

## Research Article

## EXHUMATION AND REPATRIATION OF THE REMAINS OF THE EBO 4, KWANZA SUL PROVINCE, ANGOLA

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## ABSTRACT

Between 23 and 25 November 1975, four South African soldiers died during military involvement (Operation Savannah) in Angola. The events took place near Ebo, in central Angola. At the time, it was impossible for the SA forces to recover the bodies, and the exact location of the graves remained uncertain. Three individuals died when their reconnaissance aircraft was shot down, while the fourth died in an ambush of an armoured car. The aim of this paper is to report on the excavation and repatriation of the remains, illustrating the value of the application of sound forensic archaeological techniques to reconstruct events. The gravesite of three individuals was pointed out by members of the local community and was marked by wreckage on the surface. Severely burned skeletal remains and fragments of the aircraft were excavated at shallow depth. It was clear that these individuals were not formally buried and apparently pieces of wreckage and human remains were dragged into the burial pit. The victims most probably died on impact. The excavation was complex but with careful investigation, three different individuals could be distinguished. Samples were taken for DNA analysis, although extraction was unsuccessful. Despite information from a number of individuals and several test pits, the grave of the fourth individual who had died separately in the armoured car ambush could not be found. The remains of the Ebo individuals were returned to South Africa and placed in the Wall of Remembrance at the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, thus bringing closure for their relatives.

Keywords: Operation Savannah, South African Defence Force, military history, Angola, Ebo 4, repatriation, skeletal remains, personal identification, forensic archaeology.

## INTRODUCTION

In military history Operation Savannah marks the initial conventional involvement of the South African Defence Force in Angola. After the fall of Premier Marcelo Caetano of Portugal on 25 April 1974, and the Portuguese withdrawal from Angola on 11 November 1975, the conflict among the three liberation movements in Angola, the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA) and the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) escalated to a full-scale civil war (Spies 1989: 28–39). According to the official historiographer, South Africa got involved on the basis of limited aims: the protection of the hydroelectrical project at Ruacana/Caluecue, and support to the FNLA and UNITA to strengthen their position in the power struggle to form the government of an independent Angola on 11 November 1975 (Spies 1989: xvi, 138). The limited involvement developed into a full-scale conventional military operation with initial support from the

USA. Members of the South African Defence Force operated in northern Angola, where the FNLA had their main presence, and in southern Angola, where UNITA mainly operated. When it was clear that South Africa would not withdraw after the events of 11 November 1975, Battle Group Foxbat which was responsible for the central front focused its attention on the area around the village of Ebo, southeast of Luanda. Between 23 and 25 November 1975, four South African soldiers went missing or died in combat in the area. They were reportedly buried by members of the local community since it was impossible for the South African forces to recover and evacuate their bodies from the battle area. No formal confirmation of the death of three of the four soldiers was received during the hostilities, or in its aftermath at the end of 1975.

On Sunday 23 November 1975, two groups of Eland armoured cars moved towards a bridge over the Massaba River north of Ebo (Fig. 1). The driver of the first car, Trooper Niël Lombard, was fatally wounded when they drove into an ambush at the bridge. Lombard was killed on impact when his car was hit by the projectile of a 75 mm recoilless gun. After the control of the vehicle was lost, it overturned and ended up in the river. 2nd Lt Johan du Toit and Cpl Jakkals van der Merwe, who were in the car with Lombard, both survived the attack. They managed to leave the vehicle hours later and escaped on foot during the night.

These events were recently described by the Cuban journalist and historian Blanch (2015: 62) as follows:

Just six kilometres from Ebo, when the South Africans were trying to get to Glabella (*sic*) via one of the embankments, First Commander Díaz Argüelles organized a strategic ambush on a small but very high bridge that crossed the Makassar River [*sic*]. For the South Africans this turned out into an ignominious retreat known as the 'Ebo gallop'.

Blanch (2015: 57–68) included four photographs from the Military Archives in Cuba of South African armoured vehicles that were damaged and captured at Ebo. One of these photographs of an armoured car that had left the road and fallen into a ditch is, in the view of the current authors, probably the Eland armoured car in which Lombard died.

Lombard's death only became known when Du Toit and Van der Merwe managed to reunite with their group. Plans were made to recover his body, but reports from a reconnaissance aircraft were that there was much activity at the bridge, and it would be impossible to intervene to recover the body. It was decided to leave Lombard's body and on Tuesday 25 November the decision was communicated to the headquarters of 101 Task Force (Spies 1989: 190).

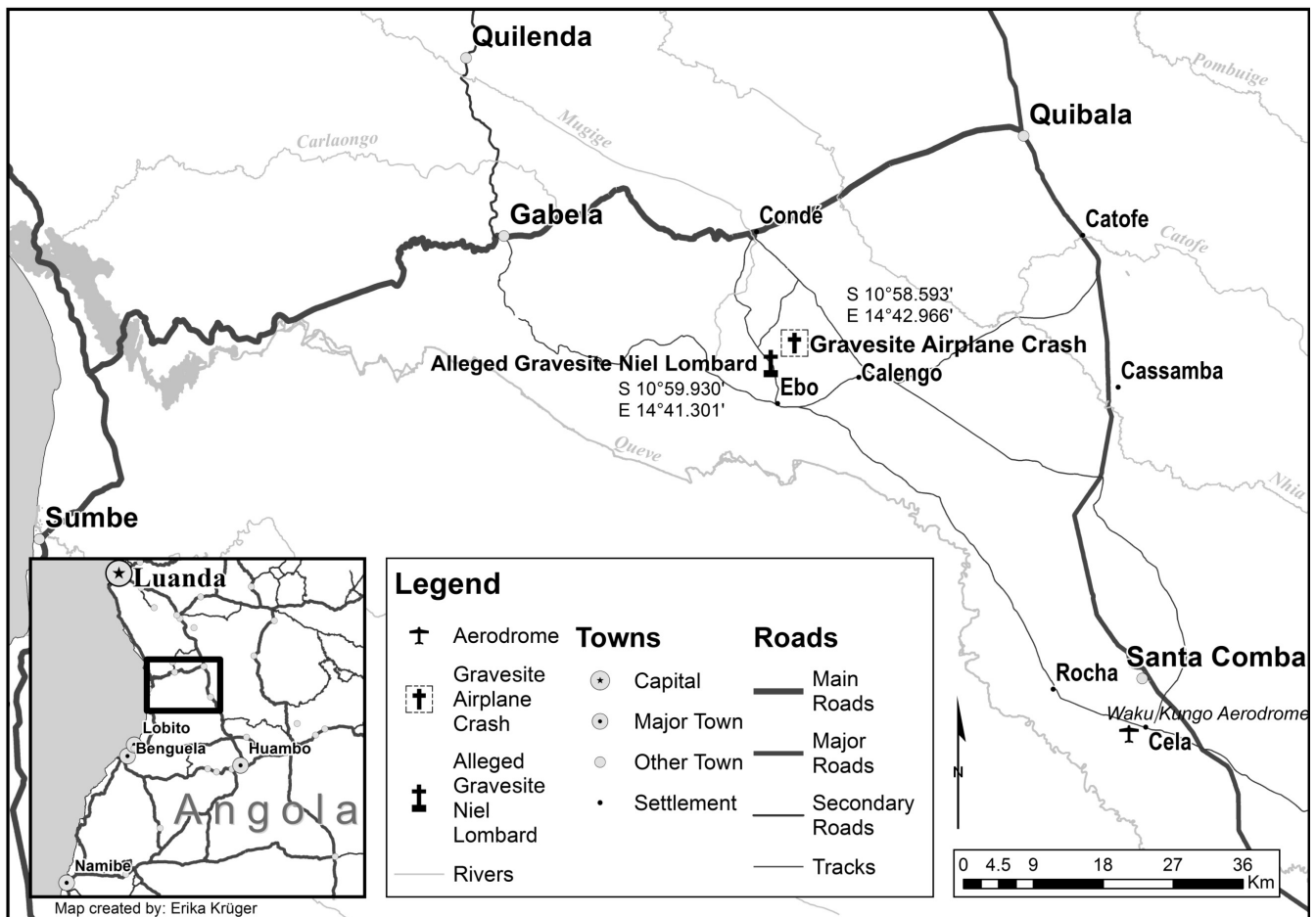


FIG. 1. Location map showing the Ebo gravesites and other landmarks.

In a separate incident, three individuals were together in a light Cessna 182 reconnaissance aircraft of the South African Air Force that was shot down by Cuban forces two days later, on 25 November 1975. 2nd Lt Keith Arthur Williamson was the pilot and he was accompanied by 2nd Lt Eric Bryan Thompson, also a pilot, and by Capt Danie Taljaard (SA Army). Taljaard was on the flight to gain a better insight of the operational area. The aircraft did not return from its reconnaissance flight. On 27 November 1975, an Angolan radio message was intercepted reporting that an aircraft with three occupants had been shot down north of Ebo. In January 1976, a journalist of the British newspaper *The Times* reported that he saw the remains of an aircraft north of Ebo (Spies 1989; Boshoff 2012).

Much uncertainty remained about exactly what happened when the aircraft was shot down, and whether the men inside could have survived the crash. Operation Savannah commenced before the independence of Angola on 11 November 1975. After independence, a civil war was fought in Angola for more than 26 years until 4 April 2002. During this period it was impossible to search for the graves or remains of the four South Africans, who came to be known as the 'Ebo 4'.

During 2005, WO1 (Rtd) Rowley Medlin set out to write a history of Operation Savannah, of which he was a veteran. In September 2005, Christo Taljaard, brother of the late Capt Danie Taljaard, made contact with Medlin and asked him to investigate the possibility of finding the graves of his brother and the two pilots. The request gave direction to Medlin's research: on 11 July 2006 the site of the grave in which the three deceased of the aircraft crash were allegedly buried was shown to Henk van Zyl, one of Medlin's co-workers in Angola, by members of the local community (Boshoff 2012; cf. Medlin's

documents in the archival file of the Ebo Trust). Until his death in December 2011, Medlin would collect information for a book on the demise of the Ebo 4 (Boshoff 2012) with the provisional title, 'Missing – Presumed dead'.

The need to formalise the process of negotiations with government officials, heads of state and donors necessitated the formation of the Ebo Trust. The trustees were Maj. Gen. (Rtd), Gert Opperman (Chair), WO1 (Rtd) Rowley Medlin, and Mr Martin Thompson, brother of the late 2nd Lt Eric Thompson. The aim of the Ebo Trust was to locate, excavate and repatriate the remains of the Ebo 4, strictly according to legal procedures (Boshoff 2012).

Opperman visited the area around Ebo between 27 and 30 September 2008. He reported first visiting the alleged site of Lombard's grave, as indicated by members of the community. All indications, including GPS coordinates given to him, were accurate as far as he could ascertain, and the site was easy to find. He found that the alleged site of the grave was now overgrown, while the surrounding area was covered with tall grass. Local inhabitants from Ebo reported that Lombard's body was removed from the vehicle in which he had died and that he was buried nearby by members of the community after the hostilities ended. The exact site of the grave was pointed out by the local population, some of whom claimed to have been present when he was buried there.

The other three soldiers, Taljaard, Williamson and Thompson, were apparently buried in a single grave close to where their aircraft was shot down. Members of the local community could not only remember and describe the event when the aircraft was shot down, but they could also indicate the location where the three soldiers were buried. The grave was still

marked with a few pieces of the wreckage on the surface, and a tree that had been planted next to the grave.

The first round of excavations was conducted during May 2012, but efforts had to be abandoned after the South Africans were forcibly removed from the gravesite, for unknown reasons. This occurred after a day and a half of successful excavations at the communal grave of Taljaard, Williamson and Thompson. The remains of two individuals had already been exposed when the cessation of all archaeological activities was ordered. Backfilling of the grave was done under armed supervision by police and soldiers. Everyone involved in the project was required to return to Luanda. The Angolan Police supplied transport in a pick-up van for the members of the archaeological team, and no meeting with Angolan authorities could be arranged during the following week. On 12 May 2012, the team returned to South Africa. Following negotiations between the Angolan and South African governments, the team was invited to return in June 2012. A second trip to Angola followed between 5 and 14 June 2012. The archaeological team set certain conditions and the Angolan government established an intersectoral commission to supervise the project and to liaise with various stakeholders. The excavations were completed on 10 June 2012. These events and their aftermath, together with a burial ceremony in Pretoria, were documented in a detailed paper (Boshoff 2012).

This report will contain the final information on the two sites that were investigated, and include findings from both the May and June 2012 expeditions. The aim of this paper is to report on the exhumation and repatriation of the four individuals who died in Angola during Operation Savannah in 1975, and whose remains could not be retrieved at the time. Specifically, this paper will focus on the procedures followed to find the graves, their excavation and the difficulties that were experienced, and the process of identification and repatriation. While a number of cases from southern Africa involving repatriation have been recorded (e.g. Nienaber & Steyn 2002; Boshoff & Steyn 2008; Nienaber *et al.* 2008), this is the first case reported from this important period in South Africa's history. It also demonstrates the value of the application of proper forensic archaeological techniques to reconstruct events.

## METHODOLOGY

Information on the exact location of the graves of the Ebo 4 was gathered by Medlin and his informants between September 2005 and August 2007 (Boshoff 2012). Opperman and Nienaber, member of the professional team and archaeologist respectively, visited the sites between 6 and 10 February 2012 in order to verify the locations and the possibility that they were indeed graves. They were taken to the site of the aircraft crash by four local informants who claimed to have been involved in the burial of the three bodies directly after the airplane went down. Upon inspection, it was found that the site was clearly marked with pieces of wreckage and that there was a strong possibility that excavations there would be successful. This grave, presumed to contain the remains of victims Taljaard, Williamson and Thompson, was situated at S10°58.593 E14°41.301.

Scant information was available on the location of Lombard's grave. It was loosely pointed out to be at the junction of two roads near Ebo village, at S10°59.930 E14°41.301.

Permission to exhume and repatriate the remains was obtained beforehand (see Boshoff 2012). In short, the whole process was preceded by numerous rounds of discussions between several government departments on both the South African and Angolan sides. Although it was thought that all

matters were sorted out, the first excavation mission in May 2012 had to be aborted as explained earlier. After several high-level diplomatic discussions and enquiries from the media, the team was invited to return in June 2012 to complete the process. The exhumation reported on here was thus conducted in two phases (i.e. excavations took place on 7 and 8 May 2012, and between 8 and 10 June 2012), under difficult and dangerous conditions in a remote region of Angola.

Before the excavations commenced, the team tried to obtain as much information as possible that could be of use to assist in personal identification of the four individuals. Their medical records were accessed, but as they were all young, healthy individuals, nothing specific could be found other than that it was ascertained that Taljaard wore dentures.

Standard archaeological methods were used to excavate the graves. In the search for Lombard's grave, surface surveys were used but when these were found to be unsuccessful, the controlled use of earthmoving equipment was employed.

Standard physical anthropological methods were used in the skeletal identification, although these are difficult when fragmentary remains are involved. Arrangements were made to collect samples for DNA, using the methods described in Işcan and Steyn (2013), for example. These involve the use of gloves to take specimens, and specific packaging. However, it should be taken into account that the working conditions in rural Angola were extremely difficult and there were no cooling facilities. These samples were submitted to a commercial pathology laboratory for DNA extraction and comparison with family members whose samples had been collected beforehand.

## RESULTS

### GRAVE OF TALJAARD, WILLIAMSON AND THOMPSON

The location that was indicated as the grave by informants was at the foot of a cut down tree. Here, several small pieces of aircraft wreckage were visible on the surface (Fig. 2). Both the tree and the wreckage were clearly visible in existing photographs of the site that were taken relatively shortly after the incident. Debris and vegetation directly on the surface were cleared to expose the location, and from the start, signs of burning could be detected on the wreckage pieces. Evidence of disturbance was clearly visible on the western side of the dead tree. After documentation, a test trench of 0.5 m × 2 m was dug in that area.

The first evidence of human skeletal remains was found at a depth of approximately 50 cm below the present surface. The remains were badly preserved and all bones were fragmentary. The excavation was expanded towards the west; the edges of the original excavation or burial pit could be established on the basis of differences in compaction and colour between the grave and the surrounding natural matrix. At this level, several human skeletal fragments and pieces of aircraft wreckage were encountered (Table 1; Fig. 3), with indications that they had been exposed to fire. Pieces of plastic, metal and rubber objects were found in the infill of the grave, and many of these items could be associated with an aircraft.

A grave pit could clearly be discerned on all sides of the excavation; it measured about 160 cm in length, 90 cm in width, and 55–60 cm in depth. The surrounding matrix consisted of hard, yellow clay, whereas the infill of the grave was a mixture of the yellow clay, softer brown clayish soil, and associated objects. An approximated, reconstructed sketch plan of the excavation is shown in Fig. 3. From this reconstruction, it was immediately clear that the remains were not formally buried,



FIG. 2. Grave location of the aircraft site after the surface was cleared.

and various pieces of the aircraft were found among the human remains. In addition, to complicate the context of the skeletal remains, rodent and termite activity was evident. The largest and most visible of the objects was a leather belt and a curved plastic handle, which was most probably part of the steering mechanism of the fallen aircraft (Fig. 4). Two metal boxes were found near the southwestern end of the grave. Another round metal object, possibly part of a flare, was found near the pelvis of one of the individuals. Various other smaller pieces of metal were found inside the grave pit.

The remains of the first individual, indicated as Individual A, were the most superficial. A reconstruction of the burial position of this individual is shown in Fig. 5. A set of upper dentures (Fig. 6) suggested that these were most probably the remains of Taljaard, who was known to have worn dentures. The skull (represented by fragments only) and dentures are indicated in the lower left section of Fig. 5. From here, the vertebral column extended in a northern direction, with the os coxae and right femoral head indicated near the centre of the figure. The right upper limb was adjacent to the vertebral column,

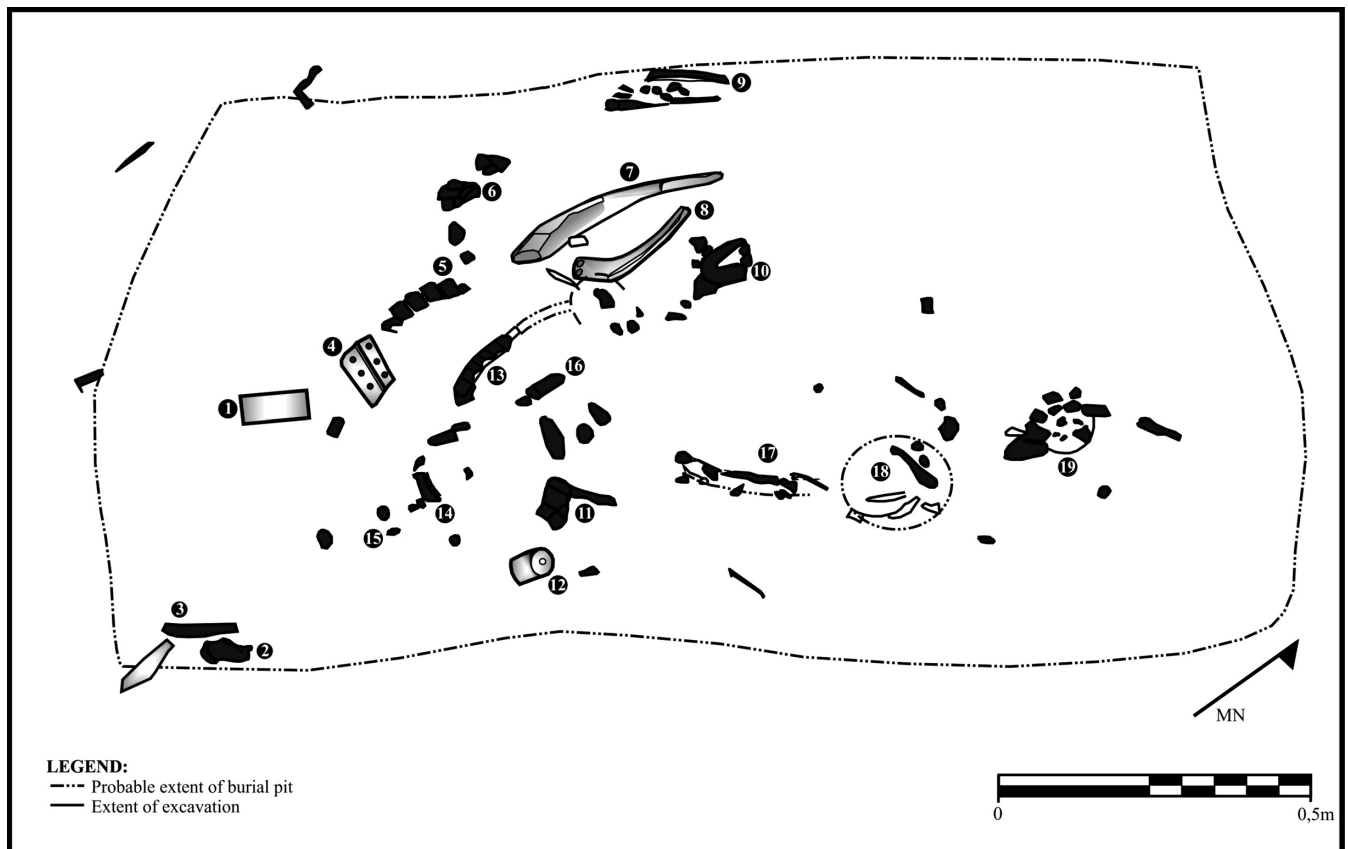


FIG. 3. Measured drawing of human remains and wreckage found at the Ebo air craft site. See Table 1 for figure key.

**TABLE 1.** Key to Figs 3, 5 and 7.

No.	Description
1	Metal box
2	Calcaneus
3	Distal tibia
4	Metal box
5	Emerging vertebral column
6	Bone fragments
7	Leather belt
8	Plastic from aircraft (possibly a door handle)
9	Unassociated upper limb
10	Fragment of os coxae and femur head (possibly right side)
11	Emerging os coxae and femur head
12	Cylindrical metal object (possibly a spent flare)
13	Vertebral column
14	Dentures
15	Small cranial fragments
16	Shaft of long bone
17	Emerging vertebral column
18	Shoulder girdle
19	Cranial fragments

with the hand near the pelvis. Bones of the left elbow region were found near the left pelvic area. No lower leg bones were found. It seems that this individual was rolled over to lie partly on his right side.

The right femoral head and acetabulum were sampled for DNA and placed in a sealed and marked bag. Fragments of a leather belt were found in the pelvic area. In addition, an earpiece of a headphone was found next to the left elbow region. The bones of individual A, believed to be those of Taljaard, were removed from the grave on 8 June. The leather belt was placed in the same container as the bones.

Individual B was lying slightly deeper and was represented by a skull, shoulder girdle, vertebral column, pelvis, parts of both upper limbs and sections of both lower limbs. The cranial fragments are indicated in the lower right hand section of Fig. 7. A few loose teeth were also found in this region. The shoulder girdle, vertebral column, ribs and pelvis could be clearly seen (Fig. 8). This individual was positioned on his

back/right side, facing in a west-northwest direction, with the head in extension. The right upper limb was under the body, flexed forward so that the forearm was found underneath the pelvis of Individual A. The left distal forearm could not be clearly seen. The right lower limb was flexed at a 90° angle at the hip and knee, so that the right foot was found underneath Individual A. A distal tibia and calcaneus, also associated with this individual, were found in the southern corner of the grave, indicating that this leg was extended. The total length from the head to the distal end of the calcaneus was about 143 cm.

The left femoral head, inside the acetabulum, was sampled for DNA analysis and placed in a marked and sealed plastic bag. A piece of aircraft (metal) was found between the right arm and the trunk, as well as another earpiece of a headphone. The remains were removed from the grave on 9 June 2012, and placed in a marked container. On removal of the cranium, it was noted that a humeral head was present inside the calvarium, probably reflecting the violent nature of the impact when the aircraft crashed.

Individual C was buried the deepest, and the remains were very poorly preserved. This individual was represented by a vertebral column, partial pelvis, left proximal humerus, and cranial fragments and teeth that were found inside a helmet. The vertebrae can be seen in Fig. 9, and were found close to the two metal boxes. Well-preserved parts of a fibreglass helmet, mouthpiece with two wires for a microphone, and two rubber tubes connected to the mouthpiece were also found (Fig. 9).

This individual was most probably interred facing in a westerly direction, on his left side. Except for a left humeral head, no upper or lower limbs were found. The pelvis was crushed into the vertebral column, once again probably reflecting the violence of the impact. The left shoulder region was sampled for DNA, and placed in a sealed and marked plastic bag. Later, two teeth were found inside the helmet, and these were also collected for DNA. The excavation of the remains of this individual was completed on 10 June 2012.

A number of bone fragments, probably an upper limb, were found unassociated with any of the identified bodies, but most probably belonged to Individual C. These fragments can be



**FIG. 4.** The exposed remains viewed from the northern side. Plastic steering mechanism (white arrow) and metal objects (black arrows) found in situ.

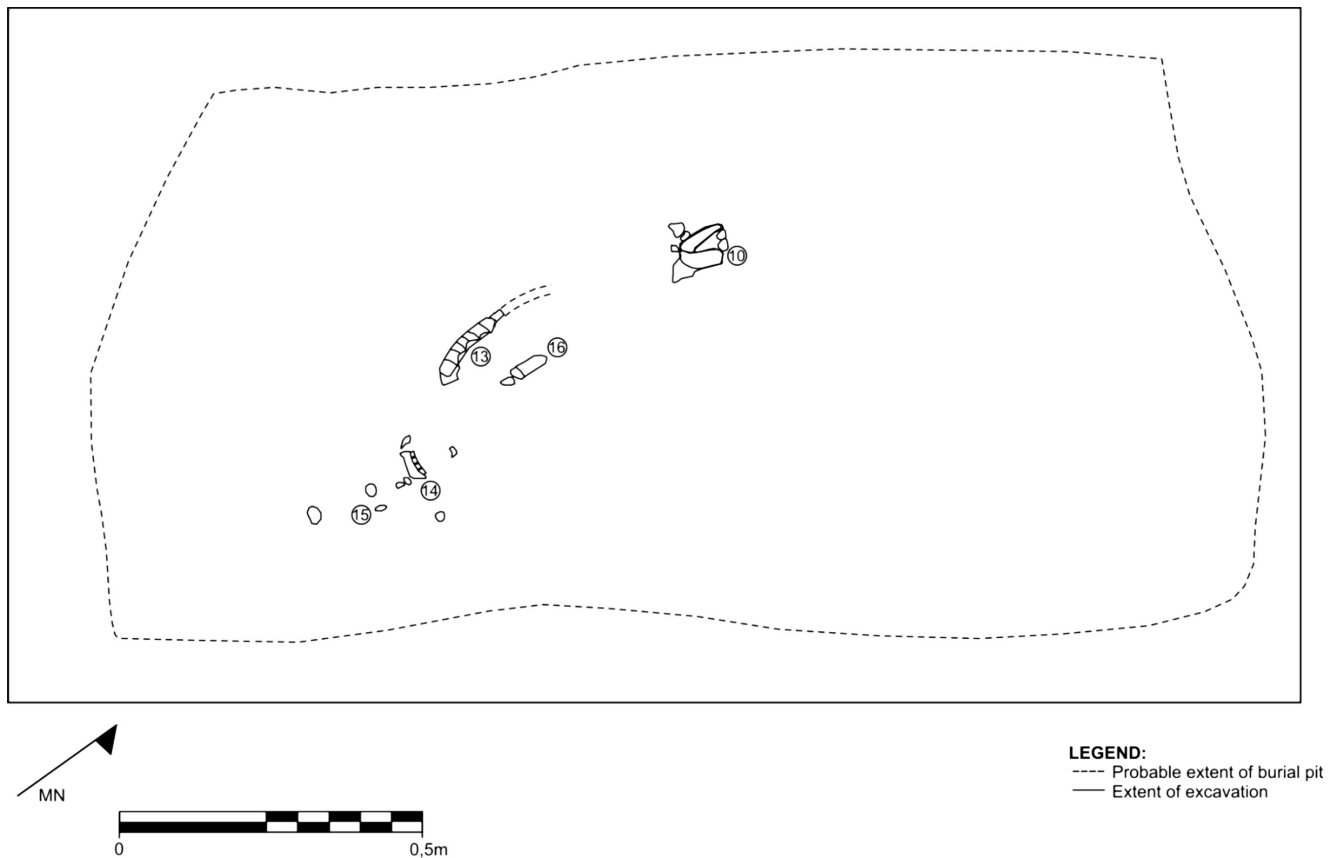


FIG. 5. Reconstruction of the burial position of Individual A (Taljaard). See Table 1 for figure key.

seen in the upper middle part of Fig. 3 (labelled 9; see Table 1). It seems probable that this limb was severed from the rest of the body during the accident. A number of loose teeth were also found in rodent tunnels – these were probably transferred during rodent activity.

#### GRAVE OF LOMBARD

Members of the local community pointed out a number of possible locations for this grave in a general area near the Massaba River. These locations were documented and archaeologically investigated to find indications of the presence of

human remains at each place. Excavations were conducted at several of these locations. The surface substrate of disturbed materials and vegetation were removed so that the natural stratigraphy could be observed. Directly below the surface disturbances a homogeneous red clay layer occurred. This stratum was evenly compacted and fairly hard. Horizontal clearing of surface layers was undertaken in an attempt to identify sub-surface disturbances of this layer. Such anomalies would then be investigated archaeologically in order to either eliminate them as areas of interest, or identify the grave reported to be located in this area. At two locations (named



FIG. 6. Upper dentures in situ, most probably belonging to Taljaard.

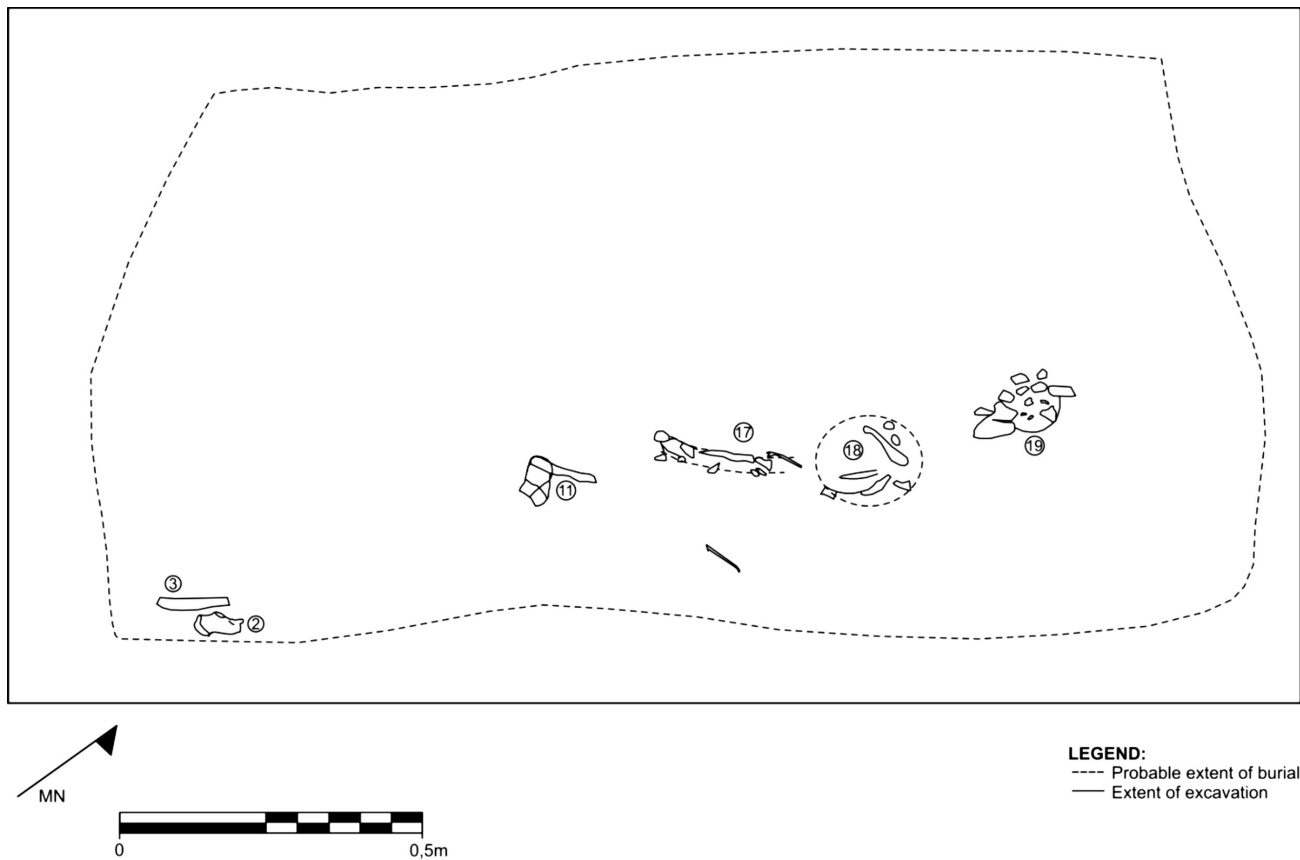


FIG. 7. Reconstruction of the burial position of individual B. See Table 1 for figure key.



FIG. 8. Individual B in situ.

Ebo4/4-1 and 4-3), sub-surface indications of a possible previous disturbance were observed. Work was stopped at both locations on the order of the Angolan government, for fear of landmines/buried explosives, before it could be ascertained whether either of these locations contained a grave or not.

Eventually, all attempts at finding the remains of this individual had to be abandoned, not least because of the possibility of opening up areas that may contain explosives or landmines. Sand was collected from the Ebo River as a proxy for the human remains, for interment along with the other individuals.

PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION

DNA extraction from the remains of the three exhumed individuals was unsuccessful despite several attempts. Although DNA has been extracted from remains of similar age and context (Davison *et al.* 2008), here all attempts were unfortunately unsuccessful which may be related to the general poor preservation of the remains, the exposure to fire and the clayish soil the remains were buried in. The identities of Williamson and Thompson could therefore not be established and their families made private arrangements for the reburial of their remains. The remains of Taljaard were identified based on the dentures found.

DISCUSSION

Following careful excavation and assessment of the grave pit at the scene of the aircraft crash, the remains of three individuals could be identified. All remains were fragmentary and poorly preserved, and it is clear that the aircraft had burned in the process of going down. These findings attest to the violent nature and impact of the aircraft’s landing. The unorganised way in which the remains were interred, the fact that parts of the aircraft were found among the remains and the



FIG. 9. Individual C in situ, showing helmet, mouthpiece and rubber tubing.

severed limb indicate that this was not a formal burial. A plausible reconstruction of events suggests that the three individuals most probably died inside the aircraft as it crashed and burned. Following that, the remains and parts of the aircraft were dragged into a communal grave pit and covered over, by members of the local community.

For many years several questions remained about the exact events that took place on the day the aircraft went down. On 20 January 1976, a journalist of *The Times* (of London) visited the area between Quibala and Gabela, and was taken to a site where the inhabitants of the town Ebo claimed a South African military light aircraft was shot down. He saw the remains of the aircraft, but declined an offer to exhume and be shown the bodies of the three deceased, who, according to the local witnesses, died in the crash (Ashford 1976).

Throughout 1976 there were rumours that the three men had been captured after the air crash and that they were alive. The families of Thompson and Williamson hired a private investigator, Peter van Niewenhuizen, who kept up their hopes that the three soldiers were still alive, even four years after the aircraft disappeared. Many questions about what exactly happened on the day of the crash still remained after the Supreme Court in Pretoria changed the status of Taljaard from 'missing, presumed dead' to 'killed in action' based on available information, in 1977. On the insistence of Mrs Suzie Thompson, mother of 2nd Lt Eric Bryan Thompson, the same was done for the two pilots in 1979–1980. The archaeological reconstruction of events brought some closure for the families, as it is clear now that the men most probably died on impact.

No formal skeletal analysis was possible, mainly because of the fragmentary nature of the remains. The remains were also directly transported from the excavation site to funeral undertakers, according to the requirements of Angolan officials. During the excavation all bones were removed, and placed in three separate containers. The grave was backfilled and a tree planted at the gravesite as part of a traditional ceremony. This tradition was upheld even though the skeletal remains of the three deceased had been removed from the grave and repatriated. On enquiry, the reason was given by members of the local community that the gravesite had to be remembered anyway.

The tradition of planting a tree at the grave by the local community of the Ebo area assisted in the initial positive identification of the gravesite as the same thing had been done after the burial of the human remains in 1975. Members of the community could later lead the team to the tree that marked the gravesite.

After all formalities were completed in Luanda, the remains of three of the Ebo 4, and some clay from the banks of the Massaba River where Lombard died, were returned to South Africa. On 15 June 2012 the remains were officially handed over to the families by Dr João Pessela, chairperson of the Angolan Intersectoral Commission. Seven members of the Commission attended the event in Pretoria. The remains were buried at the SADF Wall of Remembrance at the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria on Sunday 8 July 2012 during a ceremony attended by the families of the deceased and the public.

This repatriation gives effect to the emphasis placed on the interest of families of deceased in international humanitarian law. In the section on missing and dead persons in *Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949*, the following is stipulated:

Section III Missing and dead persons. Article 32 – General principle:

In the implementation of this section, the activities of the High Contracting Parties, of the Parties to the conflict and of the international humanitarian organizations mentioned in the Conventions and in this Protocol shall be prompted mainly by the right of families to know the fate of their relatives (International Committee of the Red Cross 1977: 25).

Through this project and the reconstruction of the events, the fate of three of the Ebo 4 was determined, and some closure about these events became possible for colleagues and relatives of the deceased.

The project shows the value of careful excavation and the use of sound archaeological techniques to help reconstruct events. Without very careful excavation and anatomical knowledge, it would not have been possible to separate the remains of the individuals and interpret them to reconstruct the events. Currently, very few forensic archaeological case studies are available in the South African literature (Nienaber



2015) but it is clear that the use of archaeological and forensic anthropological techniques can and should be employed in attempts to reconstruct events such as these, and also to help bring closure for the affected families.

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