; "Big Bloem Weapons Theft: 6 Arrested", *Citizen*, 21 May 1998; Editorial "On the Defensive", *Star*, 21 May 1998.

116. T. Molefe and M. Duma, "Lesotho on Alert after Arms Theft", *Sowetan*, 22 May 1998.

117. "Weapons Theft: 3 Soldiers to Appear", *Citizen*, 22 May 1998; "3 SANW-lede in Hof oor Diefstal van Troepedraer", *Beeld*, 22 May 1998; "Military Truck Theft: Three Charged", *Sowetan*, 25 May 1998; "Arms Arrests: 3 Freed", *Pretoria News*, 22 May 1998.

118. B. Stuart, "Arms Thefts: Probe Coup Link, says NP"; and Editorial comment, "Weapons Theft", *Citizen*, 22 May 1998.

119. M. Duma, "Hunt Continues for Arms Thieves", *Sowetan*, 26 May 1998.

120. J. Seepe, "Third Man Held over Arms Tthefts", *City Press*, 7 June 1998.

121. Editorial comment, *Sowetan*, 21 May 1998; cartoon in *Sowetan*, 22 May 1998.

As a direct consequence of the arms heist, the Defence minister, Joe Modise, was requested by parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Defence to brief it on the incident.¹²² The events of May 1998 led to the minister launching a verbal public attack on 44 Parachute Brigade. He was reported as stating:

Two years ago the 44th Parachute Brigade commemorated – without seeking my permission – their operation at Cassinga, the site of the notorious massacre of Namibian refugees. Recently, I had to intervene to cancel an attempt by the same brigade to hold a 'Paratroopers' Remembrance Weekend' on the anniversary of the Cassinga massacre. The defiance of government authority will not be tolerated".

He then added, "The massive theft of weapons from the 44th Parachute Brigade has been most disturbing. A full investigation of the theft is under way".¹²³ Deputy Minister Kasrils, in an equally minatory warning, said (referring to the parade), "This gross insensitivity is hardly the right kind of spirit to build trust and confidence within our own defence force and with our neighbours."¹²⁴

The whole matter took on an even more ominous tone when, barely two weeks after the arms theft, a military truck travelling unescorted, but loaded with several hundred thousand rounds of small arms ammunition, was hijacked between Bloemfontein and Ficksburg and the two drivers were murdered. This too, was linked to white right-wing NCOs from 44 Parachute Brigade and more arrests followed.¹²⁵ Those guilty were found to be members of the Technical Service Corps (in this case, armourers and welders) from the brigade's HQ Unit – they were not paratroopers at all.¹²⁶ But they were members of the parachute brigade, and it was the paratrooper reputation that was again badly sullied.

This all took place at a significant juncture in the development of the SANDF. On 1 June 1998, General Georg Meiring, last Chief of the old SADF and first Chief of the new SANDF, handed over command to the first black officer to head the military establishment in South Africa's history – General Siphwe Nyanda, the former Chief of Staff of the ANC's armed wing, MK.¹²⁷ Meiring's departure took place under a cloud. He had resigned because

122. "Arms Heist: We Want to Hear Modise", *Pretoria News*, 21 May 1998.

123. M. Granelli, "Modise Squares up to Elite Army Unit", *Pretoria News*, 27 May 1998.

124. Ibid.

125. "Theft of Arms a National Crisis", *Cape Times*, 3 June 1998; V. Mvoko, "Two SANDF Members Arrested, Body Found after Theft at Army Base", *Business Day*, 4 June 1998; J. Rantao, N. Chandler and R. Banda, "The Army's Base of Shame"; and J. Rantao, "SANDF Arms Thefts: The Chronicle of Events", *Star*, 4 June 1998.

126. E-mail, Col Skillie van der Walt (retd), Bloemfontein, 30 March 2015.

127. W. Bokala, "Nyanda Unveils Future Plans", *Sowetan*, 1 June 1998; S. Laufer, "Pathos Drives Defence Force Farewell", *Business Day*, 4 June 1998.

of a deteriorating relationship with President Mandela after a report about an alleged planned coup by rogue elements within the ANC. The report was believed to have emanated from rogue elements in Military Intelligence to sow dissent in ANC ranks.¹²⁸

There was a perceptible hardening of attitude among the new political masters in the Ministry of Defence, and the whip was cracked to herd the Defence Force into line. The deputy Defence minister, Ronnie Kasrils, berated the still largely white officers' corps, warning them to speed up transformation and to deal with the resistance to change in the Defence Force. He used the same occasion to again lash out at the paratroopers: "One cannot disregard what took place recently at 44 Parachute Brigade where a sergeant was allegedly involved in the cold-blooded murder of two black subordinates."¹²⁹ Kasrils referred to the "appalling atrocities" committed by the paratroopers at Cassinga and threatened dire consequences if such a commemoration was ever planned again.¹³⁰ No official commemoration of the event was ever subsequently held.

It was a time of considerable tension within the Defence Force. This was heightened when the activities of the TRC¹³¹ were often in the news and revelations of atrocities in which senior officers were implicated were being touted in the media.¹³² This must certainly have caused considerable confusion among younger officers and NCOs who had served in the old SADF and resentment or even animosity among their counterparts from MK and APLA. In an organisation such as 44 Parachute Brigade, where the former liberation forces were totally unrepresented, suspicions from the new government were understandably fuelled by unfortunate incidents such as the Cassinga Day parade and the arms theft.

In a not unexpected move, Colonel Van der Walt, the brigade commander, was relieved of his command and transferred to OFS Command as a staff officer. Although he fought the decision in an open court, and won the case,¹³³ he was sidelined and left the

128. "SACP says Meiring Report was not a Mistake", *SAPA*, 10 May 1998; "South African Military Chief Quits over Report of Alleged Coup Plot", *Los Angeles Times*, 7 April 1998.

129. N. Chandler, "Time has Come for Changing of Guard, Kasrils tells Army Top Brass", *Star*, 12 June 1998.

130. Address delivered by deputy Defence minister, Ronnie Kasrils, SA Army Seminar, Pretoria, 11 June 1998.

131. The duration of the TRC was from 1995 to 2002, see "Truth Commission: South Africa", United States Institute of Peace, <http://www.usip.org/publications/truth-commission-south-africa>

132. The KwaMhakutha massacre of 13 as part of Operation MARION is an example, where the erstwhile Defence minister, General Magnus Malan, and several senior officers were implicated. Although some were acquitted in 1996 ("KwaMhakutha Massacre", *Truth Commission Special Report*, http://sabctrc.saha.org.za/glossary/kwamakutha_massacre.htm) and the parachute brigade was not involved, such messy, high profile court cases and TRC exposure of atrocities would almost certainly have impacted on the morale of former SADF soldiers.

133. I. Jonker, "Bevelvoerder Mag nie Onthef word: Hoë hof", *Beeld*, 22 September 1998; D. Kok, "Bevelvoerder Bly in Pos: Bevel teruggetrek", *Volksblad*, 24 October 1998.

Defence Force at the end of March 1999.¹³⁴ Replaced by Colonel Peter Foke, a black paratrooper officer formerly from the BDF, Van der Walt was the last white commander of the paratroopers.

13.7. OPERATION BOLEAS: INCURSION INTO LESOTHO

Before Van der Walt's departure and in the midst of the turmoil, almost ten years after the cessation of hostilities in Namibia and Angola, the paratroopers again found themselves involved in combat. Operation BOLEAS was a military intervention in Lesotho, spearheaded by South Africa, backed up by Botswana and Zimbabwe and supported by Mozambique. A history of constitutional crises, *coups d'état* and accusations of electoral fraud in the tiny mountain kingdom of Lesotho (a landlocked constitutional monarchy, completely surrounded by South Africa) had led to general political instability. Early in September 1998, junior members of the Armed Forces mutinied.¹³⁵ With the elected government fearful of a coup, on 12 September 1988, Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili requested intervention by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), of which all countries in southern Africa are members. A troika of South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe decided to intervene militarily to restore stability and prevent a coup.¹³⁶

There were a number of astonishing peculiarities about this meeting and the decision taken,¹³⁷ but of importance to the SANDF was that the decision was made only seven days before the operation was due to take place,¹³⁸ leaving insufficient time to plan the complex operation, concentrate the forces, conduct the marrying up essential to a multinational action and carry out proper rehearsals. Coupled to this, the decision was not based on sound military intelligence, nor indeed does there seem to have been access to such intelligence.¹³⁹ Furthermore, given the tensions, suspicions and mistrust so prevalent in the SANDF as a result of the precarious integration and transformation process at the time,

134. E. Gibson, "Kolonel se Aansoek om Pos Misluk", *Beeld*, 21 January 1999; "Brigade se Bevelvoerder Vervang", *Volksblad*, 21 January 1999. E-mail, Col Skillie v. d. Walt (ret'd), Bloemfontein, 29 March 2015.

135. "Lesotho (08/99)", US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/lesotho/12551.htm>.

136. T. Mandrup, "Africa, Salvation or Despair? A Study of the Post-apartheid South African Government's Use of the Military Tool in it's Foreign Policy Conduct from 1994 to 2006", PhD thesis, Univ. of Copenhagen, 2007, pp. 218–219.

137. C. de Coning, "Lesotho Intervention: Implications for SADC, Military Interventions, Peacekeeping and the African Renaissance", Paper delivered at University of Pretoria, 10 November 1998; S. Segar, "Buthelezi Defends SA's Lesotho Raid", *Natal Witness*, 23 September 1998; J. Ngculu, "The Role of the Parliamentary Defence Committees in Ensuring Effective Oversight: The South African Experience", in R. Williams, G. Cawthra and D. Abrahams (eds), *Ourselves to Know: Civil-Military Relations and Defence Transformation in Southern Africa* (Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2003), pp. 182–183.

138. Mandrup, *Africa, Salvation or Despair?*, p. 221.

139. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

this was hardly the opportune moment to embark on a military adventure. And, given that most command positions in the SANDF were still held by white former SADF officers, it could be an extremely risky undertaking.

However, it is important to bear in mind that South Africa's interests went beyond simply the stabilisation of the political unrest in Lesotho. The vast joint South African/Lesotho Highlands Water Project, which included the large Katse Dam, then still under construction in the mountains of the kingdom, was to provide water primarily for the republic's economic hub, the province of Gauteng.¹⁴⁰ It was a strategically vital installation for South Africa and needed to be protected from damage at all costs. In this regard, not to intervene could have had extremely damaging consequences, so South Africa clearly felt justified in protecting its own interests.¹⁴¹

In discussing Operation BOLEAS, however, the political and economic issues that surrounded the action, the questionable claimed status of the Combined Task Force (CTF) as being a tool of SADC and the shaky justification for intervention are not the focus of this thesis. These have been addressed in numerous other reports, articles and papers.¹⁴² Here the concern is the part played by the SANDF paratroopers during the operation and specifically their employment in an airborne role.

The mission of the Combined Task Force (CTF) was apparently given as "... to intervene militarily in Lesotho to prevent any further anarchy and to create a stable environment for the restoration of law and order".¹⁴³ South Africa was to be the lead nation in the execution of the operation. Dippenaar's short-lived RDF had by then passed from the scene and the man placed in command was Colonel Robbie Hartsliet, a South African Armoured Corps officer from the old SADF. He had considerable operational experience and was also trained in peacekeeping operations.¹⁴⁴ He was, in 1998, the OC 43 SA Brigade (one of two brigade HQs established after further cuts in the defence budget resulted in the

140. J.-A. K. van Wyk, "The International Politics of Dams with Specific Reference to Lesotho", *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 22, 1 (June 2000).

141. T. Neethling, "Conditions for Successful Entry and Exit: An Assessment of SADC Allied Operations in Lesotho", in M. Malan (ed.), *Boundaries of Peace Support Operations: The African Dimension*, Monograph No. 44 (Pretoria, Institute of Strategic Studies, 2000).

142. See for example, M. Malan, "Regional Power Politics under Cover of SADC: Running Amok with a Mythical Organ", Institute for Security Studies, Occasional Paper No. 35, October 1998; K. O'Grady, "A City Ruined by Bungled Intervention", *Business Day*, 25 September 1998; G. Barrie, "South Africa's Forcible Intervention in Lesotho", *De Rebus*, January 1999; M. Buthelezi, "It was Intervention, not Invasion", *Star*, 6 October 1998. See also Mandrup, *Africa: Salvation or Despair?*; and Neethling, "Conditions for Successful Entry and Exit".

143. Neethling, "Conditions for Successful Entry and Exit".

144. *Ibid.*

closure of the two divisions), which also provided the HQ for Operation BOLEAS. His force assembled outside Bloemfontein, where a massive mobilisation centre existed in the military training area of De Brug.

Hartslief had only a few days to do his planning and to prepare his forces. It was not possible to interview him, as he died in 2006, but it seems intelligence about the situation on the ground in the capital city of Maseru was sparse and out of date.¹⁴⁵ However, he did intimate that special forces had been deployed inside Lesotho during the run-up to the operation in order to provide current intelligence.¹⁴⁶ In the event, this so-called intelligence appeared to be of very little value and mostly quite inaccurate. Because of this shortcoming, no serious resistance was expected from the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF) and he deliberately limited the size and composition of the force he would initially send in to about 600 soldiers (no more than a single battalion). Among the elements allocated to him for the operation was the support company of 1 Parachute Battalion, commanded by Captain Meyer Jooste, and the pathfinder platoon, commanded by Captain Sakkie van Rensburg.¹⁴⁷ The parachute brigade commander, Colonel Skillie van der Walt, and his SO1 Operations were attached to Hartslief's HQ as advisors on the employment of the paratroopers. HQ 44 Parachute Brigade as such was not involved in the operation.¹⁴⁸ Neither was the HQ of 1 Parachute Battalion deployed, because the parachute company and the pathfinder platoon were placed directly under operational command of the OC 43 SA Brigade.¹⁴⁹

When he subsequently reported on the operation to various joint parliamentary committees, Hartslief explained that he had three priorities.¹⁵⁰ The first was to create a stable environment in Maseru. This involved securing the border post, the Lesotho Defence Force bases, the Lesotho Radio Broadcasting station; and the embassies. The second priority was to secure the royal palace and the air force bases. Lastly, he had to secure the operational areas such as Maseru and the Katse Dam as a whole. Information had been received that the Lesotho Defence Force dissidents might attack around the Katse Dam where there were two villages in which 198 South Africans lived. These therefore needed to

145. G.P.H. Kruijs, "Planning Military Interventions: The Need for a Comprehensive South African Governmental Process", *Selected Military Issues with Specific Reference to the Republic of South Africa*, Institute for Strategic Studies, ad hoc Publication No. 38, August 2001, pp. 63–64.

146. Neethling, "Conditions for Successful Entry and Exit".

147. E-mail, Lt Col Skillie le Roux (ret'd), Bloemfontein, 27 March 2015.

148. E-mails, Col Skillie van der Walt (ret'd), Bloemfontein, 29 March 2015.

149. E-mail, Lt Col John Brooks (ret'd), Bloemfontein, 31 March 2015.

150. "Report on Situation in Lesotho", Joint Meeting of the Joint Standing Committee on Defence, Foreign Affairs Portfolio Committee and Security and Justice Select Committee, 2 November 1998.

be secured. However, according to the paratrooper company commander, the orders that were issued to him indicated no major resistance was expected and their task was primarily one of simply reinforcing the largely loyal LDF against some dissident elements.¹⁵¹

Colonel Hartsliel issued his orders to the paratroopers at the Headquarters of Orange Free State Command in Bloemfontein on 21 September 1998. The Support Company had been reorganised as a rifle company for internal urban deployments and this was how it deployed in Lesotho, equipped with R4 rifles (5.56mm) and a mixture of Belgian MAG and South African SS-77 light machine-guns (7.62mm). The company commander recalled their mission being given as “to assist the Military Forces of Lesotho by ensuring that rebel elements did not take over the Makonyane Military Base”. The orders stressed that it was to be a support mission and that they were not to show aggression. Captain Meyer Jooste, the company commander, made his plan and presented this to the CTF HQ. He had chosen to take along additional weapons in the form of 40mm grenade launchers and RPG-7 anti-tank rocket-launchers in case he would need to attack fortified buildings. He was instructed to leave the rocket-launchers behind, because this presented too aggressive an appearance for a “peace support mission”. Fortunately, he ignored this instruction and took them along as a precautionary measure. He also issued his men with additional hand grenades and extra ammunition for their rifles and machine-guns.¹⁵²

The mechanised elements of the Combined Task Force moved by vehicle to Ladybrand, on the border with Lesotho and opposite the capital of Maseru. The paratroopers, however, stood by at Air Force Base Bloemspruit, just outside Bloemfontein, together with the helicopters that would deploy them the 130km to Maseru. There were six of the new Oryx helicopters (yet to be tested in battle) available to transport the paratroopers, with two Alouette gunships for fire support and two more Alouettes for command and control.¹⁵³ This meant that Jooste could transport almost 100 paratroopers in one lift. The operation was scheduled to take place at dawn the next day, but for reasons that are obscure, the mechanised infantry company (to be provided by Botswana) had not arrived. Hartsliel obtained permission to launch the operation without the Botswana. The force on the first day of the operation, 22 September 1998, consisted of a composite SANDF mechanised infantry battalion group with a paratrooper company.¹⁵⁴ The mechanised force

151. E-mail, Maj Meyer Jooste (ret'd), Pretoria, 12 May 2015.

152. Ibid.

153. Neethling: “Conditions for Successful Entry and Exit”.

154. “Military Assistance to Lesotho: Operation BOLEAS”, *C SANDF Bulletin*, 57/98, 22 September 1998.

crossed the Maseru Bridge over the Caledon River into Lesotho at 05h00, but immediately encountered heavy resistance from the LDF, who appear to have been expecting them.¹⁵⁵ The SANDF soldiers were taken completely by surprise when they met with this armed opposition, having initially planned to use only blank ammunition to avoid casualties.¹⁵⁶

The paratrooper company, however, had no blank ammunition. Their commander claims to have been suspicious of this “support mission” from the outset. Mounted in the Oryx helicopters they were flown directly from Bloemspruit to the LDF Makonyane Base on the outskirts of Maseru. The Alouettes, due to their more limited range, flew ahead and refuelled at Ladybrand, linking up with the fleet of Oryx helicopters as these approached the border. The designated LZ was inside the Makonyane base, but as no significant resistance had been expected, it had not been secured beforehand. As the helicopters came in on their final approach, they drew fire. Not only was the base already in the hands of the rebels, but virtually the whole of the LDF were siding with the dissidents, and they were expecting the South Africans! Despite the fire that they encountered, the helicopters hovered long enough for the paratroopers to disembark, and some of the soldiers were hit by LDF fire as soon as they leapt out.¹⁵⁷ One of the Oryx helicopters was also hit, but managed to recover to Ladybrand back across the border. The damage was apparently not serious,¹⁵⁸ but Jooste subsequently heard that one of the helicopter pilots had been wounded in the leg.¹⁵⁹

Totally unexpectedly, the “support mission” had instantaneously turned into a full-scale battle with the paratroopers, in a typically airborne scenario, completely surrounded by their adversaries. The LDF had some heavy weaponry, including 12.7mm (or .50 inch) Browning machine-guns and 14.5mm anti-aircraft guns that they employed in the ground role. Caught in the open, the paratroopers were suffering heavy casualties, but then the Allouette gunships opened up on the LDF with their 20mm door cannons, firing high explosive shells into the LDF positions. This neutralising fire enabled the paratroopers to run for the nearest cover. The company commander described the role of the gunships in emphatic terms: “They made a major difference; I honestly believe we would have suffered many more casualties if they did not provide covering fire to get us out of the open where

155. “SANDF Met with Fire: SA Soldiers Killed amid Fierce Resistance and Looting in Lesotho”, *Natal Witness*, 23 September 1998; Email, WO1 Sakkie Cornelissen (retd), Ladysmith, 27 March 2015; “Operation BOLEAS: Update 1”, *C SANDF Bulletin*, No. 58/98, 22 September 1998.

156. “CSANDF Media Conference Operation BOLEAS in Perspective”, *C SANDF Bulletin*, 63/98, 1 October 1998.

157. E-mail, Maj Meyer Jooste (retd), Pretoria, 12 May 2015.

158. “Operation BOLEAS: Update 2”, *C SANDF Bulletin*, 59/98, 22 September 1998.

159. E-mail, Maj Meyer Jooste (retd), Pretoria, 12 May 2015.

we suffered the most casualties.” Once they had taken whatever cover they could find, the paratroopers remained momentarily pinned down, with heavy fire coming at them from almost every direction. But it took Jooste barely a few seconds to sum up the situation, make a quick combat appreciation and to launch his counter-attack.¹⁶⁰ At this stage much of the LDF attention had shifted to the helicopter gunships, which now drew heavy fire.¹⁶¹

For the South African paratroopers, the rules of engagement that had been imposed on them were a source of some confusion. They had been told to avoid causing casualties and to avoid opening fire as far as possible. In addition, according to their company commander, the years of urban deployments where the concept of “minimum force” had constantly been drilled into them, made them reluctant to now return fire. So often they had been threatened with being charged and even seen others charged with murder, that they were not anxious to now expose themselves to such possibilities. Jooste had to act quickly to restore the situation, and in paratrooper tradition, he ran out in front of his men and personally began to clear some of the buildings with grenades and automatic rifle fire. Only then was the spell broken, and the paratroopers, blunted by the years of “peace”, the emphasis on human rights and the constant publicity afforded the TRC, regained their sharpness as elite fighting soldiers. They then quickly went onto the offensive.¹⁶²

As they went over to the assault, the paratroopers had to cross open, exposed ground and they unhesitatingly stormed across this in the face of heavy fire from the defending rebels, following their commander.¹⁶³ But the rebels knew the layout of the base well and were able to move from one building to another, keeping under cover and continuing to pour devastating fire onto the paratroopers. The RPG-7 rockets that Jooste had so prudently brought along now came into their own, enabling the lightly armed paratroopers to demolish some of the cover being used by the rebels. After several hours of fighting, six paratroopers had been killed and many more, including the commander, Captain Jooste, had been wounded. Another officer, Lieutenant Leon Lerm, was also wounded.¹⁶⁴ He was a platoon commander, and lost the sight of one eye in the fighting.¹⁶⁵ Far greater casualties were apparent among the rebels, however, with bodies lying about in each position that they vacated as the paratroopers pushed them back.

160. E-mail, Maj Meyer Jooste (retd), Pretoria, 12 May 2015.

161. “Operation BOLEAS: Update 1”, *C SANDF Bulletin*, 58/98, 22 September 1998.

162. E-mail, Lt Col John Brooks (retd), Bloemfontein, 31 March 2015.

163. Ibid.

164. E-mail, Lt Col Skillie le Roux (retd), Bloemfontein, 27 March 2015.

165. E-mail, Maj Meyer Jooste (retd), Pretoria, 20 May 2015.

There was no means of replenishment and the paratroopers were soon running short of ammunition. Fortunately for them, the LDF also used the South African R4 rifle, and they were able to use the ammunition of their opponents as they overran each position. They also turned the heavier weapons that they captured against the LDF. Being a support company, they were trained in the use of such weapons. Eventually, several Ratel ICVs from 1 SA Infantry Battalion managed to push through the city and link up with the paratroopers, ostensibly to provide them with greater firepower. But they had difficulty finding a suitable position to use as a fire support base and there were problems with the 90mm guns on some of the Ratels, apparently not having been test-fired before the operation. They were, however, able to provide the paratroopers with suppressive covering fire with their machine-guns and to assist them in their tactical movement on the ground. While some of the vehicles were used to evacuate the growing number of paratrooper casualties rather than to engage the LDF, the mechanised infantry commander who had linked up with the paratroopers did assist in the final mopping up and clearance of the base. An Mfezi armoured ambulance was also used for casualty evacuation.¹⁶⁶

The South Africans took prisoners, almost all of them wounded. They were initially held at the company HQ until they too, could be evacuated with the wounded and dead paratroopers. The company commander, although he had been wounded in the early stages of the battle, continued to fight throughout the day and was eventually evacuated for treatment at 16h00 in the afternoon. He handed over command of the company to his second-in-command, Captain Pierre van Rheede van Oudtshoorn. The fighting inside the Makonyane Base continued sporadically through the night, but by late afternoon the back of the resistance had been broken. The remaining LDF rebels dissipated and fled into the mountains.¹⁶⁷

While the fighting was taking place in Maseru, the pathfinder platoon from 44 Parachute Brigade was engaged in its own battle. These highly trained specialist paratroopers had initially been tasked to capture the radio station in Maseru, supported by an armoured element from 1 Special Service Battalion (1 SSB). However, at the last minute this was changed, with 1 SSB taking sole responsibility for the radio station, while the pathfinders were diverted to secure a very different objective: the Katse Dam. The pathfinders were divided into two teams, each with a different target in the objective area.

166. E-mails, Maj Meyer Jooste (ret'd), Pretoria, 12 and 21 May 2015.

167. E-mail, Lt Col John Brooks (ret'd), Bloemfontein, 31 March 2015.

These were Katse village and Mohale village, where the South Africans who were working on the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP) and the other ex-patriates lived. The mission given to the pathfinders was to secure their safety. There was a concern at the CTF HQ that retribution would be wrought on these civilians as a result of the incursion.¹⁶⁸

Poor intelligence also dogged this mission. As had been the case in Maseru, the pathfinders were not expecting resistance, but when the helicopters came in to land near the dam wall, they came under heavy fire. The pathfinders disembarked into a hail of lead, and the MO and a medic with them were both hit. The others went straight into an assault on the LDF positions, overrunning them by the sheer ferocity of their attack and killing several of the defenders. The LDF rebels surrendered, but the paratrooper doctor and his medic, of 7 Medical Battalion Group, were both dead.¹⁶⁹

In the meantime, outside Bloemfontein, the rest of 1 Parachute Battalion was busy with a shooting exercise on the classification range in the De Brug military training area. Unaware of events in Maseru, the battalion suddenly received orders on the radio from the brigade commander, Colonel Van der Walt – they were to report immediately to the OFS Command magazine (also located in the training area) to be issued with first-line ammunition. While they were busy with this, four Oryx helicopters arrived overhead and landed beside the magazine. Two platoons of heavily armed paratroopers emplaned and were immediately flown to Lesotho, less than 150km away. The remaining two companies and a platoon embussed into troop transporters and were trucked to the border.¹⁷⁰

The Botswana Defence Force company of mechanised infantry, travelling the almost 700km from Gaborone, joined Combined Task Force on the evening of 22 September, twelve hours after the start of the intervention.¹⁷¹ By the time they arrived most of the fighting in Maseru was over and the looting by Basotho citizens was in full swing. Although the Botswana commander in later years apparently denigrated the SANDF and claimed kudos for the operation,¹⁷² there is no evidence to back his claims. In fact, it appears that the late arrival of the Botswana infantry company could be blamed for the looting, because they were supposed to secure the CBD of Maseru while the SANDF subdued the LDF bases outside the capital.¹⁷³

168. E-mail, Capt Sakkie Jansen van Rensburg (ret'd), Lobito, Angola, 26 May 2015.

169. Ibid.

170. E-mail, WO1 Sakkie Cornelissen (ret'd), Ladysmith, 27 March 2015.

171. Neethling, "Conditions for Successful Entry and Exit".

172. K. Mpolokeng and L. Seitshiro, "A Soldier of Fortune", *Sunday Standard* (Botswana), 18 July 2007.

173. Kruijs, "Planning Military Interventions", p. 64.

Because the resistance offered by the LDF was totally unexpected, it soon became apparent that a stronger force was required to stabilise the situation. Other units in Bloemfontein, such as 1 SA Infantry Battalion (mechanised) and 1 Special Service Battalion (armoured cars), both of which already had sub-units deployed in the operation, sent reinforcements.¹⁷⁴ Their mobilisation took far longer than the paratrooper reinforcements, as their logistic requirements were much greater and more complex. It was justification of the parachute brigade's long-time contention that the only true rapid deployment force was an airborne force. The paratroopers who were lying unsuspectingly on the shooting range at De Brug were literally in combat nearly 200km away within two hours of being tasked. There was no way that mechanised and armoured forces could match that.

Subsequently in parliament, the deputy Foreign Affairs minister stated that within two days the military objectives had been achieved and the security situation brought under control.¹⁷⁵ The SANDF, however, claimed in its published debrief of the operation that "the objectives set for the operation were achieved within the first day".¹⁷⁶

Towards the end of September it was decided to withdraw all the paratroopers from where they were, and to form airborne reaction forces at three key points of the Lesotho Highlands Water Scheme, namely Mohale Dam, Katse Dam and Lejone. These company-sized forces would be able to deploy at short notice by helicopter and could also defend the installations where they were based. A paratrooper tactical HQ was set up at Mohale under the new battalion commander, Lt Col Skillie le Roux to coordinate their actions, but by then all resistance had crumbled and they saw no further action. They remained in these positions for several weeks until all elements of 1 Parachute Battalion were withdrawn back to Bloemfontein.¹⁷⁷ SANDF troop levels in Lesotho were increased to some 3,500 during October 1998 to deal with the very uncertain situation.¹⁷⁸ It is of interest that this approximates the number deployed by the old SADF inside Angola during the heaviest fighting there.¹⁷⁹ This indicates how manpower-intensive peacekeeping operations can be.

174. E-mail, WO1 Sakkie Cornelissen (retd), Ladysmith, 27 March 2015.

175. "Statement on Lesotho by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Aziz Pahad, to the National Assembly, 3 November 1998", in M. Hough and A. du Plessis (eds), *Selected Official South African Strategic and Security Perceptions, 1992–2000* (Pretoria, Institute for Strategic Studies, 2000), p. 134.

176. *Ibid.*, Extracts from *SANDF Yearbook 1998/1999*, "Joint Operations Division: External Operations: Military Intervention, Operation BOLEAS", p. 135.

177. E-mail letter from Lt Col Skillie le Roux (retd), Bloemfontein, 27 March 2015.

178. Neethling, "Conditions for Successful Entry and Exit".

179. F. Bridgland, *The War for Africa: Twelve Months that Transformed a Continent* (Gibraltar, Ashanti, 1990), p. 1.

Total South African casualties during Operation BOLEAS were 8 dead and 17 wounded; the Lesotho casualties were 29 dead and 51 wounded.¹⁸⁰ The eight South Africans killed in the operation were all paratroopers as were nine of those wounded.¹⁸¹ It was the paratroopers who had borne the brunt of the heaviest fighting and several of them were recommended for bravery awards.¹⁸² Captain Meyer Jooste (by then a major) was awarded the Pro Virtute Decoration (PVD) for his outstanding leadership under fire. Nine of the others received the Army Cross.¹⁸³

The operation marked the transition of South Africa's military from the era of destabilising offensive intervention into neighbouring countries that characterised the old SADF in the 1970s and 1980s to the new SANDF's entrance into peace support operations (PSO), albeit by means of an interventionist PSO. Unlike the operations in Angola, the South African forces in BOLEAS were committed to minimum force. In every contact in which they were involved, the SANDF only opened fire after they had been fired upon.¹⁸⁴ Although Hartslief later informed a joint Parliamentary Committee that it had been a military intervention and not a peace support operation,¹⁸⁵ the action could be defined as a "peacemaking" operation in terms of Chapter VII of the UN Charter where military force can be authorised in the face of a "threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression".¹⁸⁶ But the incursion into Lesotho did not have UN approval and whether there was in fact a threat to peace or an act of aggression by the LDF is debatable.

Operation BOLEAS succeeded in securing Lesotho's strategic installations such as the Lesotho Highlands Water Project and key buildings in Maseru.¹⁸⁷ According to Neethling,

It would be fair to state from a purely military viewpoint that Operation Boleas had been successfully conducted, as it did succeed in stabilising the security situation in Lesotho, which allowed the political parties to resume negotiations around the issue of governance. In addition, it safeguarded South Africa's

180. "Report on Situation in Lesotho", Joint Meeting of the Joint Standing Committee on Defence; Foreign Affairs Portfolio Committee; Security and Justice Select Committee, 2 November 1998; Mandrup, *Africa, Salvation or Despair?*, p. 224; "Take Note", *Department of Defence Bulletin*, 62/98, 30 September 1998.

181. Information provided by Communication Section, 44 Para Bde, 18 June 1999.

182. E-mail, Lt Col John Brooks (ret'd), Bloemfontein, 31 March 2015.

183. E-mail, Maj Meyer Jooste (ret'd), Pretoria, 12 May 2015.

184. Neethling, "Conditions for Successful Entry and Exit".

185. "Report on Situation in Lesotho", Joint Meeting of the Joint Standing Committee on Defence; Foreign Affairs Portfolio Committee; Security and Justice Select Committee, 2 November 1998.

186. B. Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping*, Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to statement adopted by the Summit Meeting of the Security Council on 31 January 1992 (New York, United Nations, 1992), p. 24.

187. A. van Nieuwkerk, "Implications for South Africa's Foreign Policy beyond the Lesotho Crisis", African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), Occasional Paper No. 3, 1999, pp. 1-4.

interests in Lesotho and succeeded in securing strategic installations from being taken over or destroyed by the mutinous forces.”¹⁸⁸

The SANDF also saw Operation BOLEAS as having had a positive effect on the integration and transformation processes within the Defence Force.¹⁸⁹ According to Meyer, the action served to dispel some of the suspicions within the ranks of the paratroopers and was a boost to their sagging morale.¹⁹⁰ Coming as it did after the setbacks of the Cassinga Day controversy and the arms theft earlier that year, this was significant. The intensity of the shared experience of combat is known to forge a unique form of camaraderie, and the paratroopers who participated in the toughest fighting of Operation BOLEAS came from disparate origins: there were those black soldiers who had been recruited into the old SADF directly from the streets; there were former black Angolans who had come to 1 Parachute Battalion via the controversial 32 Battalion; and there were paratroopers from the former TDF, CDF and BDF. The officers and NCOs, though mainly from the former SADF, included some from the TDF, CDF and BDF.¹⁹¹ Aside from the political and military side of the operation, for the paratroopers it thus also had a significant forging effect on integration.

Operation BOLEAS was the combat debut of the Oryx helicopter, and it emerged with flying colours. It proved to be a worthy successor to the Puma and its extra power and greater carrying capacity contributed substantially to the success of the paratroopers during the securing of the Makonyane Base. The operation also proved to be the last time that the deadly 20mm Alouette gunship was used in action. The versatile but ageing little helicopter was gradually phased out of service in the years after the Lesotho incursion and replaced by the modern Agusta A-109, which carried no armament. The South African designed and purpose-built Rooivalk attack helicopter became the new gunship.

The two helicopter assaults were extremely effective and could almost be termed decisive in the success of the South African operation. This despite the fact that they were launched on the basis of an abysmally poor reading of the situation and with an almost total absence of accurate intelligence. The paratrooper company commander was understandably angry that his soldiers had been sent into such a cauldron under a false impression, and that those who should have gathered the necessary intelligence had failed to do so. He felt bitterness towards those in authority who, despite the unacceptable risks,

188. Neethling, “Conditions for Successful Entry and Exit”.

189. Extracts from *SANDF Yearbook 1998/1999*, in Hough and Du Plessis (eds), *Selected Official South African Strategic and Security Perceptions*, p. 138.

190. E-mail, Maj Meyer Jooste (ret'd), Pretoria, 12 May 2015.

191. Ibid., 20 May 2015.

had nevertheless been prepared to lay the lives of his soldiers on the line, resulting in the deaths and serious injury of brave and highly trained paratroopers.¹⁹²

Of particular significance to this thesis is that the two airborne actions reflected both tactics and strategy. The fight in the Makonyane Base had been a clear example of a tactical airborne operation in support of ground forces, while the more distant attack on the vital Katse Dam (some 100km from Maseru, as the crow flies) can be seen as a strategic airborne operation. But it formed an integral and secondary part of the greater operation, so it was not an independent airborne operation.

There can be no doubt that Operation BOLEAS confirmed the value of airborne forces, particularly in the helicopter role. Yet if anything, it emphasised their tactical value and did nothing to promote their strategic potential. The value of a purely airborne surgical strike such as that on the Katse Dam, where restrictions of time, distance and difficult terrain were easily overcome; where surprise was achieved; where no collateral damage to civilian infrastructure occurred; and where the objective was successfully taken at minimal cost in lives, appears to have been lost as an example of the greater potential of airborne forces in Africa. Instead, the focus fell on the employment of the mechanised cudgel in Maseru, rather than the airborne rapier. Yet even there, it was the lighter, airborne elements that were called upon to carry out the *coup de grace* to the rebel resistance. Fortunately, several of the helicopter pilots were veterans of the Thirty Year War and remained steady in the face of fire. And the fact that there was a sprinkling of hardened combat veterans among the paratroopers in the form of former 32 Battalion soldiers would certainly have contributed towards their success. Yet the crucial factor was the exceptional combat leadership shown by the paratrooper officers and senior NCOs.

13.8. THE FINAL DEMISE OF THE PARACHUTE BRIGADE

A further factor in the changing military picture in South Africa at the time was the Defence Review process, the origins of which can be traced to the *White Paper on Defence*, published in 1996.¹⁹³ The White Paper was developed from a concept framework drawn up by the office of the Directorate Strategy, which was part of the Operations Division in Defence Headquarters. This framework, based on Guidelines for Planning issued by the office of the Chief of the SANDF, had been accepted by what was then known as the

192. E-mail, Maj Meyer Jooste (ret'd), Pretoria, 12 May 2015.

193. "Defence in a Democracy", *White Paper on Defence*, 1996.

Defence Command Council.¹⁹⁴The Defence Review, published in 1998, was aimed at ensuring an affordable peacetime force comprising a small regular component backed up by a larger part-time component, forming together a “core force” capable of dealing with small-scale contingencies, but able to expand if the security situation deteriorated.¹⁹⁵

For the Army, this was seen as a RDF comprising a mechanised brigade, a parachute brigade and a special forces brigade.¹⁹⁶ The term “rapid deployment” was seen as applying to this force because it was full-time and did not require mobilisation before it was deployed. It was therefore seen as part of the core force. The remainder of the Army’s conventional forces were seen as consisting of part-time units that would first have to be mobilised to provide the expansion of the core force capability.

The Defence Review went on to provide four alternatives for future SANDF design. Each one of these included a parachute brigade.¹⁹⁷ The option approved by the cabinet of the ANC’s South African government,¹⁹⁸ was for a minimum force level to be maintained as a growth core without the permanent loss of capabilities. There should therefore have been no doubt about the continued existence of the parachute brigade in the Army of the future. Unfortunately, however, in its references to the part-time component of the SANDF, the Defence Review left a loophole that was used for downgrading the paratroopers: “Existing regiments should be retained where feasible, albeit in a down-sized form. Plans should be made to ensure representativeness within these units.”¹⁹⁹

13.8.1. Downgrading to a Parachute Regiment

In July 1997, the Chief of the Army appointed a retired former paratrooper, Major General Marius “Mo” Oelschig, to chair an investigation into how the parachute forces could be reduced in size.²⁰⁰ Oelschig had spent nine years as an officer with 1 Parachute Battalion in the 1960s. Though he had no exposure to the parachute brigade, he did have an abiding loyalty to the paratroopers.²⁰¹ Also part of the investigation was the OC 44 Parachute

194. E-mail, Maj Gen Marius Oelschig (retd), Canada, 5 April 2015.

195. *South African Defence Review 1998*, Chapter 1, Paragraph 38.

196. *Ibid.*, Chapter 8, Paragraph 20.

197. *Ibid.*, Chapter 8, Tables set out under Paragraph 74.

198. R. Williams, “Defence in a Democracy: The South African Defence Review and the Redefinition of the Parameters of the National Defence Debate”, in Williams, Cawthra and Abrahams (eds), *Ourselves to Know*, p. 211.

199. *South African Defence Review 1998*, Chapter 11, Paragraph 84.1.

200. Confidential OC 44 Para Bde to C SANDF, “Transformasie van die SANW: Magstruktuur van die SA Leër, Voortbestaan van 44 Valskermbrigade”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/V/501/6/1, March 1998.

201. E-mail, Maj Gen Marius Oelschig (retd), Canada, 5 April 2015.

Brigade, Colonel Van der Walt, who could provide current inputs regarding the brigade.²⁰²

According to Oelschig,

Those were the “post bush-war years”, when the entire defence establishment, including the defence industry, was being subjected to incredible fiscal pressure. The SA Defence Force was in the throes of a future “size and shape” exercise, unprecedented since the post-WW II era.²⁰³

There was therefore no doubt that a downsizing was unavoidable, but the team that was investigating how this should be implemented would at least make its recommendations with the best interests of the paratroopers at heart. Oelschig recalls that it was his understanding that the Army was to retain a parachute capability at all costs, including parachute training personnel and facilities as well as an operational capability. The Air Force too, was to retain the ability to deliver a parachute force. Unfortunately, it was not possible to access a copy of Oelschig’s letter of appointment or of his final report. However, a summary of the recommendations in the report is contained in a document outlining discussions held about the SANDF parachute forces in October 1998.²⁰⁴ It does seem that there was no prescription regarding the size and shape of the parachute capability that he was to recommend. He does confirm that he gave frequent feedback to the Army Command Council on his investigation and that there was never at any time any interference in what he was doing.²⁰⁵ In a letter to the Chief of the SANDF, written by the OC 44 Parachute Brigade in March 1998, the findings of the investigation team are outlined as indicating a requirement for an airborne HQ to exercise command over the various parachute elements; a full-time parachute battalion group; a part-time parachute battalion; combat support and combat service support elements; a full-time pathfinder platoon; a parachute school; a parachute storage, packing and repair depot; and an air-supply capability.²⁰⁶ It amounted to a reduction of the operational airborne capability from a full-strength brigade to a headquarters and two battalion groups (one of them being only part-time).

Van der Walt claims that he and Oelschig had in fact recommended that the brigade be reduced to a regiment, without supporting arms, and responsible only for the training of paratroopers and the administration of all infantry elements. However, he says that they

202. E-mail, Col Skillie van der Walt (retd), Bloemfontein, 29 March 2015.

203. E-mail, Maj Gen Marius Oelschig (retd), Canada, 5 April 2015.

204. Restricted document, “Summary of Informal Discussions held on the SANDF Parachute Forces, Letaba Rivers Game Reserve, 9–11 October 1998”, Ref. FNC/CS3/309/1, 20 October 1998.

205. E-mail, Maj Gen Marius Oelschig (retd), Canada, 5 April 2015.

206. Confidential OC 44 Para Bde to C SANDF, “Transformasie van die SANW: Magstruktuur van die SA Leër, Voortbestaan van 44 Valskermbrigade”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/V/501/6/1, March 1998.

recommended that a brigade HQ be retained in core form for the operational employment of the paratroops from all the various corps when necessary.²⁰⁷ Oelschig confirmed that his investigation team proposed to the Army Command Council that they create and maintain a “skeleton” parachute brigade HQ; one that could be fully activated and expanded as the need arose. Oelschig also spoke to Lieutenant General Deon Ferreira, the designated first Chief of Joint Operations, which was the organisation that was in the process of being created to run all SANDF operations in future. The new Special Forces Brigade was to fall permanently under command of Joint Operations, and Oelschig now suggested that the proposed core of a parachute brigade HQ should also be co-located with the Joint Operations HQ. Ferreira was enthusiastic about the idea; such an arrangement would give him immediate access to both an airborne and a special forces capability. He gave Oelschig permission to add his personal stamp of approval on the proposal when it was presented as an option to the Chief of the Army and his General Staff. The Army, however, did not receive the idea with the same enthusiasm; losing command of an elite grouping like the paratroopers did not appear as an attractive prospect!²⁰⁸

To what extent the Army Command Council accepted the recommendations when Oelschig delivered his final report at the end of October 1997 could not be ascertained. Oelschig returned to his retirement and had nothing further to do with the matter.²⁰⁹ It appears however, that the idea of a parachute brigade HQ was summarily dismissed, probably on financial grounds, because on 9 March 1998, Van der Walt was summoned before the Chief of the Army and his General Staff and informed that the parachute organisation was to be scaled down to a single parachute battalion, as had existed in the 1960s, and that it would fall under command of the new Infantry Formation.²¹⁰ This meant the end of the parachute battalion group concept.

The decision to do away with the parachute brigade was in direct contradiction to the Defence Review intentions, but it was almost certainly made because of the severe cuts in the Defence budget. Cutting a parachute capability was an easy exercise, because it did not involve major equipment items such as armoured vehicles becoming redundant. In all likelihood, an Army General Staff dominated by Armoured Corps officers did not help the paratrooper cause either.

207. E-mail, Col Skillie van der Walt (ret'd), Bloemfontein, 29 March 2015.

208. E-mail, Maj Gen Marius Oelschig (ret'd), Canada, 8 April 2015.

209. Ibid.

210. Confidential OC 44 Para Bde to C SANDF, “Transformasie van die SANW: Magstruktuur van die SA Leër, Voortbestaan van 44 Valskermbrigade”, Ref. 44 VALSK BDE/V/501/6/1, March 1998.

At the time, in the light of the severe budgetary cuts and a euphoric sense of lasting peace in southern Africa,²¹¹ an airborne force capable of operating independently of ground forces made little sense to the generals. No one could have foreseen the sobering experience of Operation BOLEAS and the Lesotho incursion that lay only months ahead. For the paratroopers, the golden years of Constand Viljoen's grasp of vertical envelopment as a form of manoeuvre were long gone and they no longer had a champion of his calibre and conviction at Army HQ. But neither was there a war in progress, nor a generous defence budget to draw on.

Efforts were made from some quarters to offer alternative solutions regarding the command and control of the parachute forces,²¹² but to no avail. A number of senior paratrooper officers, both serving and retired, were concerned at the direction in which the Army was moving with the parachute forces. Distressed that the paratroopers had been discredited and brought into disrepute by events such as the Cassinga Day controversy, the massive weapons theft and the action of the OC 44 Parachute Brigade in instituting litigation against the SANDF, seven of them met at a private game park in the bushveld to discuss the situation over the period 9 to 11 October 1998. They submitted several suggestions, including that a regular parachute battalion group should be permanently grouped.²¹³ But the seven paratrooper officers were all white and all formerly from the SADF, and under the prevailing conditions their collective opinion, never asked for in the first place, held almost no credibility and carried no weight.

In 1999, after Van der Walt's departure, 44 Parachute Brigade was downgraded to a regimental status.²¹⁴ This meant that the brigade headquarters disappeared, and with it the ability for the paratroopers to command their own units in operations. All operational staff were lost and the regimental HQ henceforth had only an administrative role over its units and a supervisory role over parachute and infantry training. The regiment administered 1 and 3 Parachute Battalions, the Parachute Training Centre, a pathfinder platoon and some technical and logistic elements. This effectively heralded a return to the situation where independent strategic airborne operations were no longer an option.

211. Extracts from *SANDF Yearbook 1998/1999*, in Hough and Du Plessis (eds), *Selected Official South African Strategic and Security Perceptions*, p. 138.

212. Restricted "Staff Paper for the Chief of Joint Operations on a Proposed Command and Control Structure for SANDF Airborne Forces by Colonel McGill Alexander", Ref. FNC/R/501, 11 May 1998.

213. Restricted "Summary of Informal Discussions held on the SANDF Parachute Forces, Letaba Rivers Game Reserve, 9–11 October 1998", Ref. FNC/CS3/309/1, 20 October 1998.

214. "Short History of the South African Airborne Forces", Airborne Seminar folder, 44 Parachute Regiment, Bloemfontein, 31 May 2002.

13.8.2. Withdrawal from Service of Aircraft Types

The Air Force too, was struggling to remain viable under budgetary constraints. And without the Air Force, the paratroopers had no *raison d'être*. It was therefore with shock that the paratroopers learned that the nine C-160Z Transall aircraft, each capable of delivering 64 paratroopers, were being withdrawn from service in 1993.²¹⁵ These aircraft, so exceptionally suitable for conditions in Africa, had been delivered to the SAAF from France between 1969 and 1970 and had played a vital role in the training and operational employment of airborne troops for 24 years.

Eight of the aircraft were put up for sale, and one was given to the SAAF Museum. The Franco-German Transall had many advantageous characteristics, such as having been designed specifically for the dropping of paratroopers (making it an easy aircraft to jump and to dispatch from), being able to land on extremely rough airstrips and being capable of carrying a Puma helicopter without having to remove the rotor-head. However, the Transalls were, in the words of a former commander of the Air Force command Post in Pretoria, "probably the most difficult and expensive aircraft to maintain in the inventory of the SAAF, owing to the extreme difficulties imposed by the international arms embargo".²¹⁶ This would certainly have contributed to the decision to withdraw them from service. Although the actual flying costs of the C-160 were almost the same as for the C-130,²¹⁷ it was maintenance that was the issue.

So when a decision had to be made on which of the two transport fleets should be retained, C-130 or C-160 (the budget simply did not allow for a total of 16 large transport aircraft), many factors had to be weighed up and ultimately the SAAF's non-offensive, humanitarian role under the new dispensation prevailed. An Air Force officer involved in the deliberations and decision at the time summed it up: "Which of the two transport fleets were the best for this? The excellent tactical aircraft, or the workhorse with much longer legs? The C130 of course."²¹⁸ And so the illustrious career of the C-160 Transall came to an end in the SAAF. The modern fleet of paratrooper transport aircraft was cut by more than half, overnight. This in itself had an ominous ring for the future of the airborne forces.

215. L. Engelbrecht, "SAAF to Break up C-160 Transall Wrecks", Defence Web, 24 November 2008 at, http://www.defenceweb.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=761

216. D. Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle* (Johannesburg, 30° South Publishers, 2008), p. 481.

217. A. Kriegler, "SAAF: C-130B/BZ Hercules and C-160Z Transall Thread", Avcom: It's all about Flying, 6 February 2012 at, <http://avcom.co.za/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=15&t=42564&start=45>

218. Ibid.

They were not the only casualties in the SAAF of the brutal defence expenditure cuts that followed the end of the Thirty Year War. The SAAF's venerable C-47 Dakotas had formed what was probably the world's largest remaining fleet of this aircraft type.²¹⁹ It was known at one stage during the 1980s to operate 47 of these old aircraft.²²⁰ But with most of the aircraft nearing an age of 50 years and becoming increasingly uneconomical and unreliable, it was decided towards the end of that decade to embark on a programme of refurbishment and upgrading. This included both extending the fuselage and installing modern turbo-prop engines. The work entailed an almost complete rebuilding of the aircraft. On 26 August 1991 the first such aircraft to be converted was launched into service at Snake Valley in Pretoria and on 19 October that year the second aircraft was shown to the public at Ysterplaat in Cape Town.²²¹

The "new" aircraft were fitted with a wide variety of the latest state-of-the-art avionics and navigational equipment, weather radar and a redesigned interior, all of which, together with the highly reliable turbine engines, resulted in vastly improved performance and significantly more affordable maintenance.²²² By 1995 the programme had been completed and all those Dakotas that had been earmarked for conversion were back in service. Not all of the Dakotas were converted, but most of them were.²²³ The old Dakotas had been a mainstay for the paratroopers; most of their training jumps were done from them. Operationally too, these old aircraft had been used extensively for parachuting, especially in the various versions of fire force. For the paratroopers, the new "Turbo Dak" was a major improvement: it could comfortably accommodate 25 paratroopers with their kit and it had a vastly increased range (the old Dakota struggled to manage 20 paratroopers, and then only for short distances).

However, the change had come too late; it was just in time for the drastic budget cuts that were decimating the Air Force and it was simply impossible to afford the Dakota fleet. The decision was made to dispose of them. Many were offered for sale during late 1997 and early 1998 and customers in the United States bought most of them. The only operational Dakotas that remained in service with the SAAF were those serving with 35

219. "Gooney Birds still Making Flying History", *Daily News*, 19 December 1985.

220. W. Brent, "Douglas C-47 Dakota", The Dakota Association of South Africa at, <http://www.dc-3.co.za/saaf-daks.html>

221. D. Becker, *75 Years on Wings of Eagles: South African Military Aviation History* (Pretoria, South African Air Force, 1995), p. 159.

222. "Bringing Ageing DC-3 Dakotas Back to Life", Report in BSAS International News, at http://www.bsasinternational.com/news/news_ageing_dakotas.pdf

223. Becker, *75 Years on Wings of Eagles*, p. 176.

Squadron in Cape Town, most of which had been converted to the maritime role to patrol the long South African coastline. Those no longer required for service were stored, pending disposal.²²⁴

With the integration of the SANDF, four Casa 212 aircraft were acquired by the SAAF from the Transkei and Ciskei Defence Forces' Air Wings, and these were subsequently used for the training of paratroopers. Though more modern aircraft and well suited as a replacement for the Dakota in the paratrooping role, there were only four of them, not almost 50, as had been the case with the Dakotas.²²⁵

A similar situation to the Dakota project occurred with the helicopters. The Super Frelon had already been retired from service in 1990,²²⁶ shortly after the paratroopers used them for Exercise LEVIATHAN (see Chapter 12). A South African project to upgrade the aging French Puma helicopters of the SAAF produced the impressive Oryx, an aircraft that looked like a Puma, but had a vastly improved performance. From 1990, these rebuilt and upgraded helicopters began to replace the Pumas and Super Frelons – a process that took over five years.²²⁷ Though the Oryx provided the paratroopers with far better aircraft for helicopter operations than its predecessors and there were eventually 38 such Oryx helicopters in the SAAF inventory,²²⁸ this was far less than the 69 Pumas²²⁹ and 12 Super Frelons²³⁰ that the SAAF had once been able to deploy. The SAAF had lost four Pumas to enemy fire in the war, one to friendly fire and another four to accidents in the operational area.²³¹ It must also be borne in mind that at no time would all these helicopters have been placed at the disposal of the paratroopers, because routine service schedules, other commitments (including civilian search and rescue duties) and crew availability were limiting factors. Nevertheless, by the late 1990s the number of troop-transporting helicopters was cut by more than half.

The ubiquitous Alouette III had also reached the end of its service life. It had become expensive to maintain and operate and its avionics were obsolete. In all, 118 of these helicopters were delivered to the SAAF between 1962 and the late 1970s,²³² though some

224. Brent, "Douglas C-47 Dakota".

225. Becker, *75 Years on Wings of Eagles*, p. 176.

226. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

227. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

228. "Atlas Oryx Multirole Helicopter, South Africa", Airforce-technology.com: Projects, <http://www.airforce-technology.com/projects/atlas-oryx/>

229. P. Dubois, "Puma SA 330 in SAAF Service", at http://www.sa-transport.co.za/aircraft/puma_sa_330.html

230. *Revista de las Armas y Servicios, Balance Militar, 1983–84*, p. 85.

231. Dubois, "Puma SA 330 in SAAF Service".

232. "Alouette III Final Flight", South African Air Force (SAAF)-Suid-Afrikaanse Lugmag, 12 September 2007, see <http://www.xairforces.net/>

were lost in action and accidents. But the financial burden of maintaining this large fleet of increasingly uneconomic helicopters meant that the number of light utility helicopters would also have to be reduced. With integration in 1994, the SAAF acquired nine German MBB BK-117 light helicopters from the Air Wings of the four homelands.²³³ These were more modern than the Alouettes, though they lacked some of the versatility of the older aircraft. They were retained as the Alouettes were phased out, and an even newer light utility helicopter, the Italian Agusta A-109, was acquired in terms of the arms deal negotiated by the new government. A total of 30 of these helicopters was ordered for the SAAF.²³⁴ The light utility helicopter fleet was therefore also cut by more than half and the new helicopters were not fitted with door guns. The acquisition of the South African designed and built AH-2 Rooivalk (red kestrel) attack helicopters meant that for the first time a true “gunship” was available to airborne forces, but there were only 12 of these.²³⁵

It was not only the transport aircraft and helicopters that were withdrawn from service because of the budget cuts; many other aging aircraft types faced the sword as the Air Force struggled to balance its books. These included the Canberra and Buccaneer bombers, the Mirage III and F1 fighters, the Impala trainers and light attack aircraft and the light Cessna 185 spotter planes.²³⁶ These were all aircraft that although clearly ageing and in some cases obsolete, were used to support the paratroopers in airborne operations. The new ANC government’s controversial arms deal that would acquire some replacements for these aircraft was underway during the mid to late 1990s, but this did not include fixed-wing transport aircraft.²³⁷ The SAAF had become a shadow of the mighty Air Force it had once been, and for the paratroopers, so completely dependent on the Air Force for their delivery, fire support and sustainment, this made a decrease in their own size and status inescapable.

13.8.3. “Old soldiers never die, they simply fade away”: The Part-time Paratroopers

With the end of conscription, the part-time CF units of the brigade, like all CF units in the SADF, found themselves without a feeder system. Rebranded as Reserve Force units in the new SANDF, henceforth they had to rely on volunteers to remain viable as military units.

233. Becker, *75 Years on Wings of Eagles*, p. 178.

234. “A109M Light Multipurpose Helicopter, Italy”, Army-technology.com Projects, at <http://www.army-technology.com/projects/a109m/>.

235. “10 Best Attack Helicopters in the World”, Wonderslist, at <http://www.wonderslist.com/10-best-attack-helicopters-in-the-world/>.

236. Kriegler, “SAAF: C-130B/BZ Hercules & C-160Z Transall”; Becker, *75 Years on Wings of Eagles*, p. 145.

237. For an analysis of how the Air Force’s identified need for transport aircraft in the new era of PSO, rather than prestigious modern fighters, was ignored by the government, see P. Holden, *The Arms Deal in Your Pocket* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2008), pp. 31–32.

The much-vaunted voluntary military system instituted in the mid-1990s to take the place of national service had proved a dismal failure in providing the Reserve Force units with fresh recruits.²³⁸ Initially, there was a steady decline in numbers, but the parachute brigade commanders worked hard on recruiting CF paratroopers of the past back into the system as volunteers. Travelling through the country and arranging refresher training at airfields followed by parachute jumps, the brigade used this as a draw card.²³⁹

The campaign was hugely successful. According to Van der Walt, the brigade had as many as 12,000 men on strength in their system by the end of 1998. This, he claims, was more than any other formation in the Army. These trained soldiers were for the most part quite prepared to attend an annual camp of two or three weeks and to participate in occasional weekend bivouacs and parachute jumps.²⁴⁰ The downside of this remarkable effort was that almost all of those recruited were white, ex-SADF paratroopers. It was hardly something that would pass unnoticed by the new political authorities, bent on achieving visible transformation of the SANDF.

But with the downgrading of the brigade to a regiment, only one Reserve Force battalion remained. The two infantry units, 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions, were merged to form the one remaining battalion and the non-infantry units were either disbanded or sent back to their respective corps where they ultimately lost their airborne status or were disbanded as part of the cost-saving measures of those formations. All units, including the airborne units, were placed directly under corps formations, which meant that the new 44 Parachute Regiment now fell under the Infantry Formation.²⁴¹ With Lieutenant General Reg Otto's departure on retirement in July 1998, a new era had dawned. His successor, Lieutenant General Gilbert Ramano, was the first black Army Chief. He was a product of MK, so he had no conventional background. At the same time there was increasing pressure on South Africa to become involved in peace support operations on the African continent, and this became the focus of the new Army Chief.²⁴²

The large number of part-time paratroopers that had been recruited by the parachute brigade now found themselves without a home, because the single Reserve Force parachute battalion could not absorb all of them and Van der Walt's successor showed no

238. G. Kruys, "Military Service Systems: Where is South Africa Heading?" *ISSUP Bulletin*, 4 (June 2001), p. 3.

239. E-mail, Col Skillie van der Walt (retd), Bloemfontein, 29 March 2015.

240. *Ibid.*

241. "Short History of the South African Airborne Forces", Airborne Seminar folder, 44 Parachute Regiment, Bloemfontein, 31 May 2002.

242. H. Schobesberger, "From Freedom Fighter to Chief of the Army", *SA Soldier*, 10, 5 (May 2003).

interest in accommodating them. They were no longer called up and the volunteers soon disappeared. In the years that followed, those in the part-time unit known initially as 2/3 Parachute Battalion and eventually simply as 3 Parachute Battalion, rapidly dwindled. When an exercise was held in August 2001, 3 Parachute Battalion was able to provide only 100 ageing paratroopers. They were found to be generally unfit, overweight and unable to manage the rigours and demands of sustained combat conditions as paratroopers. In a report on the exercise it was recommended that they be used in future for less demanding tasks such as the protection of the HQ within the airhead, recovery of parachutes and air supplied cargo, offloading of air landed cargo and the distribution of ammunition, rations, fuel and other commodities.²⁴³

The part-time unit eventually found difficulty in placing a full platoon on the ground, and those who reported for duty were almost all white and of an average age close to 40 – far too old for a parachute battalion. The unit, now no longer viable as an operational parachute battalion, was kept going by a handful of enthusiastic volunteers, but the concept of a paratrooper Reserve Force did not appear to have a future. Politically, the SANDF was expected to produce predominantly black Reserve Force units. But the idea of voluntary part-time military service, so deeply embedded in the psyche of white South Africans as a result of centuries of Boer commando service and British colonial regimental service, was quite foreign to black South Africans. There was little interest among black former full-time paratroopers to join the Reserve Force after leaving the SANDF, and those recruited from the street wanted a full-time job in the military, not just a hobby. The part-time Reserve Force seemed doomed to disappear.

13.9. DEDUCTIONS: A SOUND CONCEPT BUT AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The 1990s was a decade of tremendous challenge, change and adjustment for the South African airborne forces. The end of the Thirty Year War had resulted in a crisis of identity for the paratroopers. Efforts to remain relevant by applying the vertical envelopment manoeuvre during urban IS operations in the townships proved politically unacceptable in the wake of the unbanning of the ANC and an obsession in the Army with mechanised operations soon reduced the airborne forces to a tactical adjunct of the ground forces and resulted in a complete loss of their former independence. Budgetary cuts, rationalisation of

243. Restricted "Report on Exercise IRON EAGLE: 44 Parachute Regiment, 20–23 August 2001", Ref. RJTF S/R/308/1, August 2001.

the armed forces and the end of conscription then presaged the traumatic integration of armed forces that followed the advent of democracy in 1994.

The demands of the integration process left little opportunity to consider the role of an airborne capability. Furthermore, the injudicious handling of the Cassinga issue and a major arms theft by right-wing elements of the brigade led to the paratroopers losing credibility and status under the democratic dispensation. Although the military intervention operation in Lesotho restored some of this and illustrated both their tactical and strategic potential, fiscal stringency contributed hugely to the loss of any strategic capability with the demise of the parachute brigade.

For the SANDF, the focus had shifted to peace support operations in the regional context.²⁴⁴ Although enthusiastic young officers in the airborne forces initiated brigade level exercises,²⁴⁵ it was clear that these were not viable without the correct structures and command and control capabilities in place. This meant an airborne brigade HQ. An Airborne Capability Investigation was instituted in 2003 to look into the matter and a project was registered to resuscitate the SANDF airborne capability.²⁴⁶

Whether these developments will ultimately result in the re-establishment of an airborne brigade HQ will doubtless depend on financial resources. Moreover, bureaucracy moves slowly in peacetime. However, had the HQ of 44 Parachute Brigade been retained as a core capability as recommended by the Oelschig investigation, organisations, systems, experience and corporate memory would not have been lost and the complexities of joint command and control would still have been in place. The maintaining of an HQ and the expertise that goes with it is considerably more cost effective than building one up from scratch. It had taken 12 years to build 44 Parachute Brigade, and this had been during a time of war. How long it would take to reach such a level with the constraints of peacetime soldiering is an open question; but sadly, without such an HQ there is little chance of fielding a truly strategic airborne capability again.

244. T. Neethling, "Exercise BLUE CRANE: Forward with Peacekeeping in Southern Africa?" *ISSUP Bulletin* 5 (1999), p. 5; C. de Coning and K. Mngqibisa, *Lessons Learned from Exercise BLUE CRANE* (African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes [ACCORD], Mount Edgecombe, 2000), p. 34.

245. Restricted "Report on Exercise IRON EAGLE: 44 Parachute Regiment, 20–23 August 2001", Ref. RJTF S/R/308/1, August 2001; Exercise Secret "Operational Instruction 02/02: Op BLACK HAWK", Ref. 44 PARA REGT/ES/309/1, August 2002.

246. Confidential "C SANDF Directive 01/03: SANDF Airborne Capability Investigation", Ref. CJ OPS/C/308/1, 4 December 2003; Restricted CJ Ops to C SANDF, "Registration of a Project to Establish a Viable Airborne Capability", Ref. CJ OPS/R/308/1, 11 January 2005.

CHAPTER 14

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have examined one aspect of South African military history, principally over a period of four decades. A conceptual and consolidated study of airborne operations within the broader southern African context has not been attempted before. By adopting such a focused approach, the development, influence and importance of the airborne application during the hostilities of the Thirty Year War are highlighted. The strategic value of a suitably constituted airborne force is emphasised and in this conclusion that value is extended to contemporary circumstances, evincing its continued relevance. The thesis therefore does not attempt to yield a comprehensive understanding of the conflicts that were a part of the war, nor even of the South African role in that war. But it does probe a facet of the struggle that has hitherto only been superficially examined.

The period in southern Africa under review in this thesis has been subjected to intensive political and social historical analysis. But there has been little written of scholarly value concerning the military genre for that period. Analytical military history, making extensive use of original once-classified documents has been conspicuously absent for the apartheid years and the time of post-apartheid transition. It is here that this thesis makes a contribution, being based on a penetrating examination of archival and other original documentary sources. As such, it has uncovered much information that was previously unknown to the public and is thus a ground-breaking work in the study of modern military operations in southern Africa.

The thesis therefore not only contributes towards filling a gap in scholarly research into the specifically military aspects of the conflict that South Africa was engaged in, but it also serves to link the study with a wider and very topical body of scholarship on colonial counter-insurgencies. These include academic historical research and analysis done on the decolonisation struggles in south east Asia, the Middle East, Africa and even Europe. There exists a plethora of articles in professional military journals, papers delivered at contemporary military history symposia and conferences, as well as theses and dissertations written about the insurgencies in Malaya, Indo-China/Vietnam, Borneo, Palestine, Cyprus, Ireland, Algeria, Kenya, Rhodesia and other countries. But very little on South Africa.

In a sense, this thesis is an attempt to rescue South African military history from being subsumed by the war historians who avoid the technological, organisational, tactical and military-strategic issues in favour of the political, social, economic, ideological and politico-strategic aspects of conflict. At the same time, the thesis attempts to deflect the more superficial impact on public perception of popular literature. Rather than embracing the heroic, triumphalist, apologetic or condemnatory approaches to the small wars of southern Africa so common in many published works, it tries to undertake a more profound examination of military events, technologies, tactics and strategies, albeit from the point of view of only one type of military operation. In this it is hoped that it will encourage similar academic studies of other aspects in a reinstatement of military, as opposed to war history in South Africa.

From a historiographical perspective, it is the methodology for the research conducted during the formulation of this thesis that could be seen as a significant contribution. This was based primarily on the use of until recently classified military documentation, run against the grain of extensive interviews and correspondence with participants. The meshing of these two sources into an accurate and comprehensible narrative is seen as a specific offering to historiographical technique. Certainly, the attempt is not unique; but my access to the military archives and extensive official documentation outside of the archives, coupled to my particular use of them as the foundation for expanding my research within the framework of my own military experience is possibly innovative methodologically in South African military historical analysis.

In my examination of primary sources, I have drawn on the pioneering approach of Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), with an effort being made to place the purely military events within the wider, general context. While narrative has played an important role in recounting the events, I have attempted to follow Ranke's example "not only to describe sequences of events but also to show underlying forces and the contexts in which they operated".¹ However, within the constraints of a narrowly military study such as this, it has not been possible to explore in depth the political forces that have shaped some of the events that are described. Nevertheless, I have tried to avoid Ranke's tendency to "accept official diplomatic reports at face value",² yet at the same time attempting to apportion significant contextual credibility to the relevant military documents. Such source material

1. T.R. Tholfsen, *Historical Thinking* (New York, Harper & Row, 1967), p. 180.

2. G.G. Iggers, "The Image of Ranke", in *New Directions in European Historiography* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1975), p. 32.

necessarily requires careful scrutiny, but has to be judged on an assessment of whether the writer/compiler could have had any reason for applying a particular slant or bias to the document, and perhaps more importantly, what the purpose of that specific document was.

In this, my experience as a long-serving senior officer in both the pre-1994 SADF and the post-1994 integrated SANDF has been invaluable. I have used my knowledge of the military filing system to find, sort and categorise the official documentation in the archives for my research. I would argue that my understanding of the purposes of the various specialised documents that form part of the Military Conventions of Service Writing (CSW) and which I personally used on an almost daily basis through most of my 47 years in uniform, placed me in an exceptional position to grade them and to decide on their relevance. These include correspondence, signal messages, staff papers, précis, summaries (also intelligence summaries), comments, reports (also situation reports), briefs, agendas and minutes of meetings and conferences, appreciations, plans, orders, instructions and directives.³ Each of these has a specific military purpose and status that needs to be borne in mind when considering them as sources. Also important has been an understanding of the military security classifications of Restricted, Confidential, Secret and Top Secret that are applied to documents in the South African military context. This has aided me in my attempts to take a critical but constructive view of certain documentation.

In this regard, I have departed radically from the Rankean mould in my extensive resort to oral history sources in the form of interviews, discussions and correspondence with participants. I have used such sources as a means of verifying what is stated in documents; but more often, in attempting to apply the urging of Arthur Marwick,⁴ I have used the documents to try to verify the claims of participants. Throughout, I have tried to bear in mind Atkinson's cautionary words on the verification of sources, especially oral sources: "In order to count in history putative truths must be relatable in publicly checkable ways to evidence. Information offered on the basis of memory will not necessarily be inadmissible, but the credentials of the rememberer, even though he be the historian himself, must survive scrutiny."⁵ Even the test of credentials, however, remains largely subjective.

3. *Conventions of Service Writing (CSW)*.

4. A. Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 3rd edition (London, Macmillan, 1989), p. 215.

5. R.F. Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation in History: An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (London, Macmillan, 1993), p. 132.

Personal impressions and experiences frequently lend colour, life and relevance to the otherwise abstract and cold statement of bare facts gleaned from official documents. In the words of John Tosh, "Oral history, in short, tries to give social history a human face."⁶ In military history, this is perhaps even more applicable. Without personal, first-hand impressions of the conditions of combat on the battlefield and the course of events from an individual's perspective, the effects of the bigger events lose a vital and dynamic element in the telling. Again, as Tosh puts it: "Oral history allows the voice of ordinary people to be heard alongside the careful marshalling of social facts in the written record"⁷. It is the "alongside" that he speaks of that is important. I have therefore tried to avoid the recent tendency of some to build a picture of events purely from the oral (and often unsubstantiated) reminiscences of "ordinary soldiers" who were participants. While there is certainly a place for such publications in capturing the experience and ethos of war at the grassroots level, it is certainly not the scientific approach to historiography pioneered by Niebuhr and Ranke.

The dilemma of the military historian when working with these two primary sources (documentary and oral) is well put by Sir Basil Liddell Hart, where he is quoted by his widow in the foreword to his posthumously published *History of the Second World War* (1970): ". . . the memories of the participants in dramatic events are apt to become coloured or twisted in retrospect, and increasingly as the years pass. Moreover official documents often fail to reveal their real views and aims, while sometimes even drafted to conceal them."⁸

My initial intention was to restrict the discussion to the period prior to the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994. However, it became apparent that this would leave matters somewhat abruptly in the air, and that it was important to address the transitional period and its effect on the airborne community and capability. This applied particularly to the first major military operation by the new, integrated SANDF. The thesis now effectively follows the airborne concept into the new dispensation and the commencement of the 21st century. It also now provides a vehicle for gaining some insight into the complexities of the integration of combat elements from some of the various forces to form the new Defence Force, albeit only from the experience of the paratroopers. This was certainly an unploughed field of contemporary historical research. The stresses and strains of integrating

6. J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London, Longman, 1991), p. 211.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

8. B.H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (London, Pan Books, 1970), pp. v–vi.

paratroopers from five very different elite units⁹ could probably only be compared to the integration of the paratroopers from East and West when Germany was reunified at the end of the Cold War.

An important and hitherto neglected consideration that I have attempted to include in this thesis has been the drawing together of two themes: a particular sphere of technology centred around the conduct of airborne operations, and the strategic military imperative of a country that sees itself as a regional role player. The intention is for this to be extrapolated to the position of 21st century South Africa in Africa. The attempted coup in Burundi in May 2015, during which the president, Pierre Nkurunziza, who was on a visit to Tanzania at the time, was initially prevented from returning and landing at the airport of the capital, Bujumbura, could be used as a stark illustration of this.¹⁰ Had the coup been successful and the AU made a strategic decision to intervene and restore the status quo, the only means by which a substantial military force could have been deployed to Bujumbura within hours would have been by parachute (because of the blocked runways). Had South Africa (as a leading country in sub-Saharan Africa) been technologically capable of deploying a balanced force with the necessary command and control capability by parachute, this would have been a viable option. But whether, given the discussion in the previous chapter, South Africa would have been capable of doing so, is an open question.

It would have been a major embarrassment to Africa to again have to turn to a former colonial power to do this (as happened in the Congo in 1964, in Kolwezi in 1978, in Rwanda in 1994 and in Sierra Leone in 2000, where European paratroopers had to be employed on rescue and stabilisation operations in African countries)¹¹. Cilliers has pointed out that “even if South Africa were to double its defence budget overnight, it would not be able to plug the African military capacity gap that results in French, US and other interventions on the continent”.¹² Modern technology (in the shape of suitable aircraft,

9. The units were 1 Parachute Battalion (SADF), 32 Battalion (SADF), Transkei Special Forces, Bophuthatswana Parachute Battalion and Ciskei Parachute Battalion, all under the auspices of 44 Parachute Brigade.

10. A. Higgins, “While Burundi’s President is out of the Country, Military Declares a Coup”, *Washington Post*, 13 May 2015.

11. See T.P. Odom, *Dragon Operations: Hostage Rescues in the Congo, 1964–1965*, Paper No. 14, Combat Studies Institute (Fort Leavenworth, US Army Command, 1988); and T.P. Odom, *Shaba II: The French and Belgian Intervention in Zaire in 1978* (Fort Leavenworth, US Army Command, 1993); D. Reed, *Save the Hostages!* (New York, Bantam Books, 1988); Brown, “Destination Stanleyville”, *Military Review* (March 1991); G. Maes, “Silver Back: vluchten uit Kigali”, *Vox*, 9413 (1994); and A.M. Dorman, *Blair’s Successful War: British Military Intervention in Sierra Leone* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2009).

12. J. Cilliers, “The 2014 South African Defence Review: Rebuilding after Years of Abuse, Neglect and Decay”, *ISSUP Policy Brief* No. 56 (June 2014).

weapons systems, vehicles, parachutes and communications), shown in this thesis as having been crucial to the development of a viable airborne force under the apartheid government, would be a critical expense in producing the capacity in question. The nub of the argument contained in this thesis is therefore seen as vitally relevant to Africa today.

The issue, broached in the introductory chapter, of whether airborne forces still have a role to play in modern conflict, is therefore rhetorical. Despite decades of questioning the value of retaining an airborne capability by critics of the military and advocates of cutting defence expenditure around the world, every country with significant armed forces continues to maintain some such capability; and in various parts of the world that capability continues to be employed in conflict situations. Some of the more recent examples of successful parachute operations have been those by the Americans in northern Iraq during their invasion in 2003; by the Pakistanis against the Taliban in 2009; and by the French against rebels in Mali in 2013.

And if the need remains for a strategic airborne force in Africa, this returns the argument to the question posed in the introductory chapter of the thesis: Why was a once potent capability allowed to decline to the point where independent airborne operations were no longer possible? The historical narrative of the country's airborne forces constituting this thesis has provided an answer to the question. Decades of emphasis on the tactical application of airborne forces in support of other ground forces brought about a mind-set with no appreciation for or understanding of the strategic potential of the capability. This in turn produced a failure to grasp the requirements for realising that potential. After the advent of democracy in 1994, those who ultimately came to occupy the senior command echelons of the SANDF had no experience of or exposure to the airborne concept. The prevailing thinking in the defunct SADF was therefore simply passed on to them through the integration process, and the tactical mind-set continued to predominate.

Despite this, the strategic role has resurfaced in South African military thinking. This is apparent from the intention to acquire a new fleet of transport aircraft¹³ and the most recent *Defence Review* (2014), where there is reference to "Special Operations Forces", which would include airborne forces:

Special Operations Forces. Continental leadership responsibilities and the requirement to protect own vital national interests requires South Africa to configure and maintain a specialised, highly mobile combat capability (closely

13. "Airbus talking to SAAF on A400M, A330MRTT and C295", SAAF: The Unofficial Website on the South African Air Force, 18 May 2015, <http://www.saairforce.co.za/news-and-events/>.

linked to that of the Special Forces) to rapidly deploy to remote areas for specific preventative and intervention operations. Such Special Operations Forces must be able to conduct joint and supported airborne, air-landed and sea-landed assault operations, with air- and sea-deployable firepower, protection and manoeuvre. Special Forces and Special Operations Forces will be supported by joint defence capabilities, and will normally be followed-on by more robust combat forces, specifically tailored to the mission.¹⁴

Special Operations Forces is a term coined by the Americans to accommodate a vast array of specialist units from the Air Force, Army, Marines and Navy. The South African *Defence Review* outlines a proposed Contingency Division of three specialist brigades that would carry out such special operations (in addition to a mechanised and a motorised division, presumably to provide the “more robust forces” to follow-on).¹⁵ This sounds impressive and no doubt makes government ministers and starry-eyed generals feel good, but it is not a realistic proposal for South Africa. Even countries with Armed Forces and defence budgets significantly bigger than those of South Africa are not able to put together such forces, never mind a country with South Africa’s modest Defence Force, limited budget and crying social needs. If the SANDF could field just an airborne brigade, reinforced by elements from other African countries for certain operations, this would be far more realistic and would go a long way towards meeting the need.

This is in fact acknowledged when, despite its ambitious intentions, the *Defence Review* of 2014 comes to the following damning conclusion:

The Defence Force is in a critical state of decline, characterised by: force imbalance between capabilities; block obsolescence and unaffordability of many of its main operating systems; a disproportionate tooth-to-tail ratio; the inability to meet current standing defence commitments; and the lack of critical mobility. The current balance of expenditure between personnel, operating and capital is both severely disjointed and institutionally crippling.¹⁶

The generals and admirals alone cannot be blamed for allowing such a situation to develop. It is not they, but the politicians who control the purse strings. Although this tension between the generals and their political masters, particularly within post-apartheid South Africa, would warrant a thesis on its own, it has to be accepted that South Africa has extremely urgent domestic needs that make desperate demands on available funds. For this very reason, politicians should be wary of making rash military commitments on the

14. *South African Defence Review 2014*, Chairperson’s Overview, par 25. Also Chapter 10, par 58a.

15. *Ibid.*, Chapter 10, par 61.

16. *Ibid.*, Chairperson’s Overview, par 34. Also Chapter 9, par 49.

international stage when their ambitions do not match the country's military capacity. In this regard, Cilliers has made the following germane commentary:

South Africa has, for example, sought to lead on the establishment of the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises as a more viable military response mechanism that would obviate the need for reliance on European and US force enablers while awaiting the operationalisation of the African Union's African Standby Force. Such hollow gestures mean little, for when a crisis erupts in Uganda (due to the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army), Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, the CAR or Nigeria (as a result of Boko Haram attacks), African leaders call for external support from Europe and the US, since they are unable to rely on the support of other African countries. The potential locomotives of Africa's development and stability – countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, Algeria and Egypt – do not have commensurate military capacity, and all face considerable domestic security challenges that are either a greater priority or exceed their own security capabilities.¹⁷

While there can be no doubt that centripetal pressures compelled a reduction in the size and capacity of the SANDF airborne forces, this does not answer another question posed in the introductory chapter of this thesis: Why was there no attempt made within the military to retain at least a modicum of competence in a capability with such strategic potential in Africa? Thinking generals would surely have appreciated the importance of this retention, yet this thesis has shown that the capability was deliberately terminated. Had the recommendations of the Oelschig report been adopted, an inexpensive core capability would have been retained on the operational level, ensuring that the vital areas of command, control and logistic support were in place. This would have facilitated any future expansion. Instead, the focus was on the retention of only a technical and lower tactical capability, leaving no room for strategic action. For this, the General Staff of the SA Army in October 1997 must take responsibility.

The paratroopers and special forces of the SANDF acquitted themselves admirably in the Central African Republic when they were trapped and attacked by rebels in 2013.¹⁸ But the very fact that they found themselves in such a position, and had to fight for several days without any proper support, is an indictment of those who have neglected South Africa's airborne capability. It has been my contention in this thesis that a proper understanding (by both generals and politicians) of the requirements to provide strategic potential to an airborne force would ensure that it received the necessary resources, status and priority attention to maintain a viable capability. It is because there has been no differentiation

17. Cilliers, "Rebuilding after Years of Abuse, Neglect and Decay".

18. H-R.Heitman, *Battle of Bangui: The Untold Inside Story* (Johannesburg, Parktown Publishers, 2013).

between these complex and sophisticated strategic requirements and the simple needs of a merely tactical asset that South Africa's airborne capacity has been allowed to deteriorate to the level where it can no longer function as an independently competent interventionist force.

Events in Africa indicate that the need to intervene militarily to resolve crises has not disappeared on the continent. Furthermore, these events indicate that in many instances it was only an airborne force that could be delivered sufficiently rapidly, over vast distances, avoiding major geographic obstacles and infrastructural limitations, to carry out the intervention effectively. South Africa would therefore do well to consider the lessons of the airborne operations during the southern African Thirty Year War of the second half of the 20th century.

SOURCE LIST

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a. Defence Archives (Department of Defence Documentation Centre, Visagie Street, Pretoria)_Arranged numerically/alphabetically by Archival Group

- **1 Military Area (1MA/1MG) Group:**
 - 1) Box No. 60, Top Secret File HK 1MG OPS G/OPS/3/3, FOCUS, Sub-File OPS DIAMANT.
 - 2) Box No. 108, Top Secret File G/OPS/3/3, Vol. 6, "FOCUS".
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- **1 Para Bn Group 1:**
 - 1) Box No. 5, File G/SD/3/1, Vol. 1.
 - 2) Box No. 13:
 - a) Confidential File A/PERS/46/1.
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 - 3) Box No. 16, Confidential File Q/EQPT/6.
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- **1 Para Bn Group 3:**
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- **1 Parachute Battalion:** Unit History File/Annual Historical Report (Jaarlikse Geskiedkundige Verslag) 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1973, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1987, 1988.
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- b) Top Secret File, 309/1/2, Vol. 1.
- c) Top Secret File, 309/1/3, Vol. 1.
- 2) Box No. 137, Confidential File 44 VALSK BDE/308/3/1, "Opleidingsverslae oor Opleidingskampe en Bivakke".
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 - 1) Box No. 3, Top Secret File HS OPS/309/4, REKSTOK/SAFRAAN, Vol. 1.
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- **AG (2) Group:** Box No. 80, “The Operation of the UDF Demobilisation Scheme”.
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 - 5) Box No. 213, File AG 560/6/7/32.
 - 6) Box No. 222, File AG (3)1906/9 Vol. 1, Letter from Acting Secretary for Defence to Minister of Defence, 5 July 1949.
 - **AGI Group:** Box No. 132, File AG 736/4/19 “OFFICERS: SATC, No. 30 Armoured Commando (V) SAAF: Lyttelton”.
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 - 7) Box No. 866, Top Secret File HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 2, "SITREPS: Op BARUTA".
 - 8) Box No. 867, Top Secret File HVS/206/36/1, Vol. 4, "Op BOMBAY".
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 - a) Secret File 169/2, "Military Intelligence Appreciations: General".
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 - a) NOTES ON THE UTILITY OF PARACHUTE UNITS IN BUSH WARFARE by Lieutenant Louis Kraft, Military Intelligence, Defence Headquarters, 23 May 1940.
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 - **DC (Secretary for Defence) Group 1:**
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 - 2) Box No. 78:
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 - 2) File H Leër/309/4, MERLYN, "Aanbiedingsnotas oor Op AGREE en Op MERLYN: Situasië in SWA", 14 April 1989.
- **HS Ops Group 5:**
 - 1) Box No. 117, Top Secret File HSOPS/309/5, Vol. 1, "BOWLER/STORING".
 - 2) Box No. 121, Top Secret File CS OPS/310/4, Vols 1 and 2, REINDEER.
- **HS Ops Group 7A:** Box No. 8, Top Secret File HS OPS/304/1/3, Vol. 1, OP OVERCAST (HWS-Afdeling).
- **HS Ops Group 9:**
 - 1) Box No. 6, Top Secret File HS OPS/309/4, LABOTOMY/HILTI/SEMI/PRONE.
 - 2) Box No 7:
 - a) Top Secret File HS Ops/309/4/, REKSTOP/SAFRAAN, Vol. 8.
 - b) Top Secret File HS Ops/309/4/, REKSTOP/SAFRAAN, Vol. 10.
- **HVS Group:** Box No. 40, Top Secret File HS/11/3/14/2, Encl. 5c, Evaluation of Operation SAVANNAH, by Directorate Operations, Evaluation and Doctrine, 27 April 1976.
- **IG (Inspector General) Group:** Box No. 38, File IK27, "Registrations and Dismissals".
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 - 1) File KG/AOH/1/2.

- 2) File HGS/AP/VOL/2/1, "Personeel en Algemene Administrasie: Vrywillige Voltydse Diens", Vol. 1, Enclosure 2, From the Adjutant General to the Chief of the General Staff, 15 February 1952.
- 3) Box No. K43 L81, File KG/GPT/1/2/1, Vol. 1, Enclosure 24, "Komitee van Onderzoek insake Opleiding in die UVM: Opsomming van Aanbevelings", 27 January 1949.
- **KG (Kommandant-Generaal) Group 5:**
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 - 2) Box No. 132, Confidential File KG/DP/6, Vol. 1, "Newspapers, Books and Journals", Encl. 166B.
 - 3) Box No. 136, Top Secret File KG/EXT/1/1/3/1, Vol 1, "Maandverslae en Ander: MA Londen".
 - 4) Box No. 209:
 - a) Secret File KG/GM/5/3, "Notule van Generale Stafvergadering No. 3/58, Gehou te VHK, 22, 23 and 24 May 1958".
 - b) Secret File KG/GM/5/3, Vol. 1, "Notule van Generale Staf Vergadering No. 4/57, Gehou te VHK, 19/20 August 1957".
 - c) Secret File KG/GM/5/3, Secret "Minutes of General Staff Conference No. 2/58, held at DHQ, 17, 18 and 19 February 1958".
 - 5) Box 210, Secret File KG/GM/5/3, "Notule van GS Vergaderings 1960: 2 and 6 Junie 1960".
 - 6) Box No. 231, File KG/GPO/3/2/1, Vol. 2, "Organisasie: SA Leër".
 - 7) Box No 238:
 - a) File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1, Vol. 1, "Onderzoek na Stigting van Valskermeenheid".
 - b) File KG/GPO/3/2/24, "Organisasie: 1 Mobiele Wag".
 - c) File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1, Vol. 1, "Organisasie: 1 Valskermbataljon/Organisation: 1 Parachute Battalion".
 - 8) Box No. 239, File No. KG/GPO/3/2/24/1 Vol. 2 "Organisasie No. 1 Valskermbataljon/Organisation No. 1 Parachute Battalion (Voorheen 2 Mobiele Wag)".
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 - 10) Box No. 297, File No. KG/GPT/2/2/1/5, Vol. 1, "Opleiding en Aanwending van Mobiele Wagte".
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 - 12) Box No. 322, File KG/GPW/1/5/4, Vol. 1, "Pondoland Onluste (Bizana) (Operasie SWIVEL)".
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 - a) Secret File KG/GPW/1/5/4, Vol. 2, "Pondoland (Bizana) Onluste (Operasie SWIVEL)".
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 - 14) Box No. 352, Secret File KG/GPW/15, Vol. 1 "Guerrilla Warfare", Enclosure 1, 29 June 1957; Enclosure 2, 24 September 1957.
 - 15) Box No. 396, File KG/KV/20, Vol. 1, "Aanwending van Vliegtuie en Helikopters".

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 - **Minister of Defence Botha (MVB) Group:** Box No. 86, MV62, "Directorate of Military Intelligence Service".
 - **Minister of Defence Erasmus/Fouché (MVEF) Group:**
 - 1) Box No. 6, File MV8/1 "Aktiewe Burgermag: Agemeen", Vol. 2.
 - 2) Box No. 105, File MV/9 "Verslag van die Departementele Komitee insake Weermaggimnasiums", undated.
 - 3) Box No. 127, File MV109/1, "Generaal Len Beyers".
 - 4) Box No. 129, File MV/122/1, "Gimnasiums: Militêre Gimnasium", Vol. 1, Enclosure 1 ("Memorandum: Establishment of a Military Gymnasium"), undated.
 - 5) Box No. 135, File MV130, Letter from Lt Col C.F. Miles-Cadman to Minister F.C. Erasmus, 22 November 1949.
 - 6) Box No. 150, Confidential File MV205, Annual Report: UDF 1957, 17 April 1958.
 - 7) Box No. 178, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Minutes of the General Staff Committee Special Conference", 3 May 1957.
 - 8) Minister of Defence's Papers:
 - a) File MV18/10, Letter from Steyn to De Villiers, 12 December 1957.
 - b) File MV13/3 Vol. 2, "Press Statement by Mr F.C. Erasmus, Minister of Defence, Regarding the Reorganisation of the South African Defence Force", 2 December 1959.
 - c) File MV22/11, Letter from CGS to Minister of Defence, 22 October 1948.
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 - 2) File 826/18/3/1:
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 - b) Letter 9BN/1RB/ME/A, "PARATROOP COMPANY", from OC 9 Bn, Res Bde to GOA UDF Adm HQ (MEF), 9 August 1943.
 - c) Letter UDF/94(G), "UDF Air Borne Coy" from GOA UDF MEF to COS GHQ MEF, 29 November 1943.
 - 3) Secret letter DGAF.24/49/1, "AIRBORNE Company: Policy", from DGAF to DAP and ORG, 20 October 1943.
 - 4) Letter DGAF 24/49/1, "SAAF Paratroop Company", from DGAF to SAOA SAAF ME, 22 October 1943.
 - 5) Letter YO.2115/BR/OP, "SGT JOHN FREDERICK CORNWALL, No. SR 598627", from ISLD GHQ MEF to UDF Administration, GHQ MEF, 18 November 1943.
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- 8) Top Secret Report: Operation "BLOUWILDEBEEES", by Cmdt T.J. Renfree, GSO 1 (Int), Army HQ, 9 September 1966.
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 - 10) Top Secret Document, "Notas oor Vergadering te Oubos – 29 Desember 1977", by Lt Gen C.L. Viljoen, 4 January 78, in unreferenced secret file "(SWA) MINISTER Oubos Vergadering 29 Des 77".
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 - a) Top Secret letter from C SADF to Minister of Defence, "Militêr Politieke Situasie in Suidwes-Afrika", 27 February 1978.
 - b) Top Secret Memo from C Army to C SADF, "Die Rol van Cassinga in die Militêre Aanslag teen Suidwes-Afrika", 8 March 1978.
 - c) Copy of Hand-written Top Secret Composite Parachute Battalion Opso 1/78, OPS/309/1/B/1 REINDEER, 28 April 1978 (including Appendices and Extraction Plan).
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- **Northern Transvaal Comd Group 8:** Box No. 857, Top Secret File STAM HK KMDMT N TVL/309/1/R1 REINDEER, Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER.
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 - 1) Gp 8, Box No. 115, Secret File OFS COMD/307/2/1, Top Secret SADF Operation Instruction 8/78, Operasie REINDEER, Ref. HS OPS/310/4/REINDEER, 21 April 1978.
 - 2) Gp 9, Box No. 475, Secret File OFS Comd/308/1/1 Vol. 1, Encl. 14, Signal from 1 Para Bn to OFS Comd, 29 May 1978.
 - **Para Trg Centre Group:** Box No. 2, File Q/EQPT/61/1, "Paratroop Equipment/Para Aux Eqpt", Vols 1 and 2.
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 - 2) Box No. 95, Kluis 80/53, Secret "Rapport oor Besoek aan Taper van 21 Julie 1980 tot 3 Augustus 1980", 18 August 1980.
 - 3) Box No. 226:
 - a) Kluis 87/43, DBB/235/74, "Verslag oor die Reorganisasie van die SA Leër se Konvensionele Taakmag: Stigting van Korps, Divisie en Brigade Hoofkwartiere", 31 July 1974.
 - b) Kluis 87/40, "SA Leër Verslag oor die Organisasie en Dienstaat van 1 Valskermataljon: C Kompanie", G/SD/3/6 (1 Valsk Bn), 14 September 1976.
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- **Special Forces Group:** Box No. 100, Top Secret Files SPES GP/310/1/C92, Vols 1, 2, 3 and 4.
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 - 1) Box No. 5, File 2 SWA Spes/105/15.
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 - a) File 107/10/2.
 - b) File 302/1.
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 - 4) Box No. 9, File 402/3.
 - 5) Box No. 10, File 501/3.
 - 6) Box No. 11, File No. 512/2/1/4 R, "Medal Parades".
 - 7) Box No. 12, File 513/7 R, "Letters of Thanks and Appreciation".
 - 8) Box No. 14:
 - a) Confidential Files 101/1, Vols 1 and 2, "Pers Requirements".
 - b) Confidential File 101/6, "Pers Management".
 - c) Confidential File 101/7, "Employment of Pers".
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 - g) Confidential File 105/5/1 B, "NSM System Policy".
 - 9) Box No. 15, File 103/2/1, "Courses".
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 - 11) Box No. 17, Confidential File 104/10/14/2/1, "Reporting of Casualties".
 - 12) Box No. 20, File 106/22, "Returns and Statistics".
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2. Operational/War Diaries of Parachute Companies/Battalions not held in Archives (arranged by date)

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- B-Company, 2 Parachute Battalion, covering period 15 May to 5 August 1976, in possession of Cmdt Monty Brett (retired).
- B-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion (July 1977 Intake), Books 1, 2 and 3, covering period March to July 1978.
- D-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion (January 1978 intake), covering period 13 January to 24 November 1978.
- F-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion (July 1978 Intake), incomplete copy covering only period 17 October to 7 November 1979.
- E-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion (July 1978 Intake), covering period 12 July 1978 to 20 May 1980.
- A-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion (January 1979 Intake), covering period 15 January 1979 to 19 December 1980.
- G-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion (January 1979 Intake), covering period 25 January 1980 to 10 December 1980.
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- Bound Volume of Newsletters, Photographs, Orders and Articles on 44 Pathfinder Company, October 1989.

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- Curriculum Vitae of Lt Gen W.P. Louw, issued by Chief of the SADF on the announcement of his retirement in March 1975, 20 November 1974.
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- Letter from Col J.D. Breytenbach, DVR, SD, SM of HQ 44 Parachute Brigade to Officers Commanding 1, 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions, Ref. 44 Para Bde/501/7/2, 15 August 1979.
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- Group of Documents, including Memo from Montague Brett, 14 February 1991, attached to Citations for Lt Peter Jooste, Sgt Martin John MacPhail and LCpl Robert

Sonne, 25 February 1982; and statements by Lt P. Jooste, 2Lt F.J. Louw, Sgt M.J. MacPhail, Cpl P.J. Kok, Cpl S.P. Crous, LCpl R. Sonne, Rfn S.P.J. Visagie, E.P. Serfontein, J.J. van der Merwe, G. Hauptfleisch, P.J. Els, M.P. Fouché and Du T. Neethling, all dated either 6 or 8 January 1981.

- “Geskiedkundige Oorsig van Gebeure by 1 Valskermbataljon tydens die Bevelvoederskap van die Afgelope Drie Eenheidsbevelvoerders: Tydperk 6 Oktober 1972 tot 31 Desember 1981”, Ref. 1 Valsk Bn/514/281.
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4. Slide Shows/Presentations

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5. Pilot and Parachutist Log Books

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- Parachutist Log Book of Lieutenant-General W.P. Louw, for period 1960 to 1965, copy made at his request by Corporal Buys in 1963 and held by Lieutenant Colonel Ronnie Claassen (retired).

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6. Interviews and Discussions

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Floyd, Warrant Officer Class 1 Trevor (retired), in Pretoria on 23 June 1995.

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- Boutros-Ghali, B.**, *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping*, Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to the Statement adopted by the Summit Meeting of the Security Council on 31 January 1992 (New York, United Nations, 1992).
- Cilliers, J.**, “An Overview of the Armed Forces of the TBVC Countries”, *South African Defence Review*, 13 (1993).
- Cilliers, J.**, “The 2014 South African Defence Review: Rebuilding after Years of Abuse, Neglect and Decay”, Institute for Security Studies, *ISSUP Policy Brief* No. 56, June 2014.
- Miller, D.**, “Anywhere, Anytime: Rapid-deployment Forces and their Future”, *International Defense Review*, Special Report 10/1994, Jane’s Information Group, Coulsdon, 1994.
- Independent Board of Inquiry into Informal Repression**, “Report of the Independent Board of Inquiry into Informal Repression for the Month of May 1991”, Collection No. AG 2543 (Johannesburg, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand, 2012).

17. Maps and Atlases

- Angola 1:2 000 000, Portuguese Map, pre-1975.
- Booyesen, M., Map of Angola, undated, apparently produced for the SADF.
- Booyesen, M., Map of Mozambique, undated, apparently produced for the SADF.
- BP Road Atlas of Great Britain* (London, George Philip, 1983).
- Reader’s Digest 1:2 500 000 Map of Southern Africa (Pretoria, reproduced under Government Printer’s Copyright Authority 7771 of 22 January 1982).
- SA 1:500 000 Topographical Series: SE 25/26 Pietersburg ; and SE 25/30 Messina.
- SADF 1:100 000 Topographical Map of Angola, Cassinga, 1516A (361), drawn and compiled by 47 Survey Squadron, SAEC (Pretoria, 1 Military Printing Unit, May 1976).
- World Aeronautical Charts 1:1 000 000. Chart 3179 Ondangua; Chart 3178 Tsumeb; Chart 3177 Livingstone.

18. Aerial Photographs

- a. Cassinga, viewed at Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre (JARIC) of the SANDF:
- Film No. 1755, Negatives No. 9554–9556, Film Format RC-8, 11 September 1975.
 - Film No. 1817, Negatives No. 1199–1201, Film Format RC-8, 10 November 1975.
 - Film No. 1844, Negatives No. 237–239, Film Format RC-8, 5 February 1976.
 - Film No. 2222, Negatives No. 4402–4404, Film Format RC-8, 6 March 1978.
 - Film No. 2231, Negatives No. 4780–4782, Film Format RC-8, 1 April 1978.
 - Film No. 2231C, Negatives No. 003–004, Film Format F-32, 1 April 1978.
 - Film No. 2238A, Negatives No. 0045–0105, Film Format F-32, 29 April 1978.
 - Film No. 2246A, Negatives No. 0079–0096, Film Format F-32, 4 May 1978.
 - Film No. 2608, Negatives No. 86–91, Film Format F-100, 7 June 1980.
 - Film No. 2705, Negatives No. 0912–0914, Film Format RC-8, 1 August 1981
 - Film No. 2931C, Negatives No. 091–93, Film Format F-32, 4 October 1982.

- Film No. 3008, Negatives No. 4943–4945, Film Format RC-8, 27 August 1983.
 - Film No. 3008C, Negatives No. 137-141, Film Format F-32, 27 August 1983.
 - Film No. 3083, Negatives No 8443–8445, Film Format RC-8, 12 April 1984.
- b. Chitado, Angola, 17 December 1975.
 - c. Citado, Angola, 22 September 1982.
 - d. Chitado, Angola, August 1987.
 - e. Chana Buabuena, Angola, undated.
 - f. Zesani Mission, Rhodesia, QG5808, undated.
 - g. Area Mosaic of Southern Angola, Cassinga, 3 June 1981.
 - h. Area Mosaic of Southern Angola, Dombondola, undated.

19. International and South African Legislation

South African Defence Act, No. 13 of 1912.

South African Defence Act Amendment Act, No. 22 of 1922.

Defence Act, No. 44 of 1957.

Defence Amendment Act, No. 85 of 1967.

Bantu Authorities Act, No. 68 of 1951.

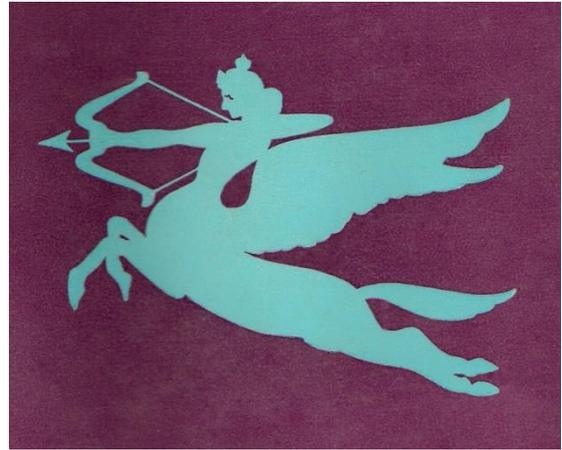
Extraordinary Government Gazette (Gazette No. 69), Pretoria, 30 November 1960.

The League of Nations Mandate for German South West Africa, Geneva, 17 December 1920.

EXAMPLES OF AIRBORNE SYMBOLISM IN INSIGNIA



**Bellerophon mounted on Pegasus
- symbol of the British Airborne
Forces**
(Taken from cover of *Pegasus*
Yearbook, 2000)

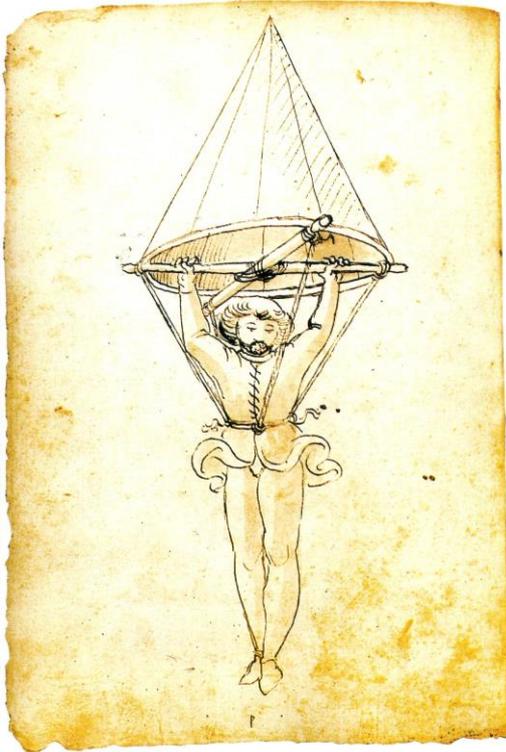


**Shatrujeet - symbol of the Indian
Airborne Forces**
(Taken from cover of "India's
Paratroopers" by K. C. Praval)

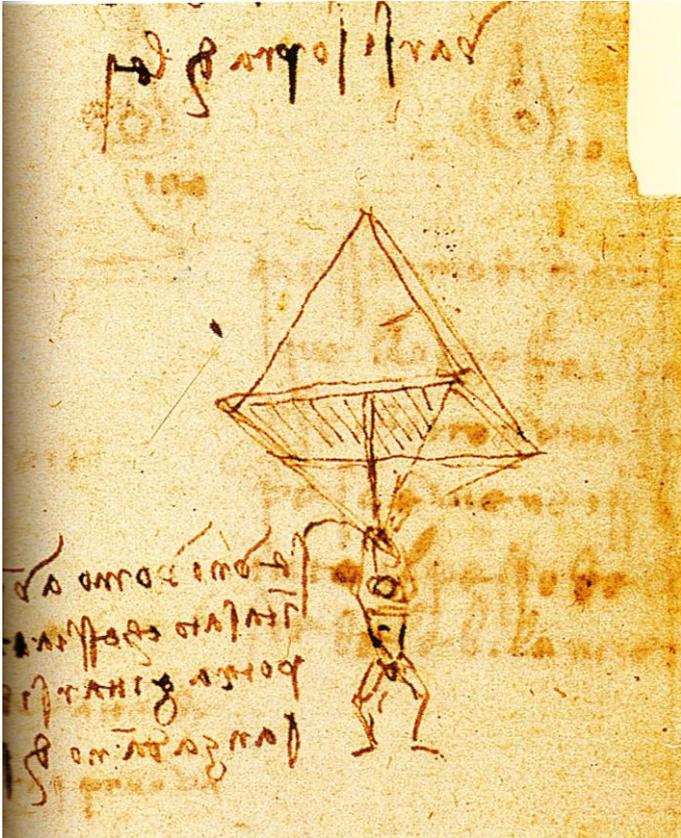


The Eagle as a symbol of German, American, South African and British airborne units
(Taken respectively from Kuhn, *German Paratroops in World War II, Static Line*,
stationary of 1 Parachute Battalion and business card of Commander, 16 Air Assault
Brigade)

ITALIAN RENAISSANCE PARACHUTE DESIGNS



Conceptual Parachute Design by an anonymous Siense Engineer from the 15th Century.
(British Library, Ms. Add. 34113, ff. 200v, reproduced in Pescio [ed], *Leonardo on Flight*, p. 27.)

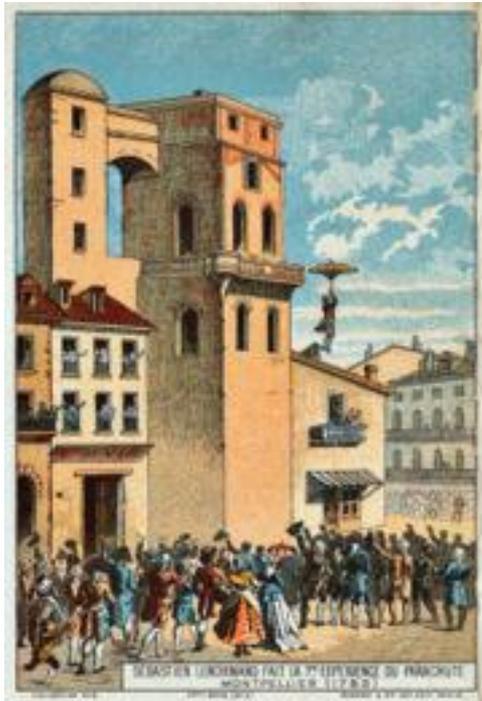


Leonardo's later sketch of a parachute.
(*Codex Atlanticus*, Folio 1058v, reproduced in Pescio [ed], *Leonardo on Flight*, p. 59.)

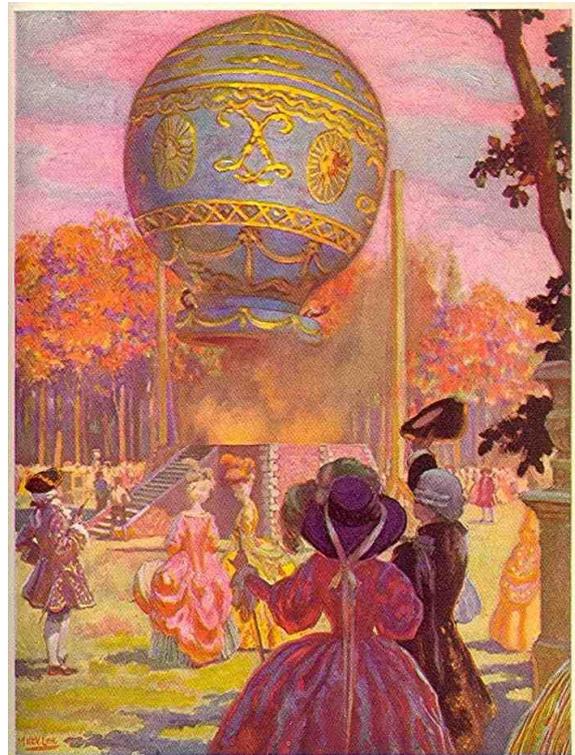
Right: Reproduction of a contemporary sketch of Vrančić's "Homo Volans"
(From Wikipedia, "Parachute")



EARLY PARACHUTING AND BALLOONING



Lenormand jumps from the tower of the Montpellier Observatory in 1793. (Illustration from the late 19th Century, reproduced in “Louis-Sébastien Lenormand” entry in Wikipedia.)



In 1783 the Montgolfier Brothers' hot air balloon made its first ascent in the Bois de Boulogne

Montgolfier brothers' hot air balloon, 1783.

Taken from
www.olympiaclub.de/montgolfier.jpg



Garnerin's first Parachute Descent in 1789

Painting by Etienne Chevalier de Lorimier, from Mary Bellis, “History of the Parachute”,
About.com:Inventors

NAPOLEONIC ERA CONCEPT OF AIRBORNE TROOPS

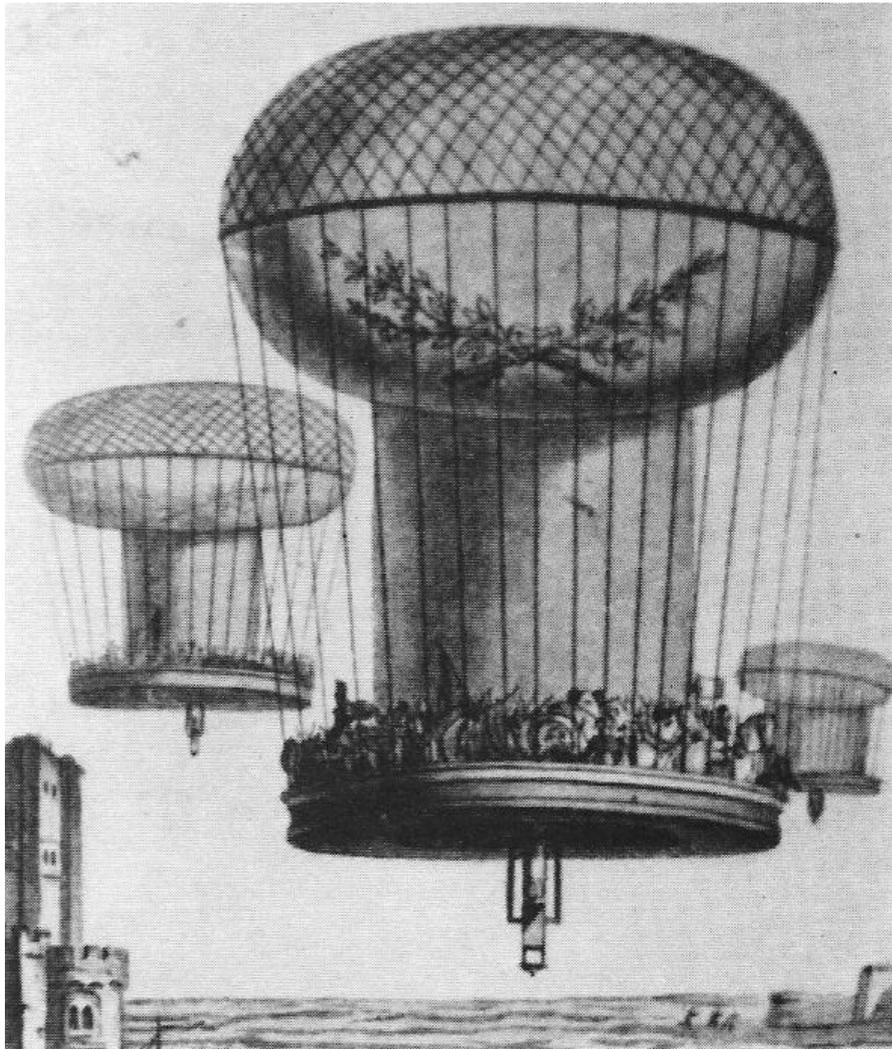
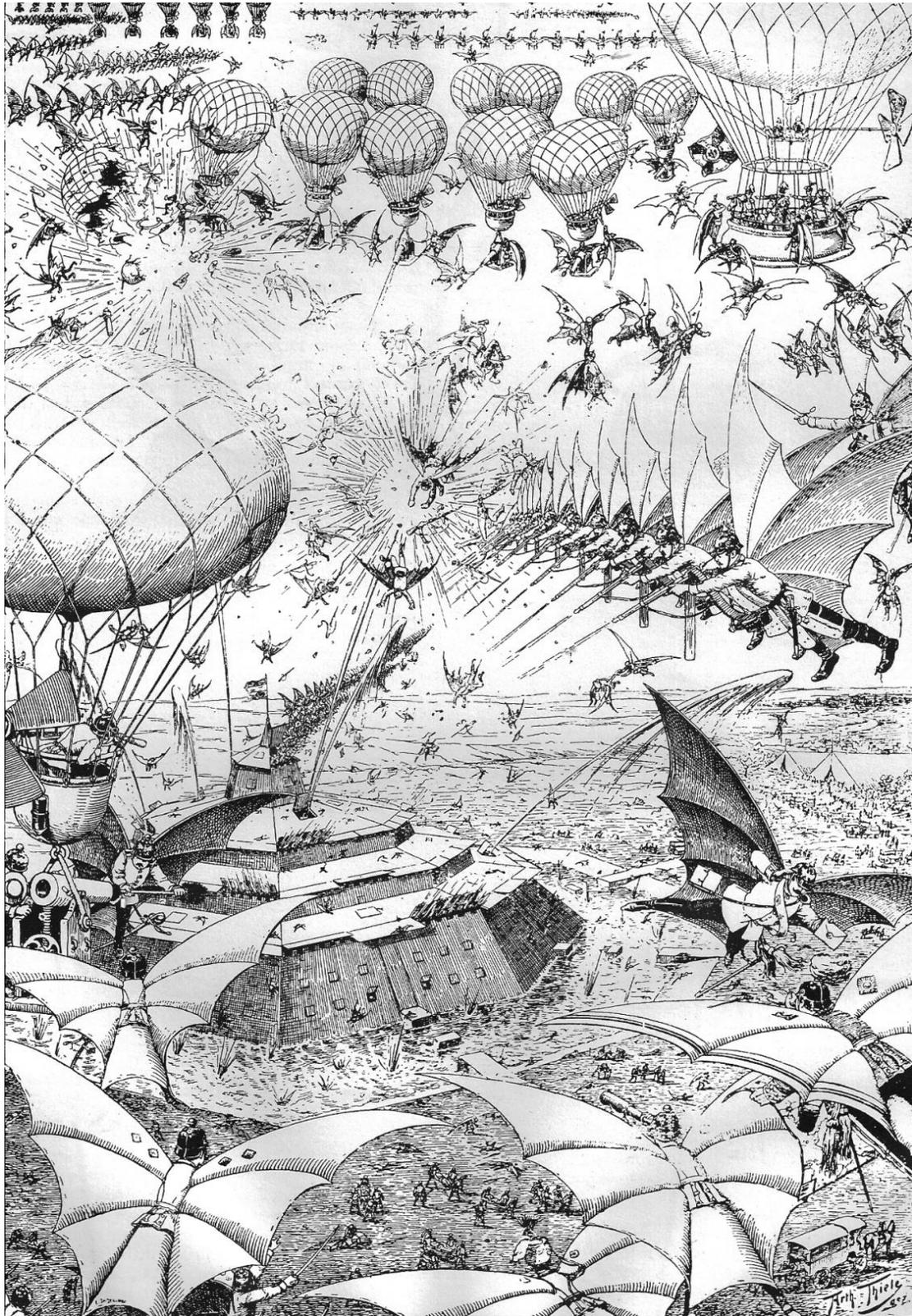


Illustration that appeared in the *Publiciste* in Paris in the Year XI of the Republican Calendar (1802/1803). Captioned "*La Thilorière, ou Déscente en Angleterre*", it was accompanied by the claim that the balloon proposal, if implemented, was capable of lifting 3,000 men.

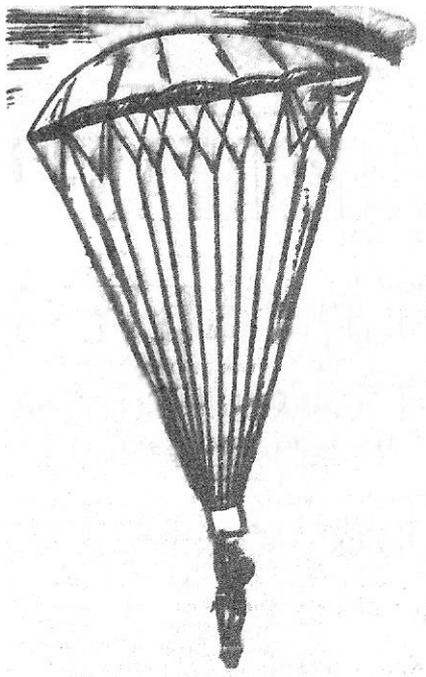
(Reproduced in Weeks, *The Airborne Soldier*, p. 6.)

19TH CENTURY GERMAN FANTASY OF AIRBORNE WARFARE



German fantasy of Airborne Warfare in the 1880s
(Postcard by Arthur Thiele, Reproduced from Barry Gregory and
John Batchelor, *Airborne Warfare 1918-1941*, p. 5.)

EARLY PARACHUTING IN SOUTH AFRICA



Sketch of James Price's parachute that appeared in the Natal Witness on 7, 8, 9 and 10 October 1891



Early photograph of a parachutist, apparently in South Africa, ascending under a balloon, seated on a trapeze with the parachute canopy ready to fill with air as soon as he is released. In all likelihood, this was the system used by "Professor" Price.

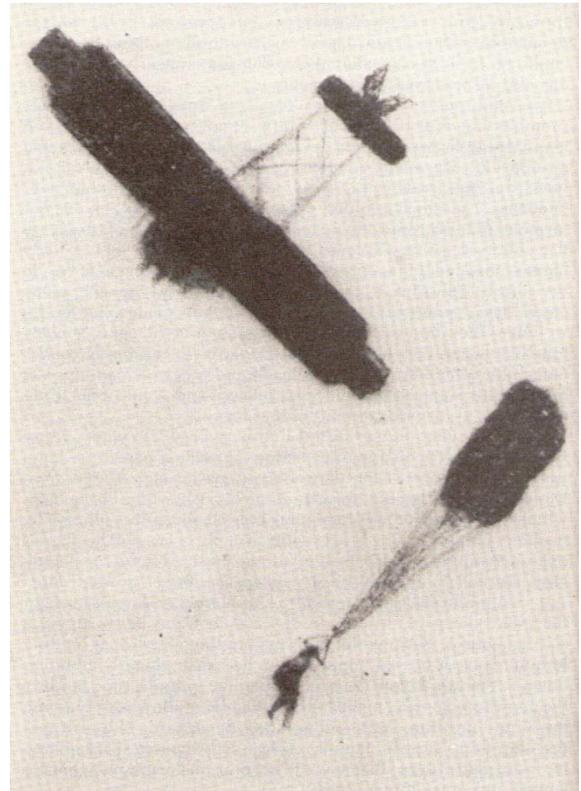
(John William Illsley, In Southern Skies, p. 6.)

FIRST PARACHUTE DESCENT FROM AN AIRCRAFT



Above: Pilot Anthony Jannus with Captain Albert Berry and the Benoist pusher-type aeroplane before take-off from Kinloch Field, Missouri, 1912. The parachute is in the conical container in front of the axle.

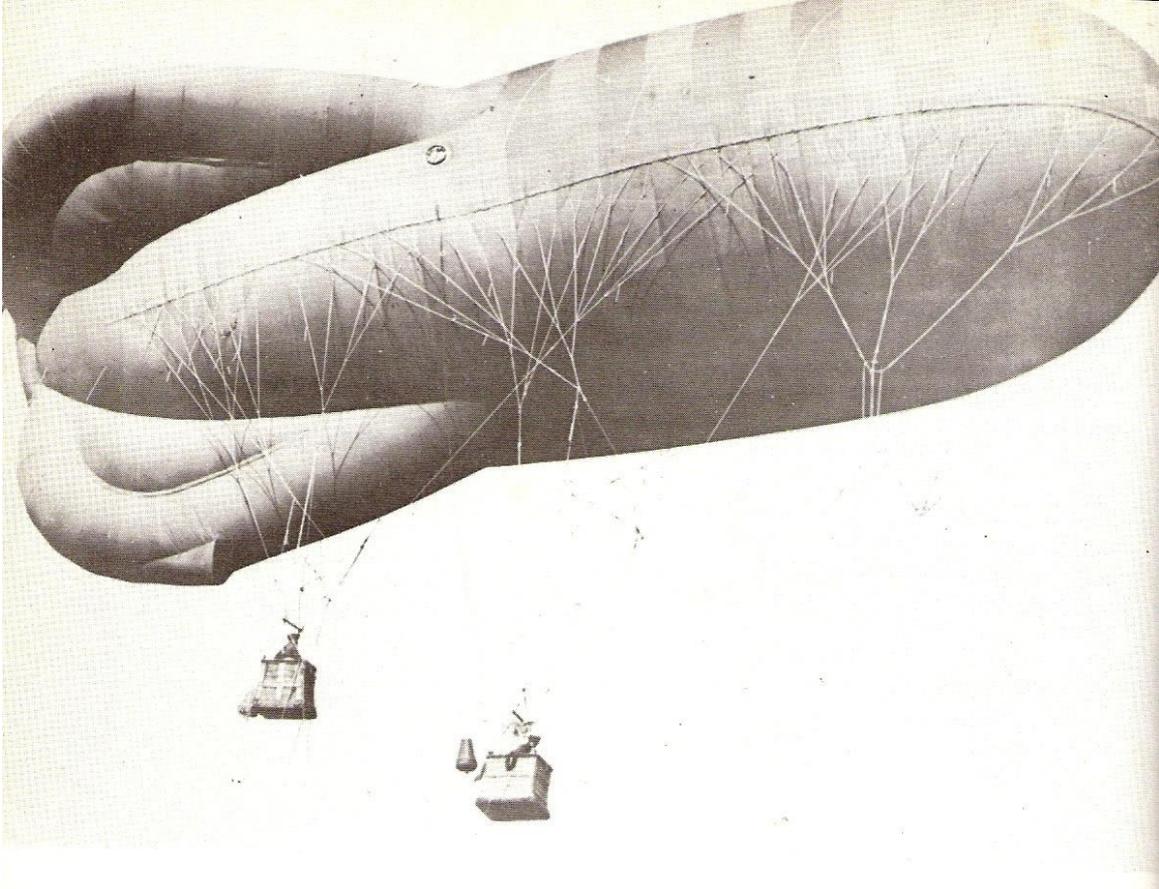
Photo: Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC



Right: Berry makes what is generally accepted as the first parachute jump in history from a plane in flight, Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, USA, on 28 February 1912.

Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC

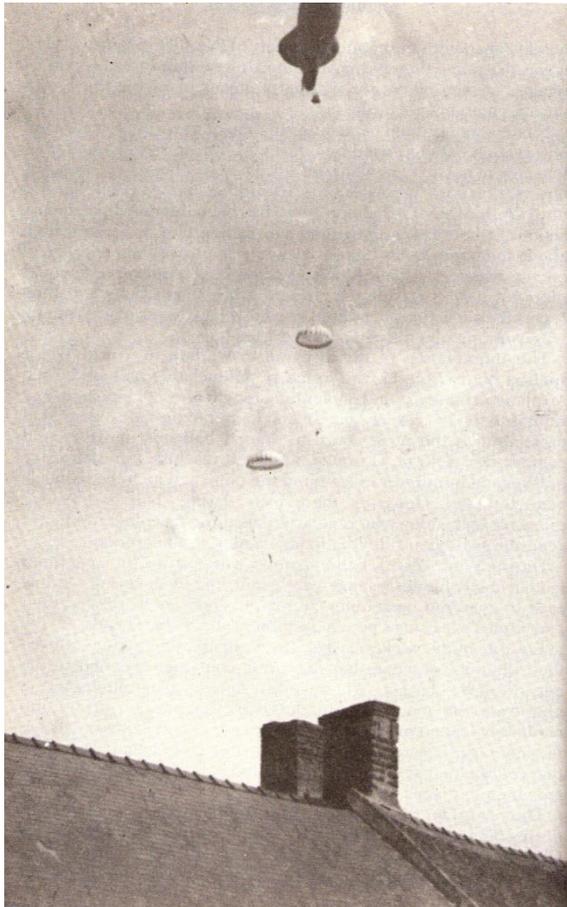
PARACHUTING BY BALLOON OBSERVERS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR



Balloon Observers on the Western Front in the First World War. The containers holding the parachutes can be seen suspended over the sides of the baskets.
Photo: Imperial War Museum, London, from Barry Gregory, *British Airborne Troops*, p. 14

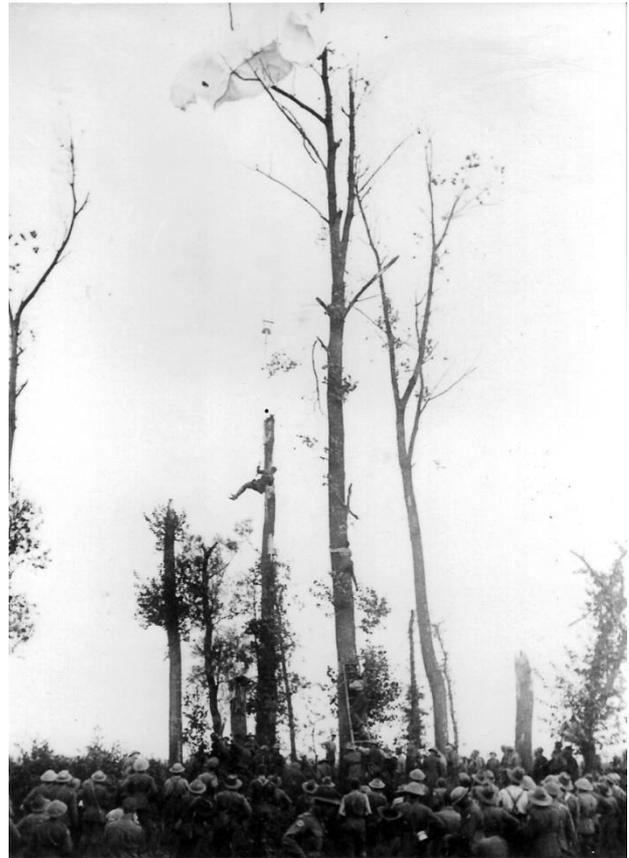


Right: A German balloon observer jumps from his basket, pulling his "Guardian Angel" parachute after him.
Photo: Bundesarchiv, from Weeks, *The Airborne Soldier*, p.8



Balloon observers descending by parachute.

Photo: US National Archives, reproduced in Devlin, *Paratrooper!*, p.16.



Watched by a crowd of soldiers, a balloon observer swings below his parachute, which has been caught in a tree during the Battle of Menin Road, France 1917. Though found in the SANDF Archives, there is no indication that the man is a South African.

Photo: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre



Left: A balloon observer extricates himself from a shattered tree after parachuting to safety at the Battle of Menin Road, 1917.

Photo: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre

ROBEY LEIBBRANDT: FIRST SOUTH AFRICAN TO BE TRAINED AS A PARATROOPER – BY THE GERMANS

Photos: Mrs Margaretha Leibbrandt, widow of Robey Leibbrandt



Sidney Robey Leibbrandt, an ardently anti-British Afrikaner, as a young Officer Cadet in the Permanent Force at the SA Military College in Roberts Heights in 1931. He did not complete the course, left the military and subsequently joined the police. During his visit to the Olympic Games in Berlin during 1934, representing South Africa in boxing, he became enamoured with Hitler's National Socialism.

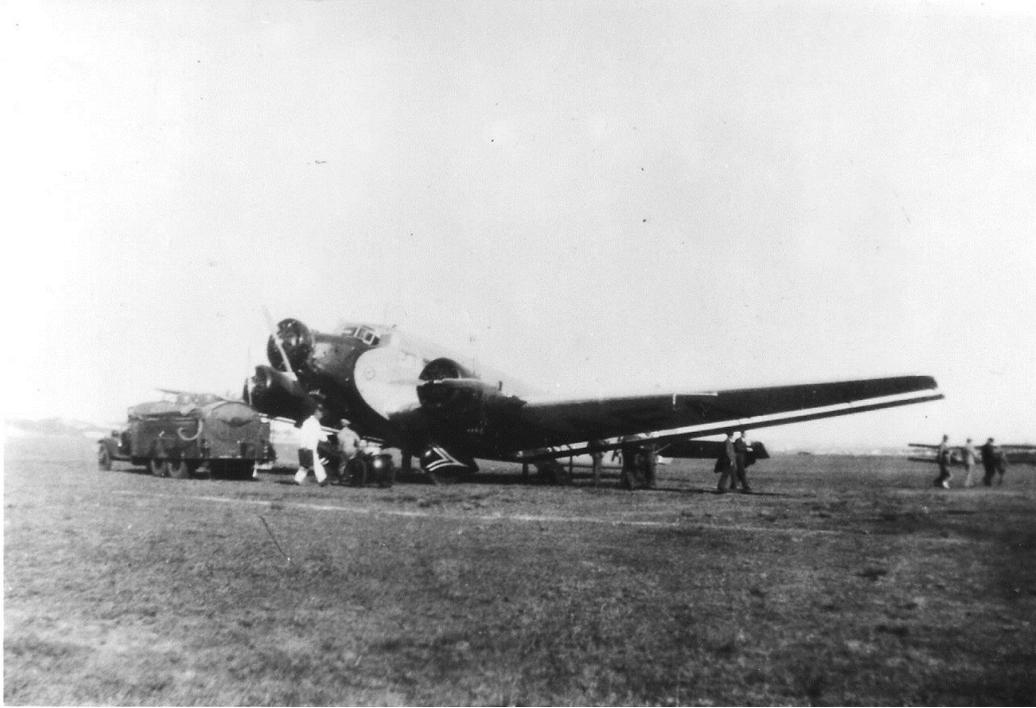


Leibbrandt (standing, second from right) with fellow students at the Reichs Akademie for Physical Culture in Berlin, 1936. The students in the group are possibly foreigners undergoing training and the other three who are standing appear to be Oriental (perhaps Japanese).



Raising the Nazi flag at the Reichsakademie for Physical Culture in Berlin, Germany, 1936. Apparently Leibbrandt is amongst the students in the picture.

SAAF AIRCRAFT USED DURING UDF AIRBORNE TRAINING AND EXERCISES IN 1940



The German Junkers Ju 52/3, eight of which had been purchased for the South African Airways with a view to being used by the South African Air Force in the event of hostilities. They were pressed into service early in the war. Photo: SAAF Museum



SA Troops boarding a Ju-52/3 at Air Force Station Swartkops in full marching order. Probably during the training of the SA Police Battalions in Tactical Air Landing Operations (TALO) in 1940.

Photo: Dave Becker, *75 Years on Wings of Eagles*.



The Hawker Hartbees used to carry out a simulated strafing run on the Wonderboom Airport during the Tactical Assault Landing exercise in 1940.

Photo: SAAF Museum



Junkers Ju 52/3 in flight, painted in SAAF livery, with SAAF identification roundels.

Photo: SAAF Museum

CAPTAIN DAVID McCOMBE, SAAF

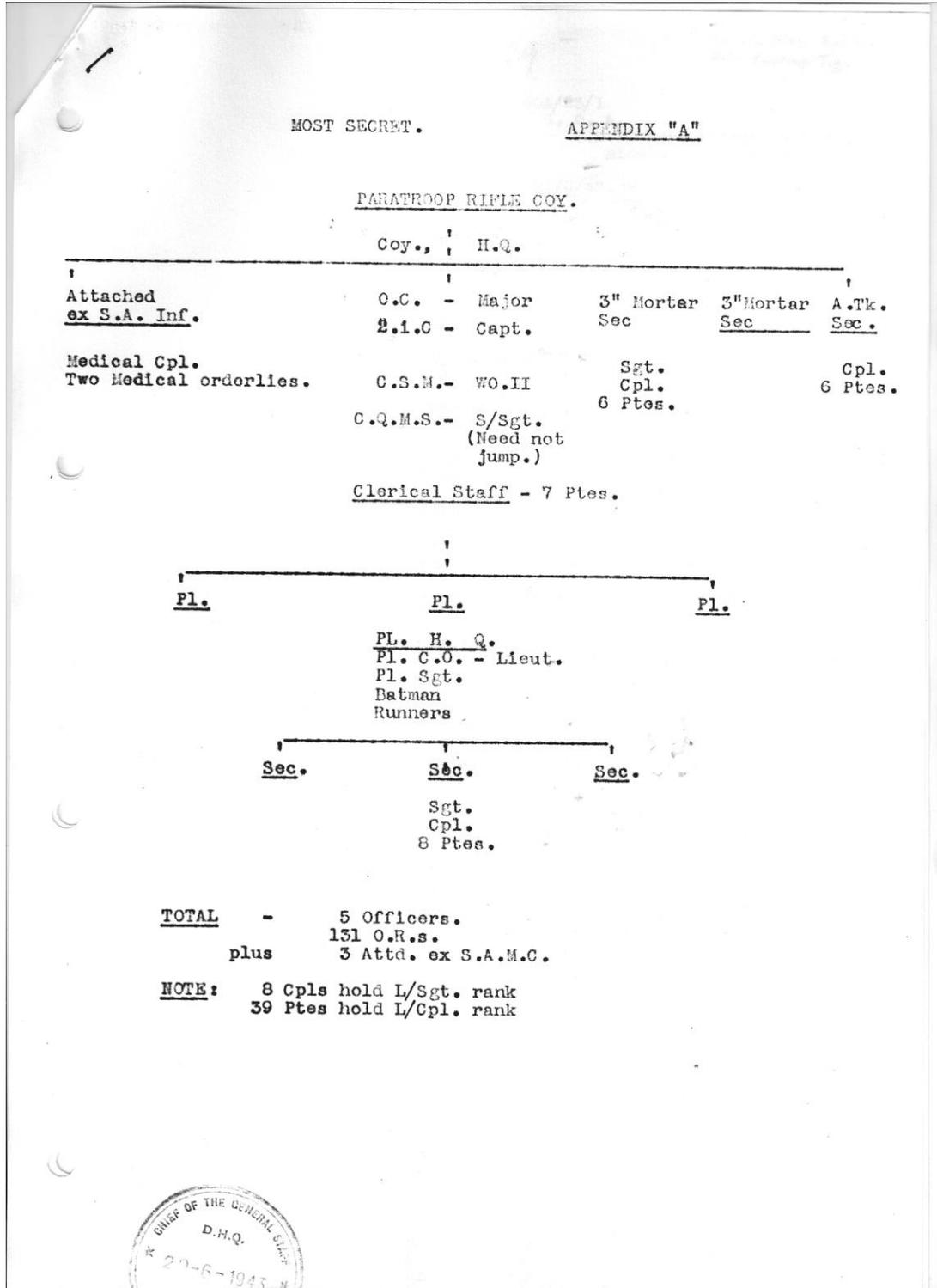


McCombe, wearing his SAAF insignia, but with the red beret of the British Airborne Forces.

(Source: Group Photograph of Officers and Other Ranks of HQ 1 Airborne Division, taken in England during early September 1944, prior to the Battle of Arnhem. Provided by Mrs Dorothy McCombe of Harare.)

ORGANISATION OF PARACHUTE COMPANY REQUESTED FROM SOUTH AFRICA BY BRITISH MIDDLE EAST FORCES

(DOD, AG(3), Box 90, 154/x/908 "UDF Para Coy", Encl. 1, Letter GAO/23/1 from GOA, UDF Admin. HQ, MEF, to CGS, DHQ, Pretoria, 21 June 1943. Also DOD, CGS (War), Box 351, "Paratroop Training", Encl. 29.)



BATTLE TRAINING OF THE SAAF PARATROOP COMPANY



Recruits for the SAAF Paratroop Company undergoing physical training to prepare them for their intended parachute course.

Photos: The late Col Ossie Baker.



Aspirant South African paratroopers training on obstacles that include a catwalk to test their reaction to heights and a wooden wall to teach them climbing skills. They are armed with automatic weapons, including the US Thompson and the British Sten sub-machine guns.

Photos: The late Col Ossie Baker.



Training on rope bridges: the three-strand bridge.

Photo: The late Col Ossia Baker.



Ladder bridges on the obstacle course.



Instructors at the Battle School show volunteers paratrooper trainees how to cross a barbed wire obstacle.

Photos: The Late Col Ossie Baker



Crossing a single-strand bridge.



Watermanship training – crossing water obstacles by boat.

Photos: The Late Col Ossie Baker



Trench clearing by the paratrooper volunteers at the Battle School, Cullinan, in 1943.

Photo: The late Col Ossie Baker



Two of the officer instructors at the Battle School in Cullinan who later joined the SAAF Paratroop Company: Lt Dennis Erwin and Capt Ossie Baker. After the demise of the SAAF Paratroop Company, Baker volunteered for duty with the British Airborne Forces and served for the rest of the war as a paratrooper.

Photo: The late Col Ossie Baker

INSIGNIA OF THE SAAF PARATROOP COMPANY



Maj Craig Anderson, Commanding Officer, SAAF Regiment, with his second-in-command, Capt "Kat" Ferreira. Pegasus, superimposed on an Air Force roundel, is painted onto the door of one of the vehicles of the Paratroop Company. The badges worn on the berets are the standard SA Air Force badges at the time.

Photo: The late Col Ossie Baker.

SOUTH AFRICA'S FIRST JEEP ALLOCATED TO SAAF PARATROOP COMPANY

Photos: The Late Col Ossie Baker



Captain Tony van Niekerk, MC, OC Paratroop Company, SAAF Regiment, driving the Jeep.



Capt Van Niekerk puts South Africa's first Jeep through its paces. His enthusiasm proved his undoing when he rolled the vehicle and was killed.

**OPERATION MANNA: PARACHUTE DROP ON MEGARA AIRFIELD,
GREECE, OCTOBER 1944.**



South African Captain Nathan Vogelmann stands beside his parachute, having been met by a communist ELAS guerrilla. When the Greek Civil War erupted a few weeks later the South Africans found themselves fighting these guerrillas.

Photo: The Late Nathan Vogelmann

EARLY HELICOPTERS IN THE SAAF



The first helicopter in SAAF service: the American Sikorsky S-51 piston engine helicopter. The first of three of these machines was purchased in 1948. Photographed at Stamford Hill in Durban. (Photo: *Daily News*)



The Sikorsky S-55, three of which were delivered to the SAAF from 1957.

(Photo: SAAF Museum)

COMMANDANT GENERAL STEPHEN MELVILLE



Stephen Melville had worked in a bank, been a stoker in the merchant marine, a professional boxer, a rifleman in the South African Mounted Rifles, an artilleryman and an Air Force pilot. During the Second World War he served as a pilot in the African and Italian campaigns and commanded the SAAF contingent during the campaign in Madagascar. He was mentioned in dispatches, and after the war was Air Chief of Staff from 1954 to 1956, Inspector General from 1956 to 1958 and Commandant General of the SADF from 1958 to 1960. He showed an exceptional grasp of the potential of air transportable forces and played a key part in the drive to establish the SADF's first parachute unit before he retired in 1960. He was the brother-in-law of prime minister J.G. Strijdom.

See R. Warwick, "The SADF Leadership During the Years 1960 to 1974", summary of lecture, in *South African Military History Society Newsletter*, No. 360, November 2008. Photo: Wikipedia

PARATROOPER SELECTION COURSE PARTICIPANTS, SEPTEMBER 1960

S.A. MILITERE KOLLEGE



S.A. MILITARY COLLEGE

KURSUS 517 P — COURSE 517 P
 VALSKERMTROEPE-KEURING (SM) — PARATROOPERS-SELECTION (PF)
 6 SEPT 1960 TOT 21 SEPT 1960 — 6 SEPT 1960 TO 21 SEPT 1960

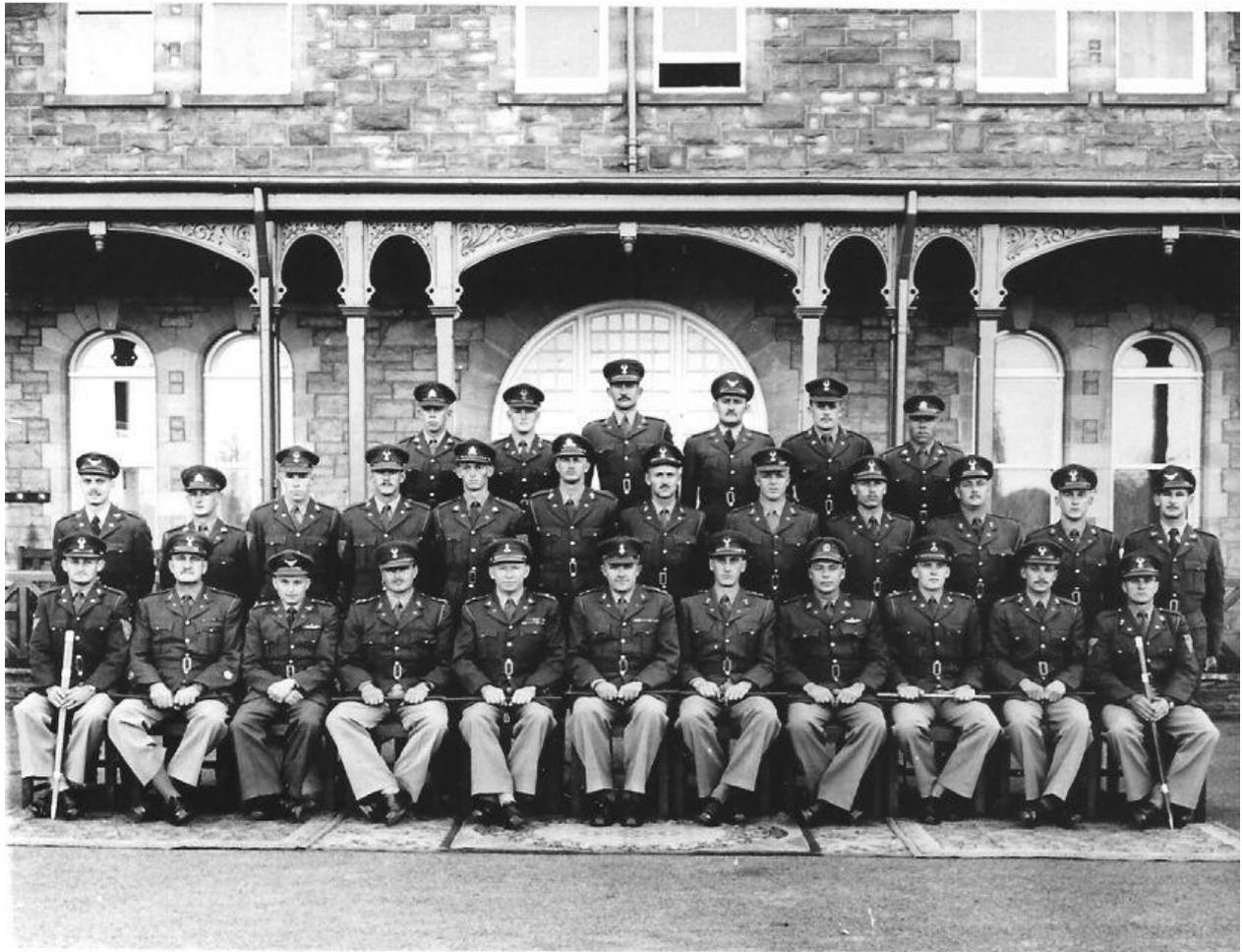


Foto deur Dotman Pretorius

Eerste Ry (L.n.a.r.) First Row (L.t.o.r.): SSERS/SGT J. P. SHEEHAN-SHEPHERD (Instr.); AO1/WO1 J. A. B. DU PREEZ (RSM); LUIT/LT D. LOMBARD; KAPT/CAPT J. H. ROSSOUW (Kursusleier/Course Ldr); KOMDT W. P. LOUW; KOMDT P. P. J. GROBLER (GSO I); KAPT/CAPT D. R. MARAIS (Adjutant/Adjutant); MAJ J. J. MALAN (MO); VDKT/FDCT L. J. VAN DEN BERG; AVDKT/AFDCT H. G. LEE; SERS/SGT A. VAN DRIEL (Instr).

Tweede Ry (L.n.a.r.) Second Row (L.t.o.r.): 1 KPL/ACPL G. J. LEIBBRANDT; SERS/SGT J. D. BOTHMA; KPL/CPL C. JOOSTE; SERS/SGT R. W. MATHEWS; SERS/SGT D. H. VAN NIEKERK; SERS/SGT D. J. VENTER; SER/SGT H. J. VISAGIE; SERS/SGT P. J. BOTES; KPL/CPL N. J. VISSER; SSERS/SGT S. A. DE BEER; KPL/CPL R. CLAASSEN; 1 KPL/ACPL E. W. BURGER.

Derde Ry (L.n.a.r.) Third Row (L.t.o.r.): KPL/CPL J. H. KIESER; SERS/SGT H. R. FINLAY; SERS/SGT J. KEEL; 1 KPL/ACPL P. W. A. HUMAN; KPL/CPL J. C. ACKERMANN; SSERS/SGT C. J. BRINK.

OFFICERS AND OTHER RANKS OF THE SADF SELECTED FOR PARACHUTE TRAINING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM 1960¹

1. Commandant W.P. Louw, SA Armoured Corps
2. Field-Cornet L.J. van den Berg, SA Engineer Corps
3. Lieutenant D. du P. Lombard, SA Air Force (Transport Aircraft Pilot)
4. Major J.J. Malan, SA Medical Corps (Medical Officer - Doctor)
5. Sergeant H.R. Finlay, SA Infantry Corps (PT Instructor)
6. Staff-Sergeant S.A. de Beer, SA Infantry Corps
7. Staff-Sergeant C.J. Brink, SA Armoured Corps
8. Sergeant P.J. Botes, SA Infantry Corps
9. Sergeant J. Keet, SA Infantry Corps
10. Corporal N.J. Visser, SA Infantry Corps
11. Corporal J.H. Kieser, SA Armoured Corps
12. Corporal J.C. Ackerman, SA Infantry Corps
13. Corporal N. Claassen, SA Infantry Corps
14. Air-Corporal P.W.A. Human, SA Air Force (Parachute Packer)
15. Air-Corporal G.J. Leibbrandt, SA Air Force (Parachute Packer)

The reserves were:

1. Sergeant D.H. van Niekerk, SA Armoured Corps
2. Sergeant J.D. Bothma, SA Armoured Corps

Of note is that three of those chosen (including the commander) were from the Armoured Corps, despite the parachute unit being envisaged as an infantry organisation. Both reserves were also from the Armoured Corps. The only other Army officer was also not from the infantry, but from the Engineer Corps.

Ultimately, one of those selected to go to the UK was withdrawn. Sergeant "Doompie" Keet remained behind because of medical reasons and Sergeant "Ysterman" van Niekerk took his place.² This increased the number of Armoured Corps members to four and reduced the number of infantrymen to six.

1. DOD, AG(9), Box 290, AG/213/5/43 (SM), Part 1, "SAPF Strength: 2 Mobile Watch", Encl .50, 9 September 1960.
 2. DOD, DC(1), Box 78, Confidential DC 17850/445 "Paratroop Training", Encl. 9, Letter Adjutant General to Army Chief of Staff, Air Chief of Staff and Surgeon General, "Valskermopleiding in die Buiteland – Lede van die SM", 22 September 1960. Also KG(5), Box 297, KG/GPT/2/2/1/5 Vol. 1, "Opleiding en Aanwending van Mobiele Wagte", Encl. 23, Signal A. 7006, Adjutant General to Army Chief of Staff, Air Chief of Staff and Surgeon General.

LIEUTENANT W.P. LOUW IN ITALY DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR



Lt Willem Louw in the centre of the picture with his thumb hooked into his trouser pocket. He is standing in front of two Sherman tanks with a group of officers and men from B-Squadron, 1 Special Service Battalion during the Italian campaign. Louw was a troop commander in this tank regiment.

Photo: Department of Defence Documentation Centre

WARRANT OFFICER JOCK FOX, RAF, LIAISON OFFICER TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTINGENT



BRITISH PARACHUTE INSIGNIA



The Badge of No 1 Parachute Training School (1 PTS), RAF Abingdon, 1960



British Army Parachute Wings, worn on the right upper sleeve

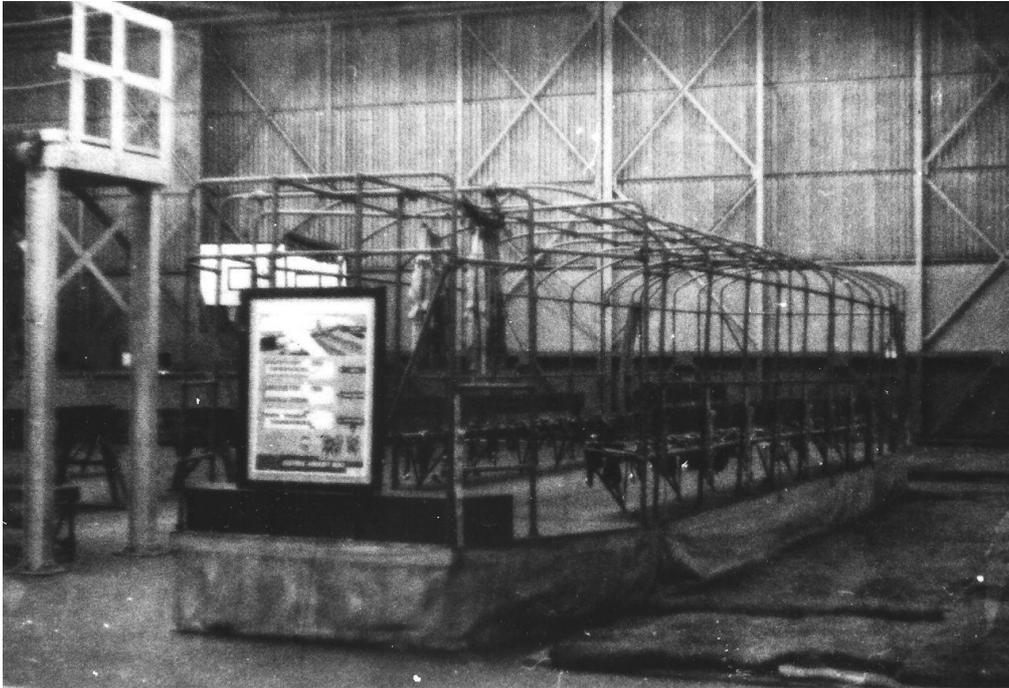


Royal Air Force Parachute Wings, worn on right upper sleeve.



Royal Air Force Parachute Jumping Instructors' Brevet, worn on left breast above medal ribbons or pocket flap.

PARACHUTE TRAINING APPARATUS AT No 1 PTS, RAF ABINGDON



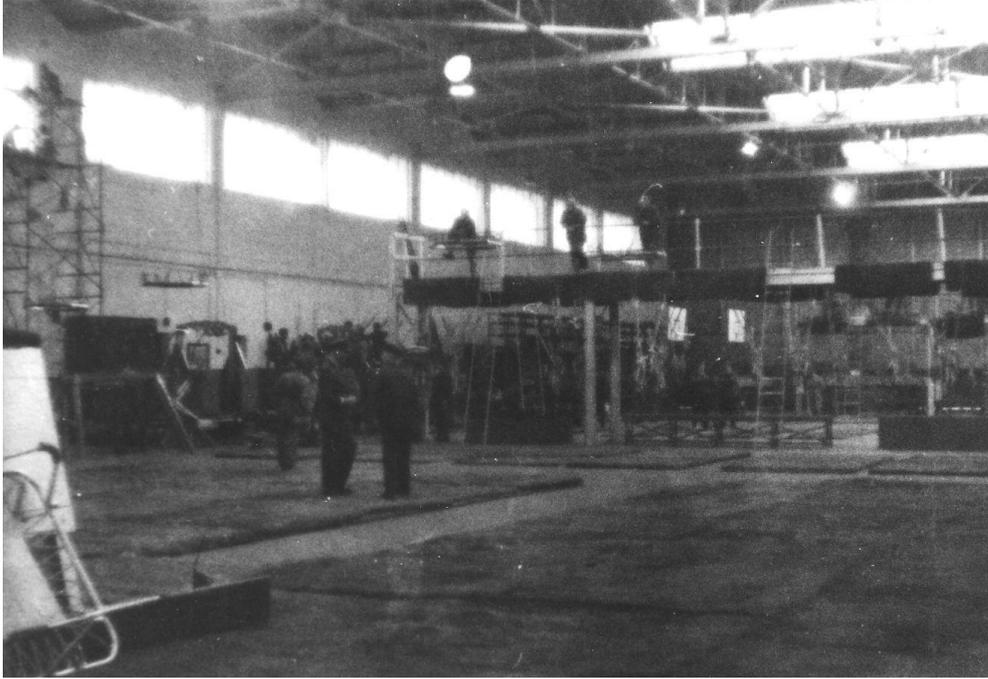
A “mock-up” construction of the Hastings aircraft in which Aircraft Drills were taught.

Photo: Taken by Sgt Harry Finlay during the course.



More training apparatus inside the Ground Training Hangar: slides and rings by which the Landing Technique was taught.

Photo: Taken by Sgt Harry Finlay during the course



Training in Flight Technique on the swings inside the Ground Training Hangar

Photo: Taken by Sgt Harry Finlay during the course



Learning the Landing Technique on the Block & Tackle Apparatus

Photo: Taken by Sgt Harry Finlay during the course



The 35-foot (10.8m) Outdoor Exit Trainer from which the Exit Technique is rehearsed, with the 70-foot (22m) Tower in the background. The Tower was for rehearsing Flight and Landing Techniques.

Photo: No 1 PTS



Some of the South Africans while they were undergoing parachute training: Maj Malan, Lt Lombard, SSgt Brink, Fd Ct Van den Berg, Sgt Van Niekerk, SSgt De Beer and Cmdt Louw.

Photo: Taken by Sgt Harry Finlay during the course

JUMPING FROM THE BALLOON



Sgt Van Niekerk, Cpl Claassen, Cmdt Louw and Sgt Finlay preparing their parachutes before the balloon jump – their first jump! Photo: Harry Finlay



Sgt Harry Finlay ready for his first jump, with a rubber training helmet on his head and his reserve parachute on his chest.

Photo: Harry Finlay



The balloon, anchored to the ground, with its “cage” on the back of the winch truck. The South Africans did their first two jumps from this cage after it had been winched 800 feet into the air.

Photo: H.Finlay



An RAF instructor does a textbook exit from the balloon as a demonstration. Photo: Harry Finlay



A trainee paratrooper descends after jumping from the cage suspended below the balloon. Photo: Imperial War Museum



Landing at Weston-on-the-Green Air Base. A Beverley aircraft is in the near background and in the distance a Hastings aircraft can be seen. Photo: Harry Finlay

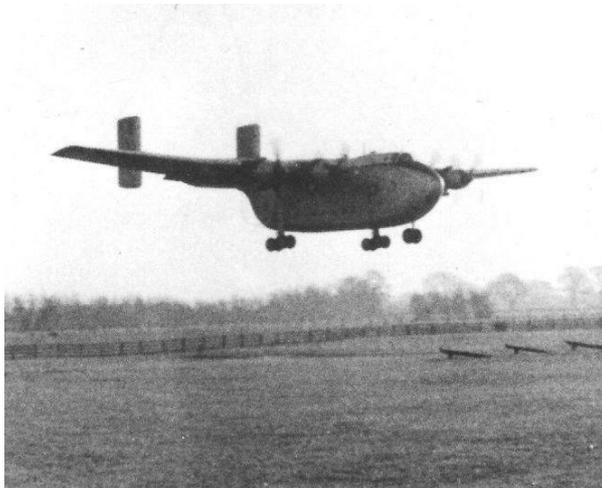


Trainees roll up their parachutes after landing, while the next batch descends. Photo: Harry Finlay

PARACHUTING FROM THE BLACKBURN BEVERLEY AIRCRAFT



The Blackburn Beverley C1 in flight, clearly showing the portholes of the upper deck in the tailboom, and those of the lower deck in the main cargo hold. [Photo:](#) Beverley Association



A double-decker Blackburn Beverley lands at RAF Abingdon.

[Photo:](#) Harry Finlay



Close up view of the front of the enormous Beverley, which could carry 70 paratroopers.

[Photo:](#) Beverley Association



Waiting to board the Beverley, its rear cargo clam-doors removed.

Photo: Harry Finlay



Paratroopers board the upper deck of a Beverley.

Photo: alternathistory.org



Paratroopers with equipment inside the main hold of the Beverley (Lower Deck)

Photo: alternathistory.org



Jumping with equipment from the side-doors of the Beverley over Weston-on-the-Green.

Photo: Peter R. March, Beverley Association

Paratroopers dropping from the Blackburn Beverley (Photo Credit: Unknown)

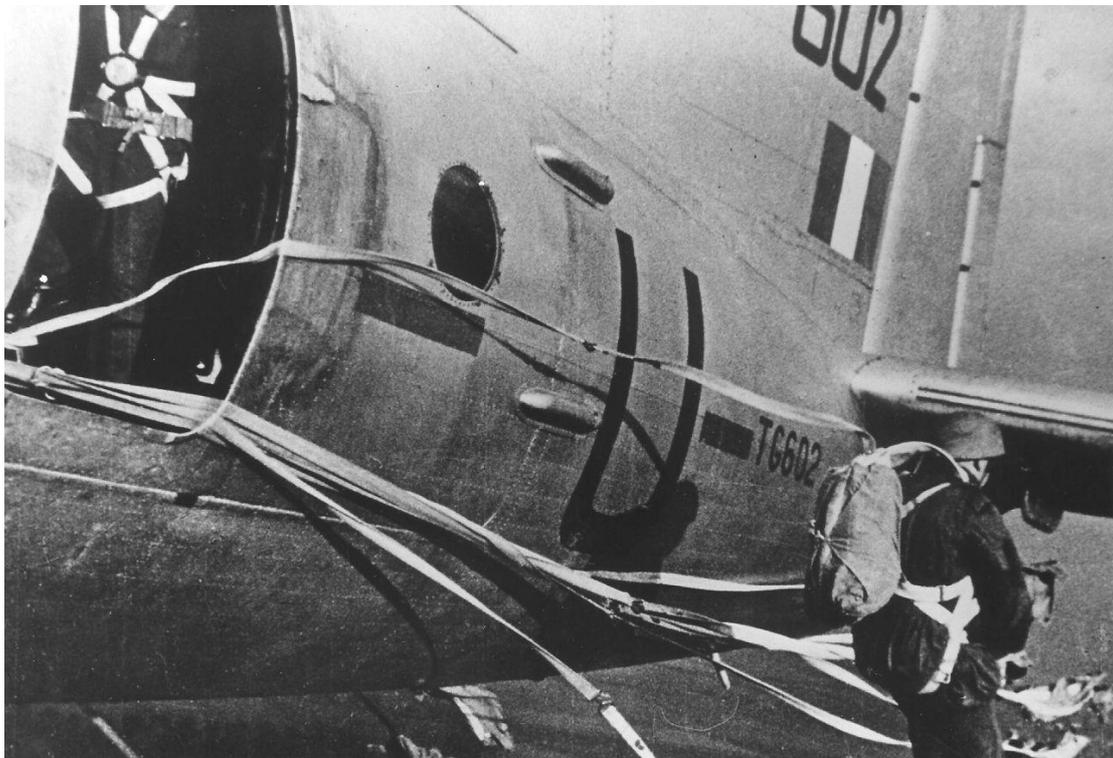


PARACHUTING FROM THE HANDLEY-PAGE HASTINGS AIRCRAFT



The Handley-Page Hastings aircraft with its port and starboard doors, parked on the wet runway, awaiting the paratroopers. The aircraft could carry 35 paratroopers

Photo: Harry Finlay



Jumping from the port side of the Hastings aircraft. This photo was taken a few years before the South Africans underwent their training, as the British paratroopers had not yet adopted reserve parachutes.

Photo: No 1 PTS



Exiting from the two-door Hastings, showing the starboard door. The smoke on the DZ below could be one of the marker signals.

Photo: No 1 PTS



Two sticks of paratroopers exit from the Hastings.

Photo: http://impdb.org/index.php?title=l_due_parà



After the paratroopers have jumped, RAF Dispatchers fold strops, stack inner parachute bags and re-arrange seat belts inside a Hastings aircraft. The two open side-doors can be clearly seen, offset so that paratroopers would not collide as they dropped when exiting the aircraft simultaneously from opposite sides. This was because of the relatively narrow fuselage.

Photo: The Glasgow Herald

PARACHUTING FROM THE WESTLAND WHIRLWIND HELICOPTER



Rehearsing the exit from a helicopter. A four-man stick of South Africans are instructed inside the Ground Training Hangar. Sgt "Ysterman" van Niekerk sits on the edge, waiting for the dispatcher to give the command, "Go!"

Photo: Harry Finlay



The other South Africans wait their turn to rehearse the helicopter jump.

Photo: Harry Finlay



An RAF Westland Whirlwind Helicopter.

Photo: en.wikipedia.org



The Westland Whirlwind Helicopter that the South Africans jumped from at Weston-on-the-Green

Photo: Harry Finlay



The South Africans are checked by a dispatcher prior to emplaning in the helicopter.

Photo: Harry Finlay



The RAF Whirlwind helicopter takes off with a group of South African parachutists aboard.

Photo: Harry Finlay

SOUTH AFRICANS ON BRITISH PARACHUTE INSTRUCTORS' COURSE



Under training at RAF Abingdon's 1 PTS in November/December 1960. Sgt Harry Finlay gives instruction on the exit technique to his fellow-students Cpl Claassen, Cpl Kieser, Fd Ct Van den Berg, Cmdt Louw and Sgt Van Niekerk.

Photo: Maj G. Leibbrandt



Sgt "Tico" Brink marches the South African contingent of prospective parachute instructors to the NAAFI (Navy, Army, Air Force Institute) for a tea break. Zipped up inside their camouflage parachute smocks against the biting English winter are (front pair) Fd Ct Louis van den Berg and Cmdt Willem Louw. Behind them are Cpl Johnny Kieser and Cpl Nic Visser, followed by Sgt P.J. Botes and Sgt "Ysterman" van Niekerk, with Cpl J.C. Ackerman and the others bringing up the rear.

Photo: Harry Finlay



Instruction as DZ Safety officers. Manning the DZ communications after having laid out the panel signals and the wind velometer are Sgt Finlay, Cmdt Louw, an RAF instructor and Sgt Botes.

Photo: Harry Finlay



Sgt Harry Finlay instructs the stick of British prospective paratroopers that he is responsible for training as part of the Instructors' Course in the intricacies of the Personal Weapons Container (PWC).

Photo: Harry Finlay



Sgt Harry Finlay, prior to boarding a Beverley aircraft to dispatch troops on course at No 1PTS

Photo: Harry Finlay

**COURSE PHOTO OF THE SOUTH AFRICANS WHO QUALIFIED AS
PARATROOPERS AT NO 1 PTS, RAF ABINGDON, TAKEN ON
09 DECEMBER 1960**



South African Contingent with RAF Instructors at No 1 PTS

- Front Row:** Fd Ct L.J. van den Berg, Wing Cdr B.F. Stannard, AFC, RAF (OC 1 PTS),
Cmndt W.P. Louw, Maj J.J. Malan, Lt D. du P. Lombard, Flying-Officer Stewart
Cameron, RAF
- Middle Row:** WO R. Fox, MBE, BEM, RAF Air Cpl G.J.Leibbrandt, Sgt D.H. van Niekerk,
SSgt S.A. de Beer, Sgt Andy Sweeney, RAF, Sgt P.J. Botes, Cpl N.J. Visser,
Air Cpl P.W.A. Human
- Rear Row:** SSgt C.J. Brink, Cpl J.C. Ackerman, FSgt Ben Cass, RAF, Cpl R. Claasen, Sgt
H. Bell, RAF, Cpl J.H. Kieser, Sgt H.R. Finlay
- Absent:** Sgt Geordie Platts, RAF

The South Africans have their newly earned parachute wings sewn onto the upper right sleeves of their tunics. Both Malan and Lombard have their right legs in plaster casts, having sustained fractures on their qualifying night jump.

Photo: No 1 PTS

VISIT TO THE BRITISH ARMY'S 22 COMPANY RASC (AIR DESPATCH)



Cmdt Louw takes notes in the model room during the visit. Behind him are Cpl Ackerman, Cpl Claassen, SSgt De Beer, FSgt Cass, RAF, Sgt Van Niekerk, Cpl Kieser and Sgt Botes.

Photo: Harry Finlay



Louw inspects a de-rigged Land Rover and trailer dropped by parachute on a medium stress platform

Photo: Harry Finlay

AWARD OF BRITISH PARACHUTE INSTRUCTOR HALF-WING BREVET



Group Captain D. Cameron, Officer Commanding RAF Abingdon, presents Cpl Ronnie Claassen with his Parachute Instructor Insignia, 15 December 1960.

Photo: R. Claassen

GATHERING FOR AN *INTABA* OF THE *iKONGO* MOVEMENT



Disaffected Mpondo dissidents ride in from surrounding districts to air their grievances at an *Intaba* meeting. Photo: UWC Robben Island Museum, Mayibuye Archives



An *Intaba* meeting of the *iKongo* movement.

Photo: UWC Robben Island Museum, Mayibuye Archives

AIRCRAFT TYPES EMPLOYED DURING OPERATION SWIVEL



A Sikorsky S-55 helicopter flies ahead of the newer Alouette II. Used to transport troops, their carrying capacity was limited to between two and four equipped soldiers.

Photo: SAAF Museum



The Harvard (known in the USA, where it originated, as the North American T-6 Texan) used to “buzz” unlawful assemblies and to drop tear gas and smoke bombs

Photo: L.J. Vosloo



The Auster AOP Mk IV/V used for Command & Control as well as Reconnaissance

The Auster AOP9 was a braced high-wing single engine monoplane with a fixed tail wheel undercarriage. It was unarmed and used primarily for directing artillery fire and for reconnaissance. At the time of the Mpondo Revolt they were flown by Army personnel, but were later incorporated into the Air Force.



The Douglas C-47 Dakota used for flying in supplies

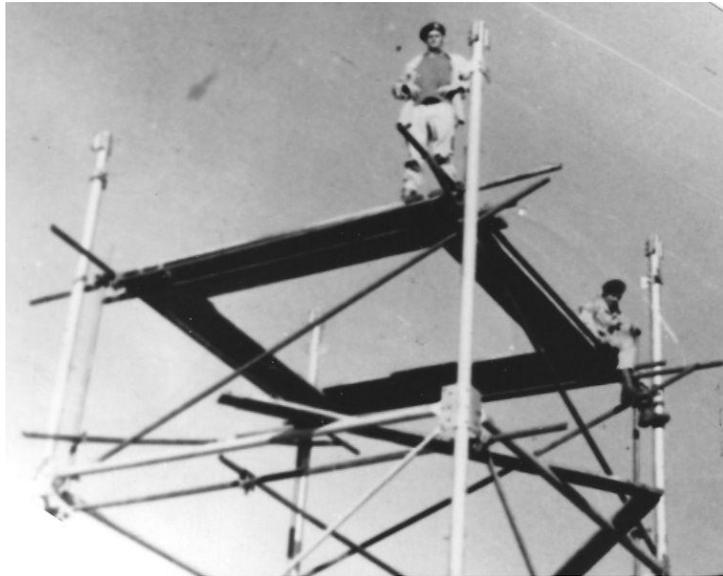
Photo: Origin unknown

BOREDOM AND HOMESICKNESS DURING COINOPS

Cpl Ronnie Claassen, one of the recently qualified paratroopers, on deployment with 2 Mobile Watch in Eastern Pondoland during Operation SWIVEL. These photographs were taken at Lusikisiki on Claassen's 23rd birthday on 18 February 1961 during the last days of the operation. He had spent almost six months away from home by then (one month on selection and preparation, three months in England on course and nearly two months deployed on this operation). His air of melancholy at celebrating his birthday far from his family, mixed with anticipation at going home is apparent.

Photos: Ronnie Claassen

ERECTION OF THE OUTDOOR EXIT TRAINER



Sgt "Ysterman" van Niekerk and SSgt "Tico" Brink during construction.

Photo: Ronnie Claassen



Sappers of 2 Mobile Watch at work on the construction of the Exit Trainer

Photo: Ronnie Claassen

COMMANDANT W.P. LOUW WEARING BRITISH PARACHUTE INSIGNIA



Cmdt Willem Louw, first OC 1 Para Bn, wearing the British Army para wings on his right breast and the RAF para instructor half-wing brevet on his left. He is wearing the burgundy-maroon beret of the SA paratroops with the SA Engineer Corps beret and collar badges of 2 Mobile Watch, although he was actually an Armoured Corps officer. On his Second World War medal ribbons the Mentioned in Dispatches device is displayed.

TESTING OF PARACHUTES BY SOUTH AFRICANS, AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 1961



SAAF C-47 Dakota No 6843, the aircraft from which the first test parachute jumps were done in 1961

Photo: SANDF Archives



AFS Swartkop, Pretoria, prior to their first jumps after returning to South Africa. Cmdt Louw wearing an American T-10 parachute. The others wearing the British GQ parachutes are Maj Malan, SSgt De Beer, Air Cpl Leibbrandt, Cpl Visser & Cpl Ackerman. Wearing the despatcher parachute is Cpl Kieser.

Photo: Maj G.J. Leibbrandt



Emplaning for their first jumps in South Africa: Sgt Harry Finlay mounts the steps followed by Sgt P.J. Botes and Sgt "Ysterman" van Niekerk.

Photo: Harry Finlay



In the air, waiting for the command to prepare for action. On the left are Sgt Harry Finlay, SSgt Faan de Beer & SSgt "Tico" Brink. The despatchers are Cpls Nic Visser & Johnny Kieser. The men on the right are Air Cpl Gerrie Leibbrandt, Sgt Ronnie Claassen & Sgt "Ysterman" van Niekerk.

Photo: Maj G. Leibbrandt



“Action stations!” Seconds before jumping. No 1 jumper is Sgt “Ysterman” van Niekerk and No 2 is Sgt Harry Finlay. No 1 Despatcher (obscured) is Cpl Johnny Kieser and No 2 (back to camera) is Cpl Nic Visser.

Photo: 1 Parachute Battalion



“Ysterman” van Niekerk launches himself from the Dakota, fitted with a British GQ parachute

Photo: 1 Parachute Battalion



The US 32-ft T-10 parachute, ultimately selected for use by the South Africans.

Photo: Maj G. Leibbrandt



The British 22-ft GQ parachute.

Photo: Maj G. Leibbrandt



With a cloud-covered Table Mountain in the background, the 28-ft British Irvin parachutes are tested at AFS Ysterplaat in windy conditions.

Photo: Maj G. Leibbrandt

THE FIRST SOUTH AFRICAN PARACHUTE COURSE

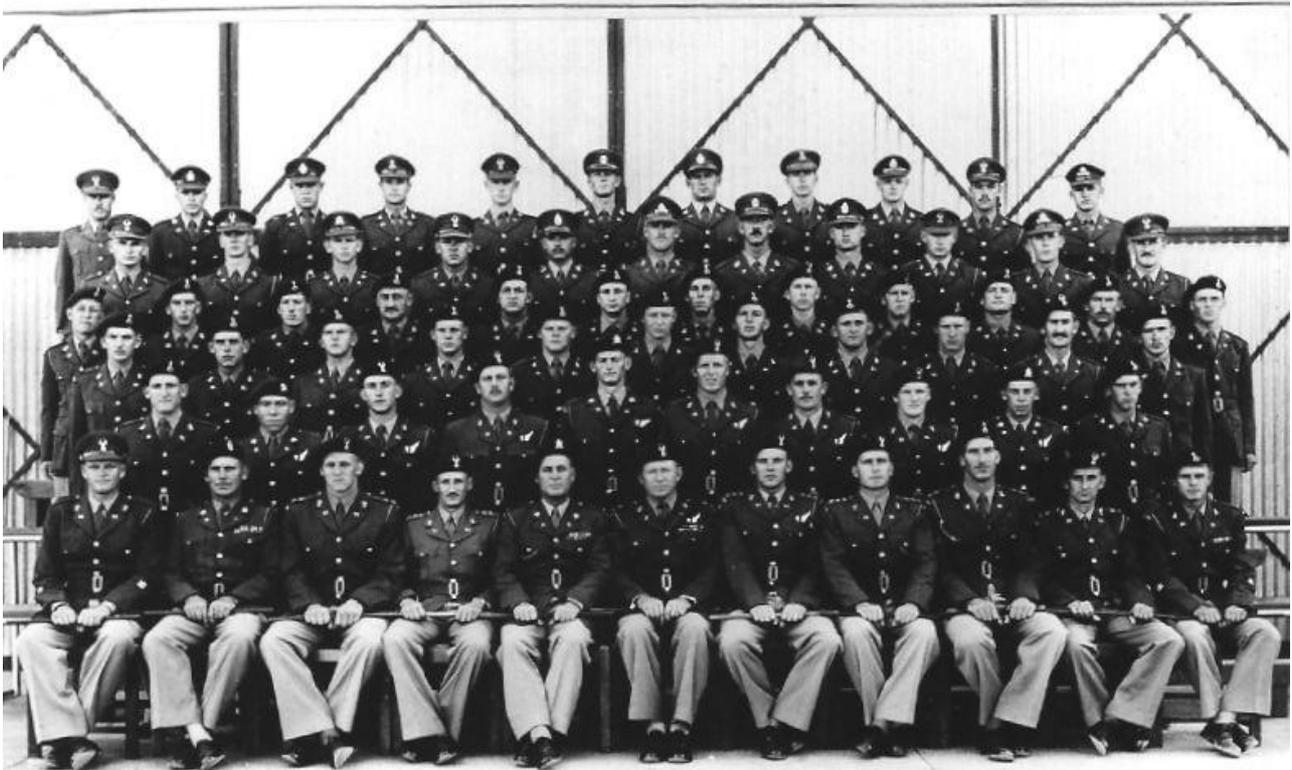
1 VALSKERMBATALJON
Kursus 8V: Basiese Valskermspring-kursus
(SM)

11 DESEMBER 1961 — 3 FEBRUARIE 1962



1 PARACHUTE BATTALION
Course 8V: Basic Parachute Jumping
Course (PF)

11th DECEMBER 1961 — 3rd FEBRUARY 1962



Liebenbergs, Bloemfontein.

Voor-v. na r.: AOZ P. J. Botes; Vdkt. G. P. du Preez (KM/QM); Vdkt. J. P. F. Botha; Kapt. M. J. du Plessis; Maj. T. J. Renfree (2B/2IC); Komdt. W. P. Louw (Bevel./OC); Kapt. L. J. van den Berg (Kursusleier/Course Leader); Kopt. J. J. Keyter; Vdkt. P. J. G. Moller; Vdkt. J. D. Braytenboch; AOZ O. R. Wocke.

Tweede Ry: Skut J. F. Smit; S.Sers. C. J. Brink; Sers. R. Cloassen; S.Sers. S. A. de Beer; S.Sers. D. H. van Niekerk; S.Sers. P. J. Botes; Kpl. J. C. Ackermann; S.Sers. H. R. Finlay; Sers. J. H. Kieser; Skut F. P. Stevenson.

Derde Ry: Skut S. W. Germishuizen; Skut L. G. Brits; Skut G. M. S. Wassenaar; Skut J. F. Bothma; Skut D. B. Truter; Skut H. F. P. Goutha; Skut J. F. Marshall; Skut S. F. Rademeyer; Skut H. P. Robberize; S.Sers. E. C. Slade; Skut H. J. Duvenhage.

Vierde Ry: O/Kpl. J. Roos; Skut T. W. van der Merwe; Spr. A. J. J. Bezuidenhout; Spr. D. D. Macke; Spr. P. D. Jacobs; Spr. S. Weich; O/Kpl. J. A. van den Berg; Spr. A. L. Botha; Spr. H. N. Engelbrecht; Kpl. M. J. Potgieter; O/Kpl. C. W. van der Schyff; Spr. S. H. Fourie.

Vyftde Ry: Kpl. S. P. Marx; Kpl. J. G. Wolmarans; Kpl. J. J. Burger; Kpl. O. A. Bodenhorst; Sers. P. Kruger; Sers. R. G. van Aswegen; S.Sers. P. S. Visser; O/Kpl. P. A. Swart; Kpl. C. Moodie; Bdr. H. Buys; Kpl. M. van der Spuy.

Akterste Ry: Kpl. S. J. Riskert; Wm. P. J. Esterhuizen; Wm. W. A. Faver; Spr. F. L. van der Westhuizen; Kpl. J. J. Moorcroft; Sers. A. G. Oberholzer; Kpl. L. G. Potgieter; Spr. E. van der Westhuizen; O/Kpl. G. P. J. Kruger; Kpl. W. J. Meyer; Bdr. E. J. Smit.

ENDURANCE MARCH IN THE KALAHARI



The Permanent Force Company of 1 Parachute Battalion with the Battalion HQ take a break during their four-day, 194km endurance march through the Kalahari towards the end of 1962.

Photo: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre

ARRIVAL OF THE LOCKHEED HERCULES C-130B AIRCRAFT, 1963



Six of the seven C-130B transport aircraft that were delivered to the SAAF in January 1963. These aircraft placed South Africa in a different league, providing for the first time a strategic reach to the SADF.

Photo: Dave Becker

COMPANY-SIZED AIRBORNE EXERCISE, MARCH 1963



The largest airborne exercise yet conducted by the SADF, March 1963. Using four C-47 Dakota aircraft in two lifts, 120 paratroopers (mostly Citizen Force) of 1 Parachute Battalion are dropped at De Brug military training area near Bloemfontein.

Photo: 1 Parachute Battalion

FIRST PARACHUTE JUMPS FROM THE C-130B AIRCRAFT, 9 APRIL 1963

(Photos: Department of Defence Documentation Centre)



The C-130: able to transport 64 fully equipped paratroopers



Two side-doors enabled the simultaneous dropping of two sticks of 32 paratroopers each



One C-130 aircraft could drop more paratroopers than three C-47 Dakotas, and could transport them more than three times the distance



ACQUISITION OF THE FABRIQUE NATIONALE AS-24 "TICO CAR" MOTORISED TRICYCLE



The Belgian AS-24, as it was advertised



The AS-24 with trailer.



An AS-24 "Tico Car" is put through its paces on the parade square of 1 Para Bn in Tempe, much to the delight of a staff member's dog!

Photo: R. Fenwick

AWARD OF PARACHUTE WINGS TO THE FIRST CF OFFICERS

Commandant Willem Louw congratulates Field Cornet Nic Claassen of Regiment Pretoria University on passing his parachute course. The date was 30 November 1963. Claassen would go on to become the first Officer Commanding 2 Parachute Battalion when this unit was established in 1972 as the first CF parachute battalion. The other officers on Claassen's right are Major N. Stork of Regiment Pongola and Captain D.J. Hollenbach of Regiment Algoa Bay. In the photo the wings have been placed on the right breast, but this was only for purposes of convenience during the parade. They were worn on the right upper sleeve.

Photo: Nic Claassen

AIR SUPPLY IN THE EARLY 1960s

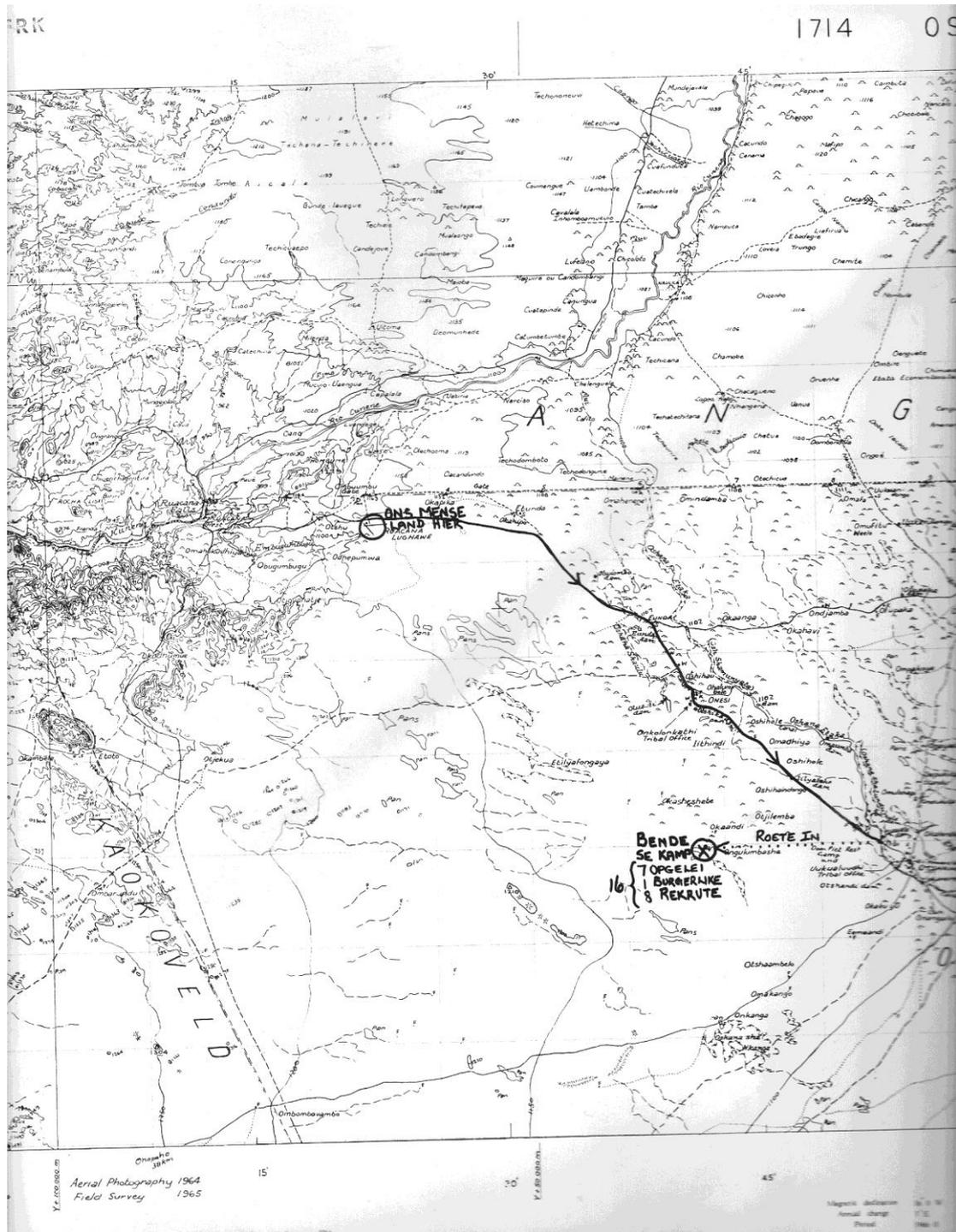


Packed, soft containers are dropped from a Dakota



An officer explains the system to Combat General Engelbrecht, Army Chief of Staff while others recover the parachutes

MAP USED DURING OPERATION BLOUWILDEBEE (1:250,000)



Entered onto the map is the route of the reserve force, travelling by truck from the Ruacana airstrip. The helicopter assault force would have flown directly to the objective.

Map: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre

OPERATION BLOUWILDEBEE: HELICOPTER ASSAULT ON ONGULUMBASHE



SAAF Alouette III helicopter with SAP markings. This photo was taken in Rhodesia, some years after the Ongulumbashe operation, when special sand filters had been fitted to the engines of the helicopters. Alouettes were frequently turned into “police helicopters” when politicians wished to hide the fact that that the military was involved in an operation. [Photo](#): Dave Becker



Unloading the vehicles, supplies and men from the three C-130B Hercules aircraft at the airstrip at Ruacana on 25 August 1966, the day before the helicopter assault was carried out

[Photo](#): SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre



Part of the SWAPO base in the thinly forested area of Ongulumbashe, seen from the air

Photo SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre:



Mopping up the base after the helicopter assault. Sgt Smit of 1 Para Bn on the left. The excavations and defensive works are clearly visible.

Photo SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre:



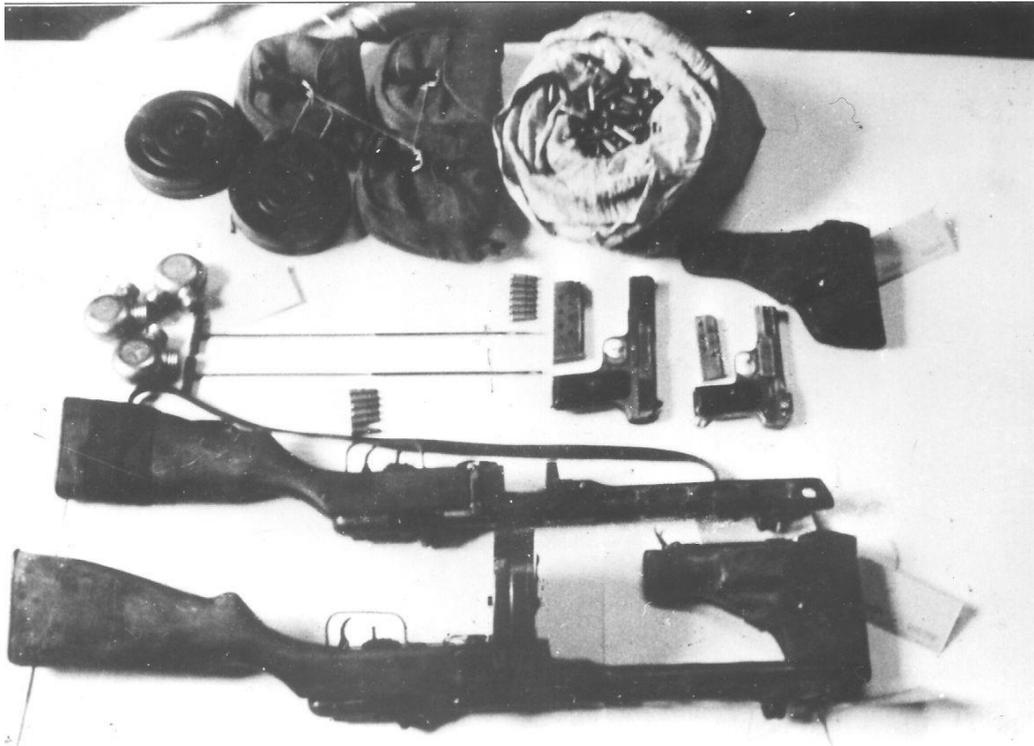
A wounded SWAPO insurgent after the attack

Photo: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre



SWAPO prisoners under guard after the action.

Photo: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre



The weapons recovered from the SWAPO insurgents: two PPSH sub-machine guns, two Tokarev pistols and over a thousand rounds of ammunition. Five insurgents escaped with their weapons.

Photo: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre



Also used by the insurgents in the skirmish: bow and arrows, assegais and daggers

Photo: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre



Underground bunker at Ongulumbashe

Photo: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre



A captured SWAPO insurgent wears an expression that implies that he understands the nature of insurgency and knows that a tactical defeat does not mean the war is lost. Time is usually on the side of the insurgent.

Photo: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre



One of the helicopter pilots involved in the action, Lt E.J. Wesley, with a group of SAP officers visiting the scene some weeks later. The policeman with the cap on on the right is Col Pat Dillon and the burly man squatting on his right is Capt "Rooi Rus" Swanepoel. The SAP insignia can be seen on the tail boom of the second helicopter.

Photo: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre



The SA Army paratroopers who participated in Operation BLOUWILDEBEEES on their arrival back at AFB Waterkloof. Standing (L to R): Capt Jan Breytenbach, Sgt Wouter Hugo, Cmdt Tommy Renfree, Sgt Ray Burgess, Cmdt Willem Klomp (MO), Sgt Yogi Potgieter. Front (L to R): Capt Kaas van der Waals, Cpl "Snakes" Snyman, Sgt Tilly Smit, Sgt "Ouboet" Kruger, Sgt Lionel Slade (medic). Their khaki uniforms have been dyed a camouflage pattern.

Photo: SA Department of Defence Documentation Centre

JUMPING FROM THE NEW FRANCO-GERMAN TRANSALL C-160Z, 1969



THE NEW FRENCH PUMA SA-330 HELICOPTER, 1970



Capable of carrying 12 equipped troops and able to fly much faster than the Alouette III, the Puma provided the paratroopers with previously unknown tactical air mobility.

Photo: Dave Becker

**RECRUITING ADVERTISEMENT FOR THE PERMANENT FORCE
PARATROOPER COMPANY AT 1 PARACHUTE BATTALION, 1976**

There's room for men who can hold their own as

PARATROOPERS

Adventurous soldiering and excellent career prospects.

Determined young men who are physically and mentally fit, are offered the opportunity to become a member of the famous

PARACHUTE BATTALION

and enjoy highly specialised training at Bloemfontein.

WE OFFER:

- Outstanding opportunities for advancement and promotion.
- Excellent pay with additional allowances.
- Ample leave, holiday bonus, unequalled pension scheme, free medica and dental treatment.
- The best sports and leisure time facilities.

YOU MUST:

- Be a white male citizen of the RSA or SWA and between 17 and 23 years old.
- Hold at least a Std 8 certificate.
- Pass stringent selection tests and be medically fit.

Apply before 23 December 1976 to:

**Chief of Staff Personnel,
SA Defence Force,
Private Bag X159, Pretoria, 0001
or phone 48-5327 for an interview.**

**THERE'S A BETTER CAREER
IN THE PERMANENT FORCE**

**Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag
South African Defence Force**



RHODESIAN AREA OF OPERATIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN PARATROOPERS (1: 2,500,000 MAP)

1. The approximate locations from where the two SADF paratrooper fire forces operated in Rhodesia as part of Operation BOWLER are indicated by:



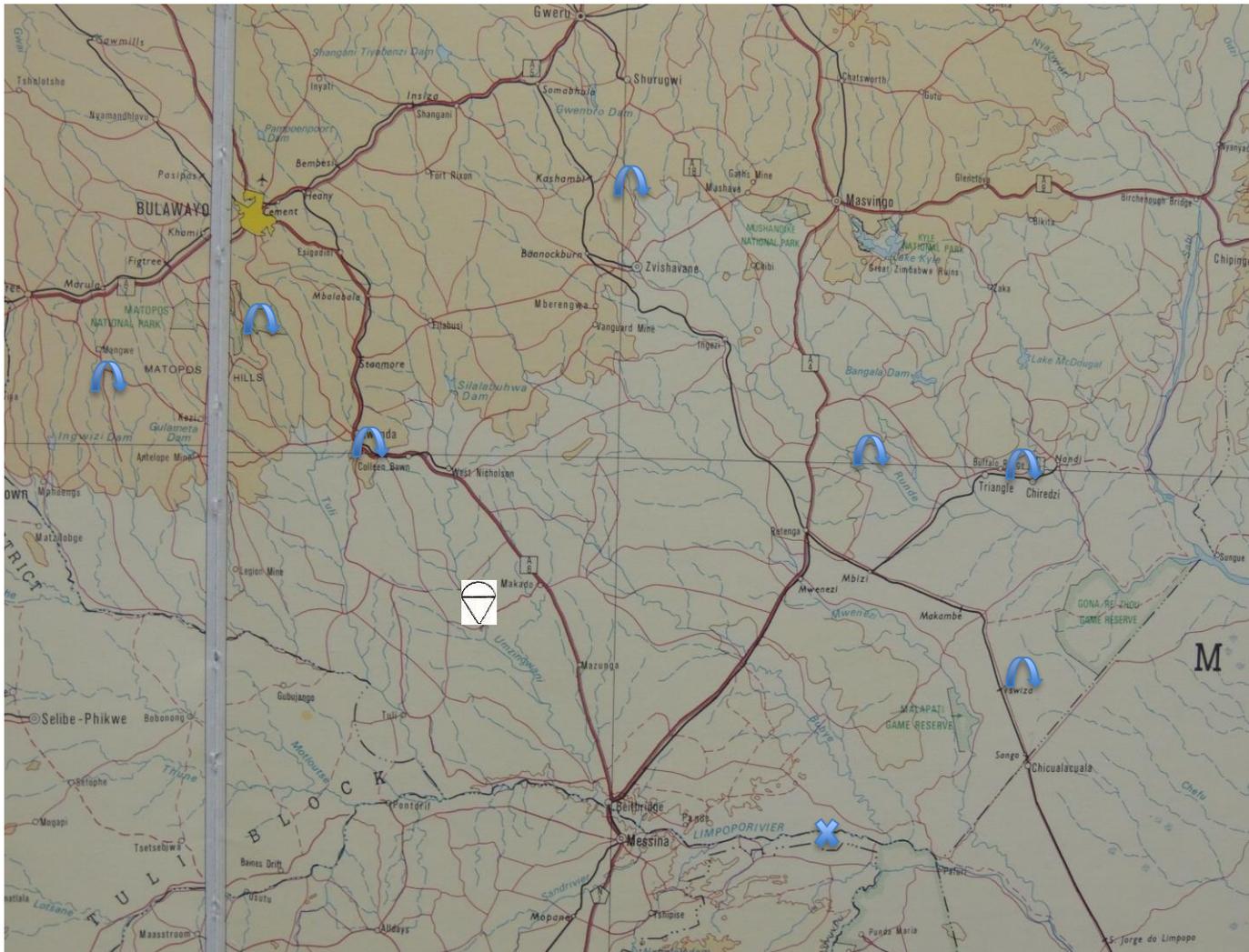
2. The Madimbo airfield is indicated by:



3. The location of Assembly Point Juliet where the planned airborne assault was to have taken place is indicated by:



4. The following represents a distance of approximately 100km:



CONCRETE PILLAR SHOWING NAME OF CASSINGA



Frequently misspelt “Kassinga” in the literature, this photograph, taken during the operation by Mike McWilliams, the appointed SADF photographer for the attack, leaves no doubt about the correct spelling.

AERIAL PHOTOS OF CASSINGA



The DZ on which the paratrooper assault force were meant to land lies between the Culonga River and Cassinga. They were in fact dropped too late, and many of them landed on the wrong side of the river.

Photo: Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre (JARIC) of the SANDF. Film No. 2231C, Negative No. 004, date 1 April 1978, Film Format F-32, taken by Canberra aircraft.



The objective: Cassinga. The line of defensive trenches can be seen on the east of the base, indicating that an attack was expected from that direction. The paratroopers had intended attacking from the west, but due to the faulty drop, had to attack from the south.

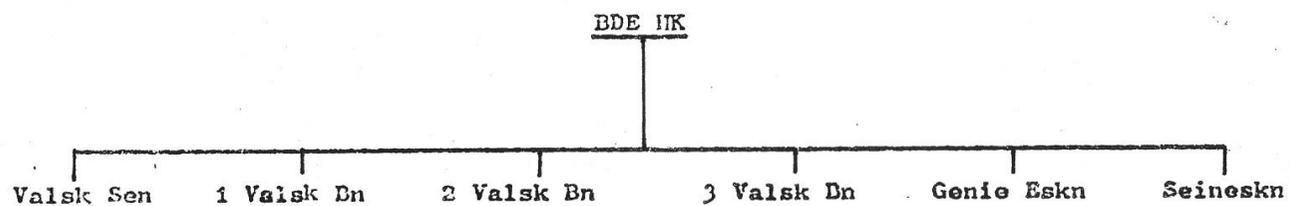
Photo: Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre (JARIC) of the SANDF. Film No. 2238A, Negative No. 0095A-0098, date 29 April 1978, Film Format F-32, taken by Canberra aircraft.

INITIAL INTENDED ORGANISATION OF 44 PARACHUTE BRIGADE

VERTROULIK

AANHANGSEL A BY
H LE&R/D PLAN/502/1/1/D511
DD AUG 1978

ORGANISASIE: 44 VALSK BDE



VERTROULIK

FIRE FORCE PHOTOGRAPHS



A line-up of Puma and Alouette helicopters on the runway at Ondangwa, beside the paratrooper base, on standby as part of the fire force.

Photo Credit: Unknown



End of a fire force action as the Pumas land to extract the troops.

Photo Credit: Unknown



A stick of paratroopers disembarks at speed from a Puma helicopter to go directly into action against insurgents.

Photo: Herman Potgieter

OPERATION MERLYN: TALO IN KAKOVELD AND FINAL FIRE FORCE ACTION OF THE WAR

Photos: M. Alexander



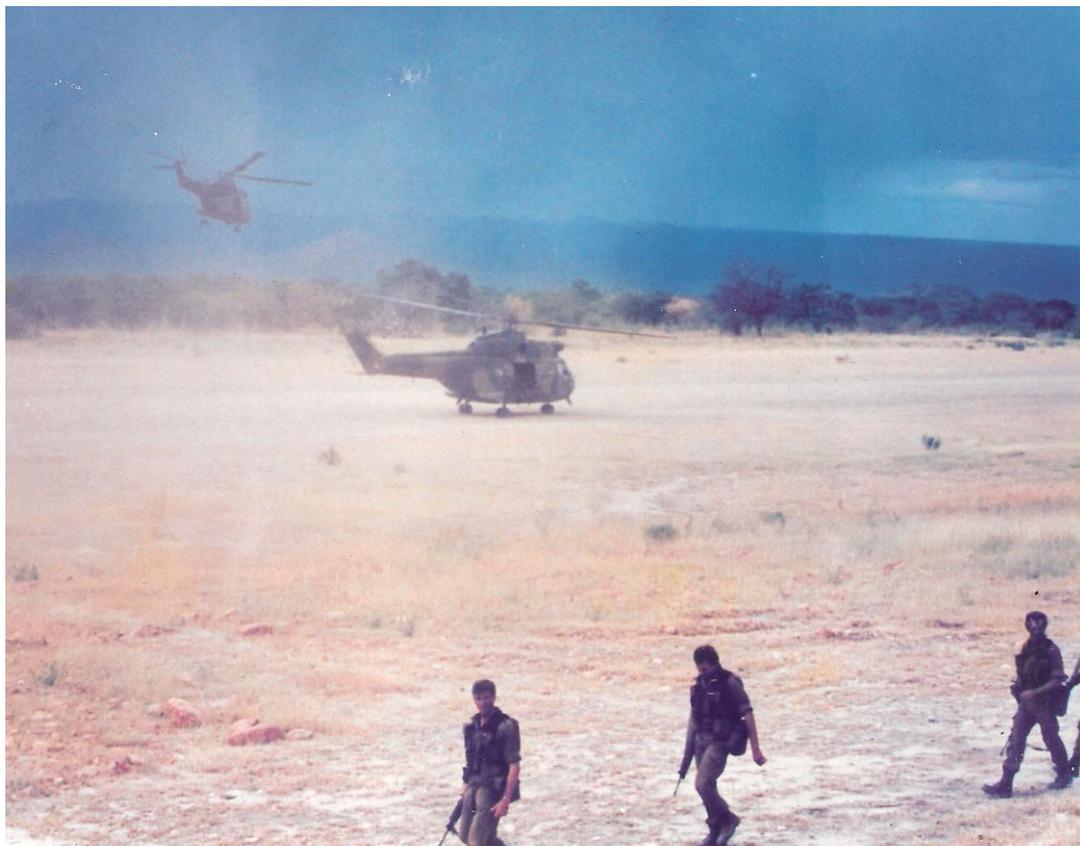
A C-160 Transall carries out a tactical air landing on the Ehomba airstrip during the delivery of 14 Parachute Battalion Group. The mountains of southern Angola can be seen in the background.



The fire force assembles at Ehomba



The fire force is scrambled for the first contact and an Alouette gunship takes off into a desert storm.



The fire force returns from a contact



The slower Alouettes arrive back after the Pumas. In the distance, the Zebra mountains.



At the Epupa Falls assembly point. The brigade commander, Col Alexander, with the UNTAG liaison officer, Maj Yussuf of Malaysia. He was deployed with such haste that he arrived alone and unarmed, without rations, equipment or radio communication. He was provided with everything he needed by 44 Parachute Brigade.

THE BELGIAN AS-24 AIR-DROPPABLE VEHICLE (“TICO CAR”)



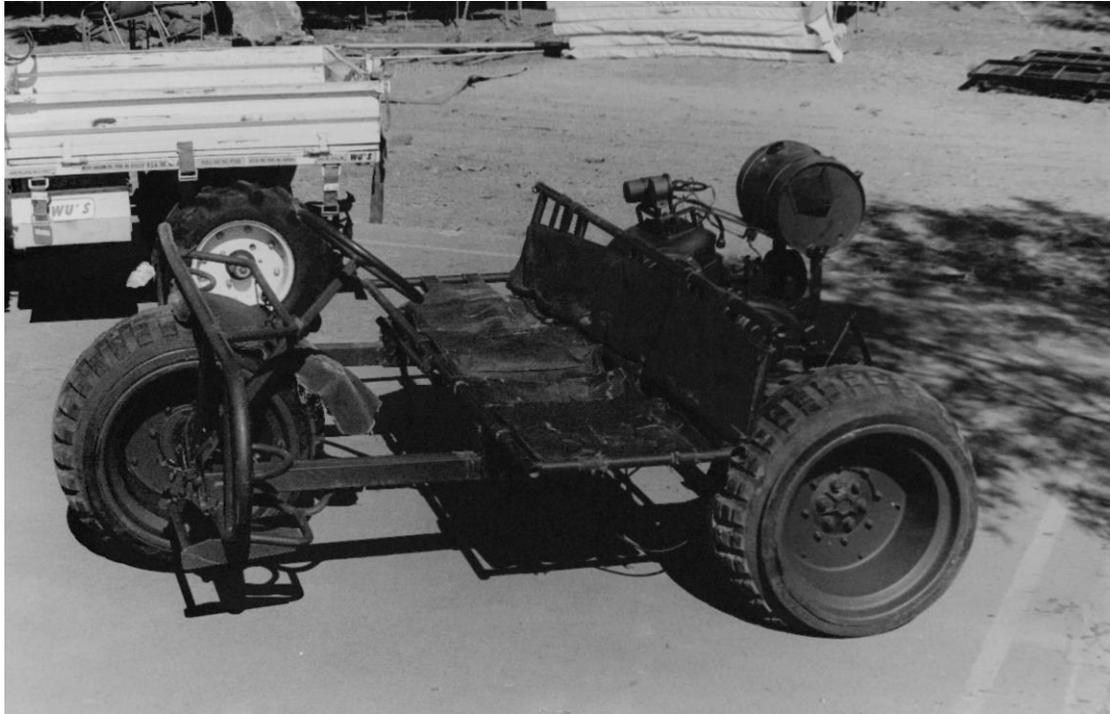
The vehicle, as advertised by the Belgians, carrying four soldiers.



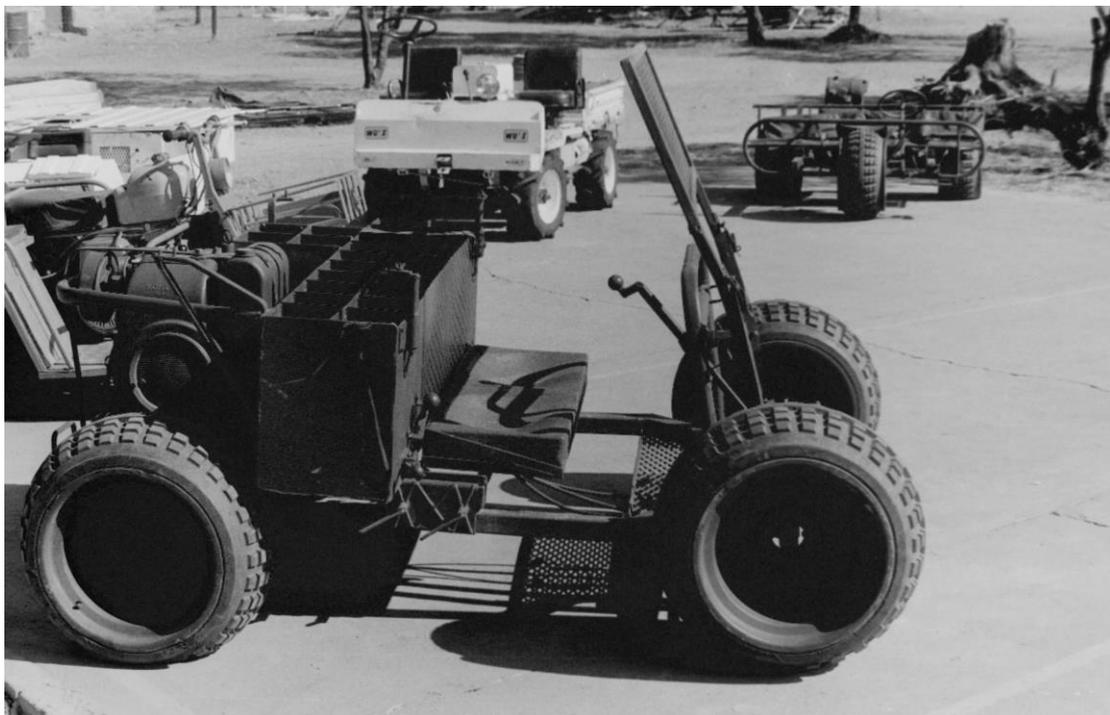
Carrying four burly South African paratroopers in the early 1960s

SOME OF THE AIR-DROPPABLE VEHICLES TESTED

Photos: M. Alexander



By the 1980s the venerable AS-24 "Tico Car", never very successful, had reached the end of its service life.



The *Veldmuis* (fieldmouse) 120mm mortar artillery tractor was built from cannibalised parts of the Tico Car. It was unreliable and underpowered.



The Firefly, a stripped down Land Rover or Land Cruiser chassis, was a useful vehicle, but took up too much space in an aircraft.



The *Skerpioen* (scorpion) could carry three men, but no equipment.

THE JAKKALS AIR-DROPPABLE VEHICLE

Photo Credits: Unknown



Robust, compact and powerful, with a glass fibre body and a 1300cc engine, the Jakkals could tow a train of small trailers and economised on aircraft space.



THE FERRET LIGHT ARMoured CAR FOR AIRBORNE FORCES



Successfully test firing the 106mm recoilless gun, mounted on the Ferret.

Photo: M. Alexander



Dropping of Ferret and Jakkals vehicles by means of PLEDS during a battalion group exercise. Three 100-ft cargo parachutes are attached to a platform bearing one Ferret.



A Ferret after safely landing, cushioned by the honeycomb material packed beneath it.



The shock absorbing honeycomb cardboard. On the platform that has landed beyond the Ferret are two Jakkals vehicles, packed with their trailers inverted on top of them



A C-130 Hercules approaches the extraction zone (EZ) at low level. The stabilising parachute has already been released from the rear ramp.



The extraction parachutes are released when the aircraft is barely 2m from the ground.



The Ferret, strapped to a skid platform, is extracted and drops directly onto the ground.



The extraction parachutes slow the Ferret's forward momentum as it skids along in a cloud of dust.



As the Ferret skids to a stop, the aircraft accelerates to gain height, but still leaves the EZ at low level to avoid enemy anti-aircraft actions.



The Ferret, none the worse for wear after the experience.

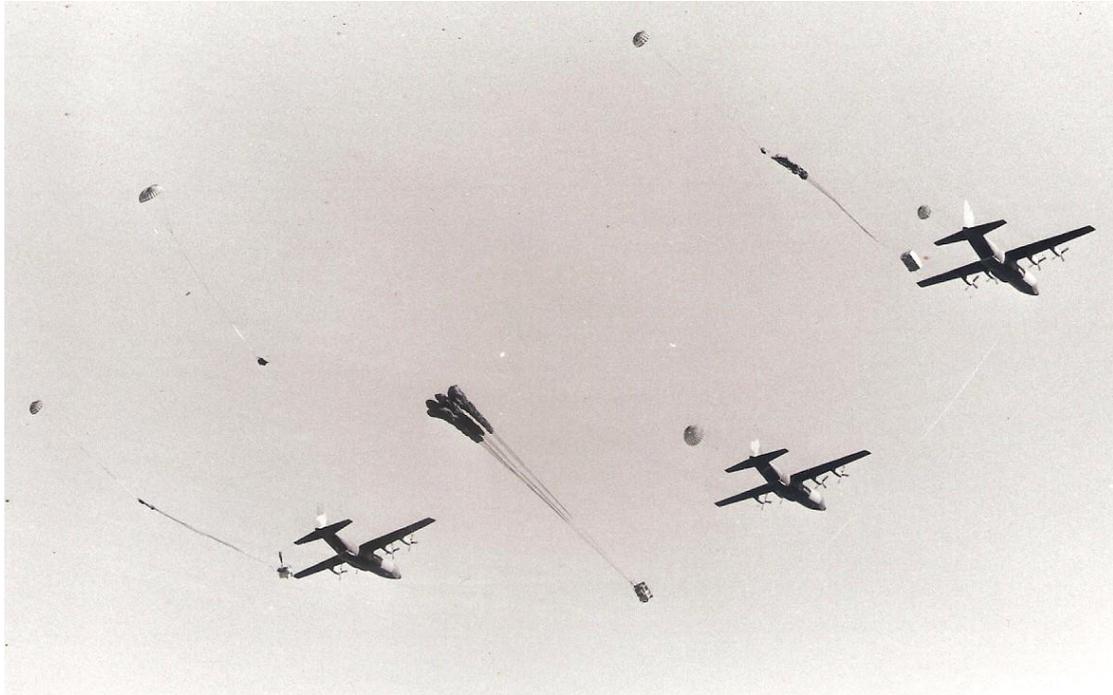


LAPES has a number of advantages over PLEDS. Packing is simpler and parachutes smaller and fewer, so it is considerably more economical; provided a reasonably hard and unrestricted surface is available, the load can be delivered far more accurately; and the aircraft are less vulnerable and exposed to enemy fire. But an extremely high level of flying skill is required from the pilot.



Ferrets in anti-tank positions in the desert near Walvis Bay during Exercise STRANDLOPER in 1988.

**PHOTOS TAKEN DURING PARACHUTE BATTALION GROUP EXERCISE
IRON EAGLE I**



Three C-130B Hercules carry out a formation PLEDS drop of vehicles and heavy equipment.



The cargo drop is followed by a C-130 Hercules and two C-160 Transalls doing a formation drop of almost 200 paratroopers. They were followed by two more waves of aircraft, also dropping in formation, to place a total of more than 500 troops on the ground in a single lift. Within seven minutes the whole force, with its equipment had landed.



Vehicles and heavy equipment descend under canopy during a PLEDS delivery.



Thorough training and considerable skill is required for heavily equipped paratroopers, jumping at low levels, to avoid collisions in the air and injuries when landing on rough terrain, often at night.

44 PARACHUTE BRIGADE, 1989

1. Brigade Headquarters (PF – full time)
2. Headquarters Unit (PF – full time)
3. 14 Parachute Battalion Group (PF and NSM – full time)
4. 2 Parachute Battalion (CF – part time)
5. 3 Parachute Battalion (CF – part time)
6. 4 Parachute Battalion (CF – part time)
7. 18 Light Artillery Regiment (CF – part time)
8. 44 Anti-Aircraft Regiment (CF – part time)
9. 44 Parachute Engineer Regiment (CF – part time)
10. 44 Signals Unit (CF – part time)
11. 44 Maintenance Unit (CF – part time)
12. 37 Field Workshop (CF – part time)
13. 101 Air Supply Unit (PF, NSM and CF – full time)
14. 44 Anti-Tank Company (CF – part time)
15. 44 Pathfinder Company (CF – part time)
16. 44 Dispatcher Company (CF – part time)

Attached for Operations:

1. Mobile Air Operations Team (PF) from Air Force
2. Mobile Naval Operations Team (PF) from Navy
3. Marine Amphibious Company (PF and NSM) from Navy
4. Medical Task Team (PF and NSM) from 7 Medical Battalion Group, Medical Service

FIRST UNITA PARACHUTE COURSE CONDUCTED BY THE SADF: JULY 1982, CAPRIVI



Seated in the middle in front is paratrooper Commandant Marius "Mo" Oelschig, the SADF's Liaison Officer with UNITA and an old paratrooper. On his right is Captain "Pale" (poles) van der Walt of 1 Parachute Battalion, with his instructors and parachute packers. On his left are the aircrew of the Dakota aircraft that they jumped from.

Photo Provided by Maj Gen Mo Oelschig (retd)

IMPROVISED, HOME MADE WEAPONS CONFISCATED DURING URBAN AIRBORNE OPERATIONS IN TOWNSHIPS, NATAL, 1991



Two of the paratroopers from 2 Parachute Battalion who had confiscated the weapons during a time of wanton bloodshed when the ANC and IFP were engaged in a virtual civil war and the soldiers had to try to keep the peace.

Photo: M. Alexander

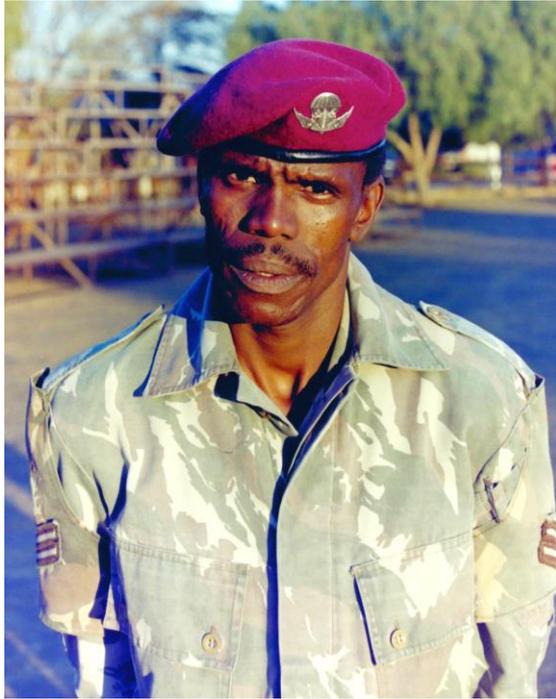
PARA UNIFORMS DURING INTEGRATION OF SANDF, 1994-1995

Photos: M. Alexander

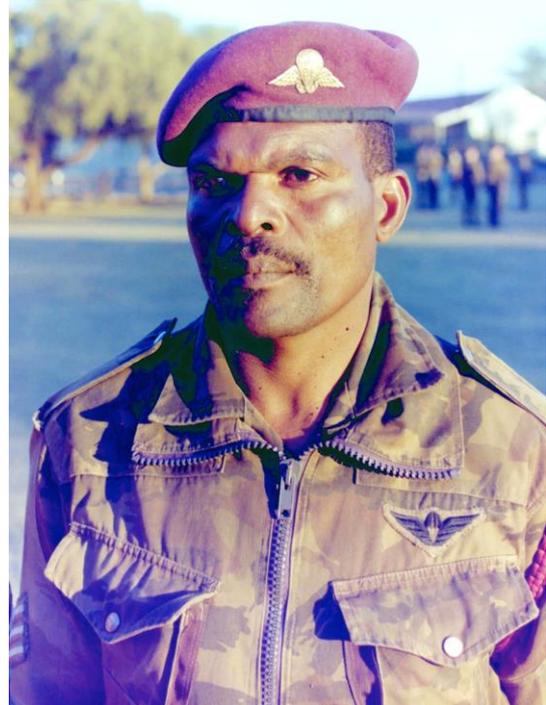


Confusion in the ranks! Integration after April 1994 to form the new SANDF was not simply a matter of blacks and whites for 44 Para Bde. The variety of different berets, badges, uniforms and rank insignia are indicative of widely differing corporate cultures, standards and values within disparate elite military units. Logistic problems in standardising uniform were not conducive to a smooth integration process.





Cpl Ndenze (ex-TDF)



Sgt Nobatana (ex-CDF)



LCpl Chabalala (ex-SADF)

**THE AIRBORNE CONCEPT IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY, 1960-
2000:
STRATEGY VERSUS TACTICS IN SMALL WARS**

by

EDWARD GEORGE MCGILL ALEXANDER

Volume 2: Appendices

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