

**THE BATTLE AT INDUNGO, 31 OCTOBER 1987: AN SADF MILITARY  
VENTURE AGAINST SWAPO IN THE ANGOLAN BORDER WAR**

**by**

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1. The aim of the study

The Angolan Border War was waged from 1966 to 1989 in southern Africa between the South African Defence Force (SADF) and the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), the military wing of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO). The *Forças Armadas Populares De Libertação De Angola* (FAPLA) or People's Armed Forces of Liberation of Angola, which served as the military wing of the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) or People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola, the Cuban Defence Force, and the defence force of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, all collaborated closely with SWAPO through their deployment of military advisors and personnel at Angolan military bases.

This study takes the form of a reconstruction and a detailed account of the participation of the South African Defence Force (SADF) in the battle at Indungo on 31 October 1987, during the Angolan Border War. The battle took place inside Angola in the area to the north of Cuvelai during the final stages of the war during the carrying out of Operation Firewood, a military operation which was intended to eliminate a military base which housed elements of SWAPO.

Chapter 2 takes the form of a survey of the leading role players in the Angolan Border War, while Chapter 3 is devoted to a discussion of the nature of the war and a detailed analysis and interpretation of the twenty-one years of the conflict which led up to the battle at Indungo in 1987. Particular attention is paid to describing how the war evolved as it passed through a number of specific phases. It is the considered opinion of the researcher that the battle at Indungo is best understood within the context which is provided by some of the most significant milestones of the Angolan Border War.

Chapter 4 consists of an investigation of the activities of the SADF inside the central region of southern Angola towards the end of 1986 and in 1987. The events which preceded the battle at Indungo include the battle which took place during the carrying out of Operation Colosseum, close to where the battle at Indungo was to be fought a year later. The researcher discerned some similarities between the two operations.

Chapters 5 to 8 constitute the main component of the dissertation. They include the planning and first two phases of the battle at Indungo, the third phase of the battle, the attack on 31 October 1987, the role which the companies of 101 Battalion performed during the carrying out of the battle, and an overall appraisal of the battle. The battle was to be the last major attack by the SADF in the war which resulted in the capture of a SWAPO base.

## **2. Research methodology**

The researcher has applied tried and tested research methods for historical studies, namely, consulting secondary and primary sources and applying internal and external criticism. Internal criticism is a method by means of which sources are analysed for their credibility. Conversely, external criticism entails authenticating sources by evaluating the information which is usually provided by secondary sources against that which is obtained from other sources, particularly primary sources.

In this study, secondary sources included published books, articles in academic journals, reports which were obtained from the electronic media, newspaper reports and articles, and television news broadcasts and reports.

A limitation which the researcher encountered during the conducting of this study was the paucity of published material which provided accounts from a SWAPO-informed perspective, with the work of Thula Bopela being a noteworthy exception. There is no formal SWAPO archive from which to

obtain relevant information and it was not possible to interview former SWAPO officers. Consequently, it was incumbent upon the researcher to approach and use the available material as objectively and critically as possible.

The researcher made extensive use of the wealth of primary sources which are available at the Documentation Centre which houses the Department of Defence Archives in Pretoria. The SADF possessed an excellent capability with respect to the administration of information during the Angolan Border War. Consequently, the archives provide detailed material, not only concerning the operations of the SADF operations, but also concerning SWAPO, which compensates, to a certain extent, for the lack of material which is available from SWAPO-related sources.

The primary sources for this study are written documents from the archives of the Department of Defence, which include war diaries, daily reports, operational orders, evaluation reports, and conference reports, and, secondly, oral evidence from interviews which the researcher conducted with a number of informants. The war diaries are particularly invaluable sources, as they contain vital information concerning military operations. The daily reports cover topics such as land mine explosions, enemy movements, and casualties which were suffered during battle, while the operational orders provide details concerning the planning of operations. Evaluation reports and conference reports comprise the information which was made available after individual operations had taken place. The researcher was required to obtain written permission to peruse classified documents which were relevant to the research topic.

Oral evidence made a crucial contribution to the study and the researcher exercised great care in the conducting of personal interviews with a number of eyewitnesses, in an endeavour to supplement the primary and secondary sources in order to reconstruct and understand the events of the battle which took place at Indungo. The interviewees were operations commanders, ordinary soldiers, and other key witnesses who were uniquely positioned to

observe the operations. The interviewees all participated with enthusiasm in the interviews. They were requested to sign a letter of consent to confirm that their participation would be completely voluntary, in which they were asked whether their identities could be revealed or whether they preferred to remain anonymous. None of the participants wished to remain anonymous. The personal accounts and experiences were recorded meticulously by the researcher, who is himself a military veteran. He held the rank of second lieutenant in the Signal Corps during 1982 and 1983, before he was promoted to the rank of captain. During this period, he served with 32 Battalion at their tactical head quarters at Ongiva and Ionde in Angola. He had already acquired considerable experience in conducting the types of interviews which would yield detailed information. In his professional capacity, he practises as an attorney.

### **3. Literature survey**

Despite the increasing number of publications which have been written concerning the Angolan Border War during the past few years, the battle at Indungo has received very little attention in general histories of the war. According to Leopold Scholtz<sup>1</sup>, who makes a brief reference to the battle at Indungo, to which he refers by the code name which was assigned to the military operation during which it took place, namely, Operation Firewood, the operation did not go according to plan at all, as the SWAPO fighters had been able to defend themselves and they had received additional outside support. He maintains that according to a 'highly secret report' to the chief of the SADF, twelve members of the SADF were killed and forty-seven were wounded.

An older published work by Fred Bridgland<sup>2</sup> makes mention of a SADF force which crossed the border on 31 October 1987 and struck 200 kilometres into Angola to attack a large SWAPO base near the Angolan town of Cuvelai. The account of Bridgland also sets the death toll for members of the SADF at

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<sup>1</sup> L. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966-1989*, p. 256.

<sup>2</sup> F. Bridgland, *The War for Africa: Twelve Months that Transformed a Continent* (1990), p. 211.

twelve – ‘most of them in a single mortar-bomb explosion’. In addition, the South African Government was continuing to deny that its forces were embroiled in the fighting in Angola, although two British newspapers, *The Scotsman* and the *Sunday Telegraph*, had broken the story a few weeks earlier to their ‘internal readers’.

In a book which he wrote concerning his visit to the battlefields of the Angolan Border War with some veterans of the conflict, almost two decades after it had ended, Louis Bothma makes a brief reference<sup>3</sup> to the battle. He acknowledges that a battle had taken place at Indungo, without making any attempt to describe it. His book serves mainly as a travelogue of his journey through southern Angola, in which he recounts some of the anecdotes of his companions. Another book which has some relevance to this study is that of Ian Uys,<sup>4</sup> in which he provides short inserts concerning the soldiers of the SADF who were decorated with the Honoris Crux medal during the Angolan Border War. To write his scant summary of Operation Firewood, he relied upon a source which did not provide accurate figures for numbers of soldiers who died or a detailed account of how they died: ‘On 31 October 1987 the SADF and the South West African Territory Force (SWATF) attacked PLAN and killed 150 soldiers; in the process they lost 11 men killed (*sic*) by a mortar bomb’. He goes into more detail concerning some of the call signs of 101 Battalion, in an endeavour to describe the bravery with which its soldiers had acted.<sup>5</sup> In another book concerning the Border War, which was written by Willem Steenkamp,<sup>6</sup> there is no mention of Indungo at all.

The information pertaining to Indungo which is provided by all of the sources which have been cited is scant at best. It is further undermined by inaccuracies, which become apparent when the primary sources in the archives of the Department of Defence are consulted. None of the sources appears to acknowledge the crucial significance of the battle at Indungo to any realistic appraisal of the Angolan Border War. In addition, the events of

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<sup>3</sup> L. J. Bothma, *Anderkant Cuito, 'n Reisverhaal van die Grensoorlog*.

<sup>4</sup> I. Uys, *Cross of Honour* (Uys Publishers, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> I. Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 133.

<sup>6</sup> W. Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War 1966-1989* (second, revised edition, 2017).

the battle have never received the benefit of a careful reconstruction and analysis. These conclusions served to convince the researcher that there was a great need for a detailed study and a penetrating analysis of the battle, in order to place the events which comprise the overall conflict in a more realistic perspective than has been possible to date.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE LEADING ROLE PLAYERS IN THE ANGOLAN BORDER WAR

#### 1. Introduction

To recapitulate the previous chapter, the principal players in the Angolan Border War were the South African Defence Force (SADF) of the Republic of South Africa and the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), the military Wing of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), the liberation movement which was committed to securing the independence of Namibia from the rule of the Republic of South African. The two opposing forces were supported by a number of different groups.

SWAPO was supported by FAPLA, the People's Armed Forces of Liberation of Angola, the armed wing of the MPLA, the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola. The MPLA was the political party of which the government of Angola was comprised during the period of the war. UNITA, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, and the FNLA, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola, were the two rebel forces which competed for power with the MPLA in a long and protracted civil war.

UNITA was supported by the SADF, in a relationship which stemmed primarily from the intention of the South African government to protect and further its interests in South West Africa, as Namibia was known at the time, and secondarily from the dependency of UNITA on South Africa for military supplies and provisions. In return, UNITA would play a leading role in occupying and dominating large areas inside of southern Angola. By securing these areas, UNITA enabled the SADF to limit its war arena to a narrow and confined area in the central southern part of Angola, which, in turn, enabled the SADF to optimise its effectiveness in a small and manageable area.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See a general map of southern Angola in Fig.1.

The FAPLA army of the Angolan MPLA government relied upon its allies, which comprised mainly the countries of the Communist Bloc in Eastern Europe and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, for military supplies and provisions. Cuba, an ideological ally of the Soviet Union, also supplied a large number of military personnel. In 1975 the Soviet Union provided the MPLA with military materials to the value of US\$ 300 million, by comparison with a total of US\$ 54 million during the course of the previous fourteen years.<sup>8</sup>

The Angolan Border War escalated into an international conflict, as it was absorbed into the Cold War when the opposing superpowers of the time demonstrated their separate alliances with the two principal antagonists. The United States of America forged an indirect alliance with UNITA through its Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), while the Soviet Union was to lend direct support to FAPLA.

The Cold War commenced during 1947, shortly after the end of the Second World War. It reached a conclusion after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and finally ended in 1991 with the total collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of communist rule in the countries of its erstwhile allies in the Eastern Bloc. It had been an ostensibly ideologically-driven global power struggle between East and West and the Soviet Union, together with Cuba, by assisting FAPLA, became active role players during the Angolan Border War. Their participation reached a climax when Cuba fought in battles against UNITA and the SADF during 1987 and 1988.

The war received a great deal of attention on the African continent and almost all African states lent political support to the MPLA government of Angola. As it progressed, the war was also extensively discussed by both the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations (UN). At the United Nations, a number of resolutions were passed to end the war and to demand that both Cuba and South Africa withdraw from Angolan territory.

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<sup>8</sup> W M James III, *A Political History of the Civil War in Angola: 1974-1990*, p. 54.

The Angolan Border War is not usually accorded the same prominence and does not usually receive the same coverage in recorded history as other significant conflicts which took place during the Cold War. By comparison, both the Vietnam War and the Soviet-Afghan War are covered far more extensively in published literature. The Angolan Border War also took place in a remote part of Africa, in a region which has no particular significance for the vast majority of the population of the world. It has been suggested that the United States could derive no economic benefits from participating militarily in the war, as the war was ostensibly not fought to secure valuable mineral and energy resources, which subsequently provided the underlying motivation for the wars in which Afghanistan and Iraq were invaded by the United States during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In addition, the ideological motivation according to which the West needed to safeguard its capitalist interests in the so-called 'free world' from the 'communist threat' did not play a particularly large part in determining the course of the Angolan Border War. Accordingly, the USA maintained a low profile while it closely monitored the activities of the SADF in Angola. Although the United States and the government of South Africa had a shared ideological orientation which characterised communism as a threat to the stability of southern Africa, the United States refrained from participating directly in the Angolan Border War by deploying troops inside of Angola. Although the war is generally afforded only minor status in a great deal of historical discourse concerning the Cold War, it was by no means an insignificant occurrence, as the discussion which follows will demonstrate.

Apart from the political struggle which had yet to be resolved in South Africa, the Angolan Border War was the last of the liberation struggles which played out in Africa through armed conflict. A trend had been established, in which the decolonisation of several African countries had been accompanied by military conflicts to end the rule of European colonisers. This highly significant period of African history ended with the Angolan Border War. It should be emphasised that the war endured for twenty-three years and its end was precipitated by the confluence of specific factors, namely, the demise of the

Soviet Union, the diplomatic breakthroughs which had been achieved to persuade the opposing sides to cease hostilities, and the economic realities which convinced them that the war could no longer be afforded.

Approximately half a million soldiers and civilians died inside Angola during the Angolan Border War, while the Angolan civil war between UNITA and the FNLA on one side and the MPLA on the other raged. The numbers of troops which were committed by both sides during the conflict were great. Cuba alone saw fit to deploy approximately 45 000 soldiers and advisers to assist FAPLA during the peak period of the war. The FAPLA army comprised more than 10 brigades, which were of varying sizes. Although it is difficult to determine the exact sizes of the FAPLA brigades, it appears that FAPLA adhered to the standard practice of a brigade comprising from 2 000 to 6 000 men. The FAPLA brigade which participated in the Battle of Cuvelai during the carrying out of Operation Askari in 1983 was estimated to have comprised as many as 6 000 men.

During the peak period of the Angolan Border War, the presence of the South African Defence Force comprised at least 30 000 military personnel who performed duty on the 1 500-kilometre border between South West Africa and Angola, to prevent insurgency into South West Africa. It is also estimated that more than 650 000 South African men and women served on the border, either as conscripts or as members of the Permanent Force during the twenty-three-year duration of the war. The ranks of South African military personnel were also supplemented through the recruitment and enlistment of large numbers of the local South West African population into military units such as the Ovambo 101 and Ovambo 102 Battalions and the Bushman 201/31 Battalion. Former Angolan FNLA soldiers were also recruited to form 32 Battalion.

Although it is generally accepted that the Angolan Border War officially started on 26 August 1966, when a small force of South African Police personnel, assisted by military personnel of the SADF and helicopters of the South African Air Force (SAAF), attacked a military base of SWAPO at

Ongulumbashe in South West Africa / Namibia,<sup>9</sup> the conflict could have started as early as in February of 1966. Ten more years were to pass before the participation of the SADF in the Angolan Border War expanded into Angolan territory.

## 2. Understanding SWAPO

The research into the official SADF military archives also provided the researcher with access to the profiles which the SADF had compiled of SWAPO and PLAN.<sup>10</sup> According to section two of the constitution of SWAPO, the organisation was defined as a national liberation movement to rally together, on the basis of free voluntary associations, all sons and daughters of the Namibian people who aspired to freedom. The organisation claimed to serve as the organised political vanguard of the oppressed and exploited people of Namibia. In order to fulfil its vanguard role, it sought to unite, inspire, orient, and motivate the masses of working Namibian people in the struggle for national and social liberation. Consequently, SWAPO perceived itself to be the expression and embodiment of national unity of a whole people, united and organised in the struggle for total independence and liberation.<sup>11</sup>

As a political party, SWAPO was based in Windhoek in South West Africa before it was obliged to go into exile. As it has been explained, its military wing was the People's Liberation Army of Namibia or PLAN. In addition, the organisation had a diplomatic and intelligence network at the United Nations, offices in Lusaka and Accra in Africa, and also in London and various European cities.<sup>12</sup>

The origins of SWAPO lie with the formation of the Ovamboland Peoples' Congress (OPC) in Cape Town in 1958 by Andimba Herman Toivo Ya Toivo, Andreas Shipanga, Das Simmons, and Wep Burak. Sam Nujoma took over

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<sup>9</sup> L Scholtz, *Die SAW in die Grensoorlog, 1966-1989*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

<sup>11</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

<sup>12</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

leadership from Ya Toivo in 1959. The OPC committed its first act of aggression against South African rule in Windhoek on 10 December 1959. The organisation changed its name to SWAPO in June of 1960. In 1961, as a consequence of conflicts with the South African Police, the main organisational structures left South West Africa / Namibia. In November of 1963, SWAPO adopted a new constitution in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and established the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). The constitution was to be amended once more during the 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

From 1966 to 1973 SWAPO committed various acts of terrorism against the local population in the north of South West Africa, which included the laying of landmines in the area. From 1969 onwards, SWAPO increased its infiltration of PLAN military personnel into South West Africa from Angola.<sup>14</sup>

In 1966, Sam Nujoma articulated the following objectives for SWAPO:<sup>15</sup>

- Its freedom fighters should infiltrate South West Africa from all sides to carry out attacks on police stations and strategic positions.
- Influential citizens of South West Africa should be assassinated.
- Military installations should be destroyed.
- White farmers in rural areas should be attacked.

In 1966, the South African Congress of SWAPO formed a united front of action in Lusaka with the following objectives:<sup>16</sup>

- To liberate the area which comprised Angola, South West Africa, and the Republic of South Africa.
- The African National Congress (ANC) was to provide logistical support to SWAPO.

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<sup>13</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

<sup>14</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

<sup>15</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

<sup>16</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

- The regime in South West Africa was to be replaced by a Namibian government which was founded upon the principles of Marxism-Leninism, which also accorded with the principles of African socialism.
- SWAPO was to provide farms to its supporters.
- The system of chiefs in Ovamboland was to be abolished.
- South West Africa was to be used as a base from which military offensives could be launched against the Republic of South Africa.
- The system of criminal and civil courts in South West Africa was to be replaced by a communist system of courts in Namibia.
- Namibia was to be ruled by the majority party, with no opposition parties being permitted to contest elections.
- The armed struggle of PLAN should continue until the South West African regime was replaced, through either military or economic means.

In summary, the aims of PLAN were to fight for the freedom and independence of Namibia by means of force, safeguard the policy and constitution, and implement the aims and objectives of SWAPO.<sup>17</sup> The principal economic objective of SWAPO was to isolate the Republic of South Africa from the international community, in order to force a withdrawal from South West Africa as a prelude to the birth of Namibia. The organisation also aimed to destabilise both South West Africa and the Republic of South Africa and to reduce the benefits which both countries were able to derive from economic resources.<sup>18</sup> The goal of SWAPO was to gain the support of all of the indigenous populations of Namibia and to end all international support for the Republic of South Africa by making full use of the guilt which many countries in the West felt as a consequence of the colonisation of Africa.<sup>19</sup>

SWAPO received support from the Soviet Union, in the forms of more than 80 percent of the weapons which were used by PLAN and advanced military

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<sup>17</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

<sup>18</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

<sup>19</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

training, university education, and military advice. From Cuba the organisation received logistical support, which included the maintaining of sophisticated military hardware, such as radar stations. The Democratic Republic of Germany, or East Germany, as it was known at the time, also provided training and medical and logistical assistance. Zimbabwe provided logistical support and training facilities. Other countries which provided SWAPO with political and humanitarian support included Sweden, the Netherlands, Algeria, Norway, Nigeria, Denmark, Finland, Libya, the United States, and France.<sup>20</sup> The inclusion of the United States and France in the list of countries which were known to have sided with SWAPO appears to be somewhat anomalous, as both countries were opposed to the Soviet Union. Consequently, it seems plausible to conclude that the support from these countries would have been confined to moral support and the provision of food and medical supplies.

SWAPO was provided with financial, material, and political support by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The ANC, under the chairmanship of Oliver Tambo, shared training facilities with SWAPO and the ANC and SWAPO coordinated their plans.<sup>21</sup> The role of SWAPO in their coordinated activities consisted of destroying power lines, laying ambushes for military personnel, carrying out bank robberies, murdering farmers, destroying bridges and fuel supply installations, and carrying out acts of violence in populated areas inside of South West Africa. The military hardware which was supplied to SWAPO comprised mainly 7.62-mm Tokarev pistols, 7.62-mm AK-47 rifles, AKM-AKS rifles, G-3 rifles, SKS rifles, 7.62-mm PMK rifles, 7.62-mm RPK machine guns, RPG-7 and later the much improved RPG-75 rocket launchers, 82-mm and B-10 recoilless canons, 60-mm and 82-mm mortars, 122-mm rocket launchers, and SA-7 Grail MK-1 surface-to-air missiles. The landmines and explosives consisted of PMD-series anti-personnel mines, POMZ-2 anti-personnel mines, PMA-3 mines, TM-45, TMA-3, MK-7, TM-57, TMA-5, and PT-MI-BA-111 anti-tank mines, and F-1, RGD-5, RG-4, and RG-42 hand

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<sup>20</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

<sup>21</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

grenades. These weapons were supplied mainly by the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, North Korea, and Poland.<sup>22</sup>

The military training which was provided to SWAPO personnel consisted of three phases. New recruits were collected in Ovamboland, after which they were transported to the Tobias Hanyeko Training Centre (THTC) of SWAPO, near Lubango in Angola. New recruits were usually required to wait for five months before their formal training commenced. During this period, they were forced to do hard labour and to dig trenches. The first phase of their training was confined mainly to physical and political training. After the first phase, recruits were sent to other training bases for more political training, which lasted for six months. Their political training consisted of background information concerning the Soviet Union, socialism, motivating recruits for war, and instruction concerning their interactions with the local people. The second phase consisted of infantry training, which included several military disciplines such as engineering, reconnaissance, medical training, artillery, and anti-aircraft. The third phase was devoted to tactical training, which included ambushes, formations, contact drills, and anti-tracking techniques. Recruits received training in musketry, drills, camouflage, anti-tracking, and attacking. Typhoon instructors, who included Soviet, East German, Cuban, and Ovambo-speaking instructors, trained the more specialised Eastern Detachment and Special Forces units. The best recruits were sent for further training to Libya, the Democratic Republic of Germany, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, or Tanzania.<sup>23</sup>

During a normal training day, SWAPO recruits rose at 05:00 and their physical training started at 06:00. They drilled on the parade ground from 07:00 to 09:00, after which they ate breakfast. From 10:00 to 12:00 on Mondays and Tuesdays they received political training and on Wednesdays they received training in the use of weapons. On Thursdays they received lectures concerning the theory of weapons and on Fridays they received tactical

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<sup>22</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

<sup>23</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

training. During the afternoons, from 13:00 to 17:00, they underwent practical training in the field. At 18:00 they ate supper and at 03:00, on some mornings, they conducted emergency drills. Saturdays were spent gathering firewood and Sundays were rest days to enable them to attend to personal concerns.<sup>24</sup>

The organisational headquarters of SWAPO was referred to as the Forward Command Post (FCP). The next level in the structure of the organisation was comprised of the Western Area, which consisted of four detachments, the Central Area, which consisted of a further four detachments, and the Eastern Area, which consisted of two detachments. The detachments were occasionally withdrawn from their bases for re-training.<sup>25</sup>

PLAN was a well-trained guerrilla force, which was capable of fighting a drawn-out war. It had the support of the Angolan MPLA government and it established its bases inside or in close proximity to the FAPLA bases of the MPLA.

SWAPO was the primary enemy of the SADF, which drew distinctions between SWAPO and FAPLA. The priorities of FAPLA were different from those of SWAPO, as it was engaged in fighting a civil war inside of Angola against the UNITA and FNLA rebel forces, whereas the SADF had no immediate interest in the conflict and was relatively unconcerned about the political leadership of Angola. It needs to be emphasised that the SADF did not consistently maintain its distinction between SWAPO and FAPLA as its principal foe. On some occasions, when it appeared to be necessary to do so, it engaged FAPLA in large battles, while on others it gave specific orders to its units not to engage with FAPLA at all costs. The SADF could not maintain its policy not to engage FAPLA by the end of the conflict, as it secretly held large territories in south-central Angola, thereby infringing upon the sovereignty of its government. The SADF could also not avoid fighting FAPLA when FAPLA provided safe havens for SWAPO by harbouring its troops inside its bases.

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<sup>24</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

<sup>25</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

Consequently, the SADF attacked FAPLA bases, under the pretext that the attacks had been necessitated by its war against SWAPO. At the end of the Angolan Border War, the SADF fought a semi-conventional war against FAPLA during 1987 and 1988, when FAPLA threatened the very existence of UNITA in south-eastern Angola and the interests of the SADF were threatened.

Prospects of success for SWAPO were dependent on its ability to destabilise the northern region of South West Africa by gaining the support of the largest ethnic group in the country, the Ovimbundu. Defeating the SADF militarily could have been within the reach of SWAPO, through the effective use of guerrilla tactics. According to one scenario, the SADF could have become bogged down in the region by being forced to perform aimless search-and-destroy and tactical missions over distances of hundreds of thousands of square kilometres of trackless bush. Through the use of these tactics, SWAPO had aimed to thin out the defences of the SADF, to the extent that they could have become precariously spread out, thereby obliging the SADF to confine its activities to deploying its forces in small pockets. This scenario would place SWAPO in an ideal position to slice through the defences of the SADF with the assistance of a concentrated mechanised army and to set course for the capital city of Windhoek, which is situated in the central part of Namibia.<sup>26</sup>

SWAPO was supplied with a range of armoured troop carriers to transport infantry units over conventional battlefields. These vehicles included amphibious BTRs, which were supplemented with additional firepower from BRDM armoured cars, 120-mm mortars, artillery pieces, and Stalin-Organ multiple launch rocket systems. Transport lorries loaded with soldiers could have been deployed as cannon fodder to flood the battlefield while wielding their AK-47s and covering the flanks of the advancing mechanised force. Strike aircraft, such as the Sukhoi Su-20s and Su-22s and the MiG-23s which were stationed at Lubango and Menongue, could have been used to

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<sup>26</sup> J Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike: The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga 1978*, p. 21.

wipe out the ground forces of the SADF. The air bases at which the aircraft were housed were well protected by highly mobile, mechanised radar and anti-aircraft systems. Later during the war, the defences also included the most advanced system of its time, the SA-8 rocket system.<sup>27</sup>

According to Colonel J.D. (Jan) Breytenbach, a prominent SADF officer, during some of the battles during the Angolan Border War, the SWAPO forces were not able to win any battles or to be deployed offensively, owing to a lack of commanders who possessed sufficient military acumen to lead offensives aggressively from the front.<sup>28</sup>

### **3. Enemy deployments in southern Angola**

According to an official SADF military report which covers the period during which the battle at Indungo took place, the positions of the enemy were reported to be as follows:<sup>29</sup>

- Three groups of Cuban soldiers were positioned 3 kilometres west of Villa da Ponte and two more groups of soldiers, south of the road leading towards Villa da Ponte. In addition, strike units which consisted of from 150 to 200 members each, were positioned 10 kilometres west of Villa da Ponte and 2 kilometres north of the tar road in the area. Two SWAPO camps, which consisted of thirty soldiers each, were also stationed 5 kilometres south of Villa da Ponte and 2 kilometres west of the road which linked Villa da Ponte and Indungo.
- At the end of 1987, troops which comprised mainly FAPLA forces were deployed at the Angolan towns of Lubango, Cuvango, Mulondo, Techamutete, Cahama, Bambi, Cuvelai, and Ongiva.

Other FAPLA brigades, which were deployed in the southern central parts of Angola, were positioned as follows:

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<sup>27</sup> File 204/2/2/1 14/12 83 – 31 / 3 89 (101 Battalion), Department of Defence Archival Service, signed chairperson Major-General JJ Geldenhuys.

<sup>28</sup> J Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike: The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga 1978*, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> File INL / 109 / 8 November 1987, Department of Defence Archival Service, dated 8 November 1987.

- The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, at Chitambo, Otchinjau, Caleque, Chilau, and Techipelongo.
- The 19<sup>th</sup> Brigade, at Quiteve, Macova, and Quvela.
- The 35<sup>th</sup> Brigade, at Bambi and Bale.
- The 61<sup>st</sup> Brigade, at Ogival, Nnamani, and Camaro.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> File INL / 109 / 8 November 1987, Department of Defence Archival Service.

## CHAPTER 3

### INTERPRETING THE ANGOLAN BORDER WAR

This chapter is devoted to an elucidation of how and why the Angolan Border War evolved. Accordingly, some background information is necessary to provide appropriate insights into the nature of the war, in order to be able to interpret it in a historically valid manner. The orientation of the study is underscored by the rubric which the researcher selected for the conflict between the SADF and SWAPO, namely, the Angolan Border War. Although it encapsulates both the location of the war and the territory within Angola in which the SADF engaged its enemy, it also has other distinct resonances.

The prosaic import of the rubric is that the study concerns a war which took place on a border between two countries. As David Williams<sup>31</sup> explains, although a border is a geographic fact, ‘whatever the interpretation of history, we know “the border” was a long way from home, logistically and psychologically... However, it can be argued that “on the border” was more than a geographical concept. There were other borders in this war, other dividing lines, divisions, and paradoxes’. His nuanced elucidation of the concept of a border is of particular relevance to all of the implications which are implicit in the term ‘the Angolan Border’ as it is used in this study.

The nomenclature which is used to designate members of PLAN in relevant literature tends to vary. Although the term ‘SWAPO’ is an all-embracing one, it is often not entirely appropriate to use it to refer to all members of the organisation. Some members of SWAPO were merely members of a political party, who did not take part in the activities of PLAN. In some circles the soldiers of PLAN were branded as terrorists, as their actions were frequently directed against civilians and public installations, while others preferred to characterise them as freedom fighters. During the treason trial under the provisions of the Terrorism Act (no. 83 of 1967) of Herman Toivo ya Toivo and

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<sup>31</sup> D Williams, *On Multiplicity of “borders”*; I van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p. 245.

thirty-six other members of SWAPO in Pretoria, Toivo ya Toivo, addressing the court, expressed his desire to be referred to as a rebel, because he maintained that 'the South African Government has chosen an ugly name to call us by. One's own are called patriots, or at least rebels; your opponents are called terrorists'.<sup>32</sup> As members of irregular armies such as UNITA are frequently referred to as rebels, for the sake of maintaining an appropriate distance from ideologically loaded and value-laden terms, it would be prudent to differentiate between members of SWAPO and soldiers who served in the ranks of the military wing of SWAPO.

Soldiers who sought to carry out the objectives of SWAPO found a safe place of refuge inside of the sovereign territory of Angola, from which they launched their military offensives against various targets inside of South West Africa. Although the decision by the SADF to enter Angola to take the fighting to the enemy was an easy one to make, the political leadership of the Republic of South Africa was ultimately responsible for making it. The military leaders of the SADF received their directives from the political leadership in the form of broadly and simply stated single paragraphs, which they were required to interpret in order to formulate appropriate courses of action.

A directive which is of crucial relevance to this study authorised the SADF to 'move the border'. In effect, the actual border between South West Africa and Angola, which is a fixed geographical line, was to be disregarded and other artificial borders were created, further and further away from this line, inside of Angolan territory. Predicating its operations upon a new imaginary border, the SADF drove SWAPO further north, away from South West Africa. According to this plan, most contacts with SWAPO were to take place a considerable distance away from the South African-held territory, to avoid skirmishes inside of South West Africa, which could cause either death or injury to the South African citizens of South West Africa. When SWAPO troops managed to enter South West Africa, the SADF conducted military operations to which it referred in Afrikaans as *hakkejagoperasies*, or close pursuit operations.

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<sup>32</sup> L J Bothma, *Vang 'n Boer: Die Stryd tussen Boer en Ovambo*, p. 223.

Consequently, it became increasingly difficult for SWAPO to reach South West Africa from the safe havens which were provided inside of Angolan territory.<sup>33</sup>

In this chapter, the researcher endeavours to divide the Angolan Border War into distinctive stages or phases, a strategy which, to the best of the knowledge of the researcher, no other author who has written about the war has adopted. The account of General J.J. Geldenhuys, the Chief of the SADF from 1985 to 1990, follows a more general approach and he places the actions of the SADF inside of Angola in one of two categories. According to Geldenhuys, the military operations during the war were classified as either General Operations or Specific Operations.<sup>34</sup>

Geldenhuys explains that General Operations included all conflicts and contacts which were made with SWAPO during the entire duration of the war. The official military records in the archives of the Department of Defence reveal that the army of the SADF participated in more than 300 General Operations during the course of the war. By contrast, Geldenhuys characterises Specific Operations as operations which entailed a specific objective, a target area, as was the case with the battle at Indungo, or the identifying of a territorial area which was to be either attacked or dominated through military means. The Specific Operations changed the course of the war and consequently are considered to be of immensely greater significance than the General Operations.<sup>35</sup>

Specific Operations tended to share at least one common characteristic, in that territories or targets which had been taken by the SADF were seldom held for long. In some instances, the duration was not more than a day, while in the case of possibly only a few operations, it may have been significantly longer. The SADF withdrew from these areas inside of Angola shortly after attacks had been conducted, only to face the enemy repeatedly at the same

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<sup>33</sup> J J Geldenhuys, *Ons was daar: Weners van die Oorlog om Suider-Afrika*, p. 64; L J Bothma, *Vang 'n Boer: Die Stryd tussen Boer en Ovambo*, p. 388; W Steenkamp, *Suid-Afrika se Grensoorlog, 1966-1989*, p. 198.

<sup>34</sup> J J Geldenhuys, *Ons was daar: Weners van die Oorlog om Suider-Afrika*, p. 66.

<sup>35</sup> W Steenkamp, *Suid-Afrika se Grensoorlog, 1966-1989*, p. 212. According to Steenkamp there were a dozen formal operations.

locations during future operations. Although on some occasions UNITA, which the SADF considered to be a legitimate fighting force in Angola during the Angolan civil war, was tasked to move into and occupy the captured territories, it was seldom able to hold them for long periods.

Taking enemy targets and not holding onto them for long periods was the preferred tactic of the SADF for fighting a guerrilla war against SWAPO. As guerrilla wars are decided by numerous small incidents which take place over large areas, the conflicts almost invariably have very long durations. Consequently, the characteristics of guerrilla warfare are significantly different from those of conventional warfare. Conventional warfare has always been the traditional and the preferred means by which well-equipped and well-disciplined armies engage each other in large-scale confrontations. In these confrontations, large armies engage their opponents at fixed locations by employing all of the means which they have at their disposal, usually with decisive outcomes which result in one army emerging victorious at the end of the war. In this respect and many others, guerrilla wars are significantly different.<sup>36</sup>

From its humble beginnings during the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, the Angolan Border War underwent frequent changes. The first large-scale incursion deep into Angola by the SADF during Operation Savannah, which took place from 1975 to 1976, was probably the first milestone of the war. During the operation, the SADF tasted semi-conventional war in the modern era for the first time.

General C.L. (Constand) Viljoen, the Chief of the SADF from 1980 to 1985, implemented a revised doctrine of mobile warfare, which differed significantly from the philosophy which had underpinned strategies for fighting wars in the past, to which he referred to as the traditional South African way of fighting a war. For Viljoen, the revised doctrine was 'based on not to hold ground but to create the design of battle in such a way that you would lure the enemy into

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<sup>36</sup> J J Geldenhuys, *Ons was daar: Weners van die oorlog om Suider-Afrika*, p. 79.

(a) killing ground and then (by utilising) the superiority of firepower and movement, you would kill him completely.'<sup>37</sup>

After twenty-one years of conflict, the Angolan Border War eventually reached a final milestone when the character of the war changed with the fighting of semi-conventional land battles at locations such as Mavinga, Cuito Cuanavale, and Tetchipa during 1987 and 1988. The active participation of the Cuban Army, through its offensive manoeuvres, was the principal driver of the new form which the conflict assumed. The conflict was further complicated by the SADF continuing, at the same time, to wage a guerrilla war against SWAPO in the central areas of southern Angola.

The factors which exerted a significant influence upon the course of the Angolan Border War include the presence and participation of Cuban forces, the influence of P.W. Botha, the President of South Africa, the simultaneous civil war which was being waged among competing factions inside of Angola, the interest which the United States took in the conflict, the modern military armaments which were introduced by the opposing armies during the conflict, and the unique military tactics which the SADF developed to fight against a guerrilla force such as SWAPO.

The Cuban force played significant roles during the Angolan Border War and the civil war in Angola. Under the direction of President Fidel Castro, the Cuban army had participated in earlier conflicts on the African continent, thousands of kilometres from Cuba, an island which is separated from the continent by the Atlantic Ocean. The conflicts in which the army participated included the war in the Congo, the war in Eritrea, the Yom Kippur War, and wars which were fought at several locations in Central and Latin America, such as Bolivia and El Salvador.<sup>38</sup>

During the 1980s, Cuba probably was the most militarised country in the world. Quoting from an article which was published by the London Institute for

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<sup>37</sup> I van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p. 261.

<sup>38</sup> J J Geldenhuys, *Ons was daar: Weners van die oorlog om Suider-Afrika*, p. 666.

Security Studies, General Geldenhuys explains that it was estimated that the Cuban Army comprised 145 000 men and women who performed conscript service for a minimum of three years, after which they were assigned to a reserve force which comprised at least 110 000 men and women. Geldenhuys also quotes Castro, who maintained that at least 400 000 Cuban soldiers had served inside Angola during the period of the Angolan Border War.<sup>39</sup>

During the time of the war in Angola, the Cuban army relied on arms and military support which were provided by the Soviet Union. Geldenhuys estimates that the army was supplied with 300 T-62 tanks and 650 T-54/55 tanks. In addition, Cuba had a 12 000-men strong navy and an 18 500-men strong air force. The air force had 250 aircraft of various types, including the advanced MiG-21, MiG-23, and MiG-27. Cuba had by far the largest army in Latin America, a region which includes large countries such as Brazil, whose population was fourteen times the size of that of Cuba at the time.<sup>40</sup>

The escalating deployment of the Cuban army in Africa was driven by Castro, who craved recognition by the Non-aligned Movements in Africa as a hero of liberation struggles. By contrast, the Cuban army was largely ineffective, as it consisted mainly of raw young recruits who were a great distance from their homeland and who, under the supervision of their political commissars, lacked competent leadership, nutritious rations, and appropriate training. Boris Putilin, the First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Brazzaville, described the soldiers as being unfit for regular war. The assessment was borne out during some fierce battles with the SADF. Ian van der Waag quotes another source, Ernesto C, who described how a Cuban soldier had expressed his disaffection with the Cuban Army as follows: 'The longer we were there, the more I saw good comrades fall. There was no talk of ever leaving Angola. We began to feel somewhat depressed. Medical attention was always good. But our equipment began to break down, our clothes were not being replaced and our

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<sup>39</sup> J J Geldenhuys, *Ons was daar: Weners van die oorlog om Suider-Afrika*, p. 669.

<sup>40</sup> J J Geldenhuys, *Ons was daar: Weners van die oorlog om Suider-Afrika*, p. 667.

food supply was sometimes unpredictable... we were never paid while serving in Angola.’<sup>41</sup>

The participation of the Soviet Union and the Democratic Republic of Germany in the war in Angola was relatively limited by comparison with that of Cuba. Respectively, they deployed 1 500 and 3 000 personnel and soldiers inside of Angola and the roles of the personnel were limited. They acted mainly in advisory roles during the deployment of sophisticated military installations. By contrast, the Cuban soldiers participated directly in the fighting against the SADF and UNITA.<sup>42</sup>

It also needs to be emphasised that when P.W. Botha was appointed as the Minister of Defence of South Africa on 5 April 1966, the appointment heralded the adoption of significant new approaches to ensuring the security of South Africa and, as a consequence, some new policies were implemented during the conflict in Angola. He later became the President of South Africa on 28 September 1978, a position which he held until his resignation in 1989. Consequently, it cannot be considered to be coincidental that his terms of office, while he served in these capacities, largely coincided with the period during which the Angolan Border War took place.<sup>43</sup>

While the former Portuguese colony of Angola and the former British colony of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) were still in existence, as the South African government perceived them to serve as a *cordon sanitaire* against the infection of independence fever in Africa, it felt that its position was sufficiently secure. The sense of security was subsequently to undergo considerable revision when South Africa became entangled in a regional war which saw South Africa effectively becoming a participant in the Cold War.<sup>44</sup>

Botha told the electorate of South Africa that the Soviet Union was making a ‘total onslaught’ on South Africa, which was inspired by Leninist and Marxist

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<sup>41</sup> I van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p. 260.

<sup>42</sup> J J Geldenhuys, *Ons was daar: Weners van die Oorlog om Suider-Afrika*, p. 670.

<sup>43</sup> I van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p. 247.

<sup>44</sup> I van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p. 249.

ideologies. In response, the South African government formulated a comprehensive strategic doctrine in 1977, the White Paper on Defence, which committed all of the resources of the state to combating revolutionary warfare.

Academics such as Deon Fourie and Ben Cockram lectured to South African military officers from the writings of Samuel P. Huntington, an American political scientist, and J.J. McCuen, a colonel in the armed forces of the United States, who wrote *The Art of Counter-revolutionary War - the Strategy of Counter-insurgency*. Other sources which were consulted included the works of André Beaufre, a French general who was an expert in the field of counter-revolutionary warfare in the Third World and had served in Morocco, Indochina, and Algeria, and Sir Robert Thompson, who had written about the Malayan Emergency. The strategy which Beaufre propounded formed the basis of the South African response while Botha held office.<sup>45</sup> The State Security Council (SCC), which was established in 1973, became the centre for the coordination and the implementation of the strategy which Botha spearheaded against 'the total onslaught'.

The SADF underwent radical restructuring during 1974. The regular army was transformed into a proper war machine which John Stockwell, a CIA operative in Angola, characterised as 'the most effective military strike force ever seen in black Africa, exploding through the MPLA-Cuban forces (to catch them) off balance and they remained dislocated and unable to regroup and redeploy into well prepared defensive positions.' According to Stockwell, the crucial secret which the SADF had learnt concerned the necessity of having an effective mobile, rapidly deployed force which acted effectively and decisively.<sup>46</sup>

By 1974, the conventional forces of the SADF were organised into two Divisions, namely, the 7 SA Infantry Division, which comprised the 71, 72, and 73 Motorised Brigades, and the 8 SA Armoured Division, which comprised the 81 Armoured Brigade, the 82 Mechanised Brigade, and the 84 Motorised

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<sup>45</sup> I van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p. 251.

<sup>46</sup> I van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p. 259.

Brigade. The Citizen Force and the commandos took over the responsibility for performing effective counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. According to the estimates which Van der Waag has made, by 1990, some 600 000 white men and women had received extended military training and 320 000 had served on the Angolan border in one capacity or another. From 1973, a number of black volunteers were also recruited and formed into separate military units.<sup>47</sup>

During the mid-1980s, two distinct wars were fought in Angola. The civil war was waged between the MPLA government, with the support of the Soviet Union and Cuba, and UNITA. The support which UNITA received took the form of military support from the SADF and political support, in the form of recognition as the true representatives of Angola, and military support, in the form of sophisticated weapons, from the United States. The second war was between SWAPO, which operated from inside of Angola, and the SADF, which made frequent incursions into Angola to seek out and destroy SWAPO bases.<sup>48</sup> During the 1980s, the SADF had 35 000 troops in South West Africa/Namibia, of whom as many as 75 percent were recruited inside the country.<sup>49</sup>

Van der Waag also cites the assessment of Leopold Scholtz, who maintains that the war was a proxy for the ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union and its ally, Cuba, to achieve the main objective of control over southern Africa.<sup>50</sup>

The relationship which the United States maintained with Angola was somewhat contradictory. On one hand, the United States was the principal trading partner of Angola for oil and Angola was the fourth largest trading partner of the United States in Africa. On the other, revenue which was generated by the oil trade and investments in the form of Chevron Oil, which largely controlled the Angolan oil industry, was used to pay for arms to fight

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<sup>47</sup> I van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p. 254.

<sup>48</sup> G Arnold, *Africa: A Modern History: 1945-2015*, p. 712; L J Bothma, *Vang 'n Boer: Die Stryd tussen Boer en Ovambo*, p. 363.

<sup>49</sup> G Arnold, *Africa: A Modern History: 1945-2015*, p. 716.

<sup>50</sup> I van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p. 247.

UNITA and the SADF. During the same period, President Ronald Reagan of the United States publicly recognised the leader of UNITA, Dr Jonas Savimbi, as the legitimate leader of Angola during his official visit to the White House, when he was also promised aid to fight the war.<sup>51</sup>

Both Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain were reluctant to condemn South Africa for the military role it was playing inside of Angola.<sup>52</sup> On one occasion, during the 1989 Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Thatcher expressed her opposition to any form of pressure on South Africa when she issued the official consensus communiqué for Great Britain in a separate document from the statement which was made by other Commonwealth leaders.<sup>53</sup>

The commanders of the SADF displayed great ingenuity in finding ways to minimise the threats which its enemies presented. The fire-force-style 'butterfly' operations, in which army units were rapidly transported by helicopter to hotspot areas and the clandestine operations in which the SADF sometimes mimicked the operating methods of other guerrilla forces provide just two examples of their resourcefulness.

During the Angolan Border War, the SADF developed and introduced advanced military vehicles. Among the most notable were the Buffel or Buffalo, which was introduced in 1974, the Ratel, which went into production in 1976 and made its combat debut during Operation Reindeer in 1978, and the Casspir, which was first ordered by the SADF in 1980. As it will be demonstrated in due course, the innovative military equipment provided the SADF with new opportunities to overcome the obstacles which had previously impeded its ability to prosecute the war effectively.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> G Arnold, *Africa: A Modern History: 1945-2015*, p. 712.

<sup>52</sup> F Pretorius, *Geskiedenis van Suid Afrika: Van Voortye tot Vandag*, p. 412.

<sup>53</sup> G Arnold, *Africa: A Modern History: 1945-2015*, p. 729.

<sup>54</sup> Heitman HR, *Equipment of the Border War*, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31(3), p. 91-108, 2006.

In response to the actions of the SADF, the PLAN fighters of SWAPO were obliged to rely heavily on continuous supplies of manpower to engage the SADF in combat. SWAPO had no shortage of new recruits from Ovamboland, the area in which the largest concentration of the population of South West Africa/Namibia, more than 1.5 million people, resided in the Ovimbundu territory, whose members joined their ranks continuously. The almost unlimited source from where SWAPO was able to draw manpower probably constituted the most crucial single contributory factor for enabling the Angolan Border War to continue for as long as it did and to continue to escalate until its end.

The Angolan Border War attained its various milestones by passing through several distinct phases. The following six phases summarise concisely how the war developed from 1966 to 1989:

- The first period: Low intensity conflict without large-scale military involvement: 1966-1975.
- The second period: The competition for power before Angola had become an independent African state: 1975-1976.
- The third period: Cross-border operations in the shallow central area inside of southern Angola: 1976-1980.
- The fourth period: Cross-border operations in the deep central area inside of southern Angola: 1980-1983.
- The fifth period: Covert guerrilla warfare in the deep central area inside of southern Angola: 1984-1986.
- The sixth period: Semi-conventional battles and total warfare inside of southern Angola: 1986-1988.

The battle at Indungo took place on 31 October 1987, during the sixth phase, while the SADF was preparing for the main onslaught by FAPLA and its allies upon other areas which were held by the SADF and UNITA in Angola.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE PERIOD PRECEDING THE BATTLE AT INDUNGO

#### 1. Introduction

Operation Firewood was carried out on 31 October 1987, at the small village of Indungo.<sup>55</sup> The village is situated adjacent to the main road which runs through Cuvelai, 285 kilometres north of the border between South West Africa/Namibia and Angola.<sup>56</sup> The build-up to the battle at Indungo entailed a number of operations being carried out deep in central southern Angola during the preceding year. At this time the operations of the SADF in the area were aimed mainly against SWAPO, although it was also fighting against FAPLA in the south-east and the south-west of Angola. This chapter concerns only the military operations which were carried out deep in central Angola during the year which preceded Operation Firewood and how they contributed to the build-up to the battle at Indungo.

The military bases of SWAPO housed small groups, which consisted of from 150 to 300 soldiers each. At these bases they were provided with military training and they rehearsed their movements to enable them to infiltrate undetected through the southern parts of Angola into the highly populated areas of Ovamboland, inside of South West Africa/Namibia. The objectives of the SADF were to eliminate the bases of SWAPO, to cut off logistical supply lines, to prevent infiltration by SWAPO into the area. Since the beginning of the war, the annual infiltration by SWAPO into the area was timed to coincide with the start of the annual rainy season, during the summer months, which last from December until approximately April of the following year.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See photograph of Indungo in Fig. 3.

<sup>56</sup> See map of the Battle at Indungo in Fig. 2.

<sup>57</sup> *The Pretoria News*, 3 November 1987.

## **2. Operations which preceded Operation Firewood: November 1986 to July 1987, in the deep central areas of southern Angola**

During the period from April to October of 1987, the SADF continued to maintain its secret presence in the central areas of southern Angola, while the tension between the SADF and SWAPO continued to escalate. On 13 November 1986, almost a year before the carrying out of Operation Firewood, Operation Colosseum was carried out in a nearby area, at the junction of the Bale and Tucuwe Rivers, east of the village of Indungo. Colonel James Hill, who was also to be the commander at Indungo, commanded the Task Force for Operation Colosseum, which consisted primarily of soldiers from companies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiments, for an attack on the Northern Front headquarters of SWAPO.<sup>58</sup> This operation was preceded by a reconnaissance of the area. The Recces located the SWAPO base and obtained vital information concerning the layout of the base and the strength of the SWAPO force, which enabled the SADF to plan its attack on the base.<sup>59</sup>

The SADF Task Force for Operation Colosseum consisted of a convoy of forty-four vehicles.<sup>60</sup> The convoy comprised two command Casspir armoured vehicles, both of which were fitted with 7.62-mm machine guns, another Casspir which was fitted with twin-barrel .50 calibre Browning machine guns, and a further eight Casspirs, each of which was fitted with a single-barrel .50 calibre Browning machine gun. There were also four Unimog vehicles, which had captured Soviet Union twin 14.5-mm medium machine guns mounted on their backs and four more Unimog vehicles carried 106-mm recoilless rifles. There were also two Soviet-manufactured GAZ trucks, both of which were fitted with .50 calibre Browning machine guns. Twenty-two logistical vehicles and a recovery vehicle accompanied these vehicles.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> K Stadler, *Recce, Kleinspan-operasies agter vyandelike linies*, p. 265.

<sup>59</sup> P Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969-1994*, p. 537.

<sup>60</sup> P Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969-1994*, p. 538.

<sup>61</sup> K Stadler, *Recce, Kleinspan-operasies agter vyandelike linies*, p. 265.

The SWAPO support platoon was equipped with 12.7-mm machine-guns and other heavy weapons to fend off an attack on the base. The standoff which ensued between the Task Force and the SWAPO force resulted in an estimated ten to twelve SWAPO soldiers being killed at the base, as not many of the force which occupied it had been present at the time of the attack.<sup>62</sup>

In the aftermath of the attack, the SADF Task Force received valuable information from a captured SWAPO soldier concerning other SWAPO targets. The Task Force advanced to a second location, which housed a SWAPO rehearsal base, at a location approximately 12 kilometres south from where they were. The approaching convoy was unexpectedly caught in an ambush, which had been laid by a capable SWAPO force of fifty men. The SWAPO force directed a well-aimed RPG-7 rocket at the leading vehicle of the advancing force, which found its target. The SWAPO attack was followed by more fire from machine guns and various small arms.<sup>63</sup>

Although two Recces from the SADF force were wounded during the ambush, the Recces regrouped and proceeded undeterred in an extended line formation towards the target. The SWAPO soldiers quickly dispersed after a short firefight, to avoid being overrun by the vehicles of the Recces. Upon arriving at the target, the Recces discovered that a large group of SWAPO soldiers had already evacuated their bases to participate in training exercises in other areas. Consequently, the area was almost deserted, apart from a few SWAPO tracks which had been left behind when the remainder of the force left the base in great haste.

The SADF Task Force subsequently withdrew from the target area and the convoy formed up in a single column, driving almost immediately into another well positioned SWAPO ambush which had been laid by approximately 120 men. In this incident, the SWAPO force managed to destroy two of the leading vehicles of the Recces, with two Recce Operators, Corporal Renken and

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<sup>62</sup> P Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969-1994*, p. 540.

<sup>63</sup> P Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969-1994*, p. 541.

Corporal Mashawawe, being mortally wounded.<sup>64</sup> Once again, the Recces fended off the SWAPO attack and commenced with a counter-attack.

Although the Recces again formed up in an extended line in pursuit of the fleeing SWAPO force, it soon dispersed in a 'bombshell' fashion, fleeing the area in all directions. The Recces did not manage to follow up the fleeing troops and soon realised that the fighting was over, as no more SWAPO soldiers were to be found anywhere. The two Casspirs which had led the column had been destroyed and the wreckage was abandoned by the Recces at the scene of the attack.

After the withdrawal of the Task Force from the target area, the higher command ordered it to return to the area immediately, to find and recover the destroyed Casspirs. There were strict orders not to leave any damaged equipment behind. The damaged Casspirs needed to be recovered at all costs, as their design was a closely guarded secret. Abandoned vehicles would provide the enemy with valuable information concerning how they had been manufactured by using special welding techniques. Capturing damaged vehicles could have enabled the enemy to identify vulnerable areas in them, thereby making them more vulnerable than before to direct hits from enemy weapons.<sup>65</sup>

A number of similarities exist between Operation Colosseum and the operation which was to follow the next year, namely, Operation Firewood. Both operations took place at approximately the same time of the year. Both Task Forces were formed from companies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiments. Their respective SWAPO targets were almost identical and were situated in the same general area. At least one unit from the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment used Casspir armoured personnel carriers during both operations and Colonel James Hill, who was to command the carrying out of Operation Firewood, would inevitably have made some observations concerning the carrying out of operations under these circumstances from his

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<sup>64</sup> P Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969-1994*, p. 541.

<sup>65</sup> P Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969-1994*, p. 542.

previous experience. In early January of 1987, military operations were carried out in the central areas of southern Angola, in which companies from another SADF unit, 32 Battalion, attacked SWAPO bases which were located to the south of Indungo, east of Cassinga, and in the Mupa, Evale, and Dova areas.<sup>66</sup>

One of the operations, which was carried out on 8 January 1987<sup>67</sup> in the area of Vinticet in southern Angola, took the form of an area operation by Romeo Mike Teams of 101 Battalion. Very little is known of this operation, as no detailed records could be found, apart from one report which comprises only a few remarks. According to a trustworthy source which has published records of SADF soldiers who died in uniform on social media, it has been briefly recorded that on 8 January 1987, 101 Battalion suffered severe losses as the consequence of a contact with a numerically superior enemy force. During the attack, eleven soldiers from 101 Battalion and attached personnel were killed in action and sixty-five soldiers were wounded. The report mentioned that some of the vehicles were destroyed when they were hit by concentrated fire from Soviet RPG-7 anti-tank rockets and Yugoslavian M-60 HEAT STRIM and M-60-P Pencil STRIM rifle grenades. No further details were provided concerning this incident. From the scant information which is available, it appears that the losses were suffered as the result of an ambush. The casualties provided early indications of the vulnerability of the Romeo Mike teams of 101 Battalion to enemy attacks and did not bode well for subsequent operations to come, such as the battle at Indungo, which followed later during the same year, in which an even greater number of soldiers of 101 Battalion were killed.

On 25 December 1986, 32 Battalion was deployed in the Cassumbi area, to the east of Cassinga. The battalion was under the command of Major Peter

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<sup>66</sup>P Nortje, *The Terrible Ones, A Complete History of 32 Battalion*, Volume 2, p. 971.

<sup>67</sup>A trustworthy source, [https://www.facebook.com/pg/sadfroh/posts/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/sadfroh/posts/?ref=page_internal), 8 January 1987, contains details of an incident on 8 January which concerned 101 Battalion, which resulted in the death of Lance Corporal E Tomsen and the awarding of a Honoris Crux medal to Lance Corporal A L Roux; According to another report, by I Uys, *Cross of Honor*, p. 120, the incident did not take place 8 January, but rather on 28 February, in the Mupa area. The date which Uys cites, 28 February, is probably incorrect.

Waugh. He assumed command of a force of 325 men who had been drawn from the B, D, and F Companies of the battalion, which was supported by seventeen vehicles.

After a fairly lengthy period of achieving limited success in locating and destroying SWAPO bases, the fortunes of the group changed when they discovered a SWAPO base at Cassumbi, which they attacked on 1 February, in an operation which was coded Operation Kakebeen. They systematically cleared the area, which had housed a SWAPO force of 120 men. They found the bodies of five SWAPO soldiers who had been killed during the fighting. Four soldiers from 32 Battalion were killed and seven more were wounded as a result of injuries which they had sustained, mainly from enemy mortars which had been fired at them.<sup>68</sup>

On 25 February, after the operation had been concluded, 32 Battalion established its tactical operations headquarters in the area to the north-west of Dova. There were further contacts with SWAPO soldiers on 12 March, 16 March, 21 March, and 2 April and the battalion suffered a few more casualties. It managed to occupy and gain control over the strategic towns of Mupa and Evale, which enabled UNITA to occupy them. The domination of the areas by the SADF and UNITA provided strategic advantages. The headquarters of FAPLA were located at its base in the large town of Ongiva. Its main access road runs from north of Cuvelai towards Ongiva. This route, which had been used to provide the base with much-needed supplies, was cut off by the SADF during Operation Kakebeen.

After 32 Battalion withdrew from the area after the operation had been completed on 12 April, the towns were soon re-occupied by FAPLA when it drove UNITA from the area. Consequently, the strategic advantage which the SADF and UNITA had enjoyed by preventing FAPLA from using the main road from the north as a supply line for their base at Ongiva was lost.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> P Nortje, *The Terrible Ones, A Complete History of 32 Battalion*, Volume 2, p. 971 to p. 982.

<sup>69</sup> P Nortje, *The Terrible Ones, A Complete History of 32 Battalion*, Volume 2, p. 971 to p. 982.

June saw more contacts with SWAPO. On 9 June, a force of 291 men of 32 Battalion under the command of Major Daan van der Merwe carried out a standoff mortar bombardment of a SWAPO target north of Evale in Operation Ratbraak. Once again, the force comprised soldiers from B, D, and F Companies, who were supported by their mortar group. Although the enemy fled the scene, the support group was ambushed by SWAPO. Six SADF soldiers were killed in action and six more were wounded. On 22 June, 32 Battalion again approached a SWAPO base, but discovered that it had already been deserted. UNITA was tasked with holding the area around Evale. On 17 July, all of the companies of 32 Battalion were evacuated from the central war theatre in southern Angola. They returned to their base at Buffalo, in the eastern part of the Kavango Region in South West Africa/Namibia. They were subsequently deployed in the eastern war theatre during the carrying out of Operation Modulêr, during which the largest and bloodiest battles of the entire war took place.<sup>70</sup>

In the build-up to Operation Firewood, the SADF conducted more Special Forces operations in September and early October, in other parts of southern Angola. On 17 September, during the carrying out of one of the operations, the railway line between Lubango and Namibe was sabotaged by a SADF Special Forces small team. The line was destroyed by the detonating of a landmine by a train. It was also reported that on 2 October, UNITA shot down two enemy MiG fighter aircraft and an enemy helicopter.<sup>71</sup>

During the run-up to the carrying out of Operation Firewood deep in central southern Angola at the end of October of 1987, a significant drawn-out battle was taking place at Cuito Cuanavale, in south-eastern Angola, at the source of the Lomba River, in areas between the towns of Mavinga and Cuito Cuanavale. Although the battle did not fall within the ambit of Operation Firewood, it is relevant to mention it briefly at this juncture.

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<sup>70</sup> P Nortje, *The Terrible Ones, A Complete History of 32 Battalion*, Volume 2, p. 971 - p. 982.

<sup>71</sup> File 14 / 12 / 83 to 31 / 3 / 89 101 Battalion, Department of Defence Archival Service.

The objective of FAPLA had been to attack a UNITA stronghold in the small town of Mavinga in south-eastern Angola. It was imperative for the SADF to prevent the attack from succeeding at all costs, as it was crucial to protect and not to lose the support of UNITA in the area. A force which comprised 3 000 SADF soldiers and was supported by a large UNITA guerrilla force halted the 47<sup>th</sup>, 59<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> Brigades of FAPLA, which were supported by Cuban soldiers in semi-conventional land battles. As a consequence, FAPLA and its Cuban allies were forced to retreat to their positions at Cuito Cuanavale, after the SADF and UNITA forces had begun offensive operations against them, with the objectives of gaining a strategic advantage over FAPLA's forces and ultimately ending the Angolan Border War.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE PLANNING AND CARRYING OUT OF THE FIRST TWO PHASES OF THE BATTLE AT INDUNGO (OPERATION FIREWOOD), 30 SEPTEMBER TO 30 OCTOBER 1987

#### 1. The SADF Task Force for Operation Firewood

In the previous chapter, the researcher has endeavoured to provide relevant information concerning how the SADF went about eliminating SWAPO bases deep in central southern Angola. It is widely acknowledged that SWAPO had sought the protection which FAPLA bases provided in some of the larger towns of Angola. The SADF obtained information which revealed that the FAPLA bases were not the only locations at which SWAPO bases could be found. A vital base, which housed both the Central Area headquarters and various detachments, was situated in the remote area in which the village of Indungo is located. As it had done when it elected to carry out Operation Colosseum in 1986, the SADF planned to launch another attack on a SWAPO base in an initiative which was formalised as Operation Firewood, which culminated in the battle at Indungo on 31 October 1987.

The SADF was to field its best-trained military formations for Operation Firewood, namely, South African Special Forces units from its Reconnaissance Regiments (Recces), the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion, and companies from 101 Battalion. The men from 2 and 5 Reconnaissance Regiments who participated in the operation were individually selected, highly trained military operators. The Recces were undisputedly the finest soldiers which the SADF produced.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Recce Regiment consisted of five Commandos. The 51<sup>st</sup> Recce Commando, which was stationed at Ford Ref at Ondangwa, was trained to carry out pseudo-operations, by impersonating SWAPO soldiers in order to obtain information. The 52<sup>nd</sup> Recce Commando was the largest Commando and its members were trained to carry out large-scale attacks on SWAPO

targets. The members of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Recce Commando were trained mainly to carry out urban operations against enemy targets at locations such as Gaborone in Botswana and Lusaka in Zambia. 54<sup>th</sup> Recce Commando, whose ranks included names which were to become legendary, such as those of André 'Diedies' Diedericks and Koos Stadler, operated in teams of as small as two and not more than four members, behind enemy positions. The 55<sup>th</sup> Recce Commando was reserved for the training of new recruits.

The C and D Companies of 1 Parachute Battalion, which was colloquially known in the SADF as 'the Parabats', also participated in the operation. The battalion was an elite unit which consisted of a group of carefully selected paratroopers, who are sometimes also known as Airborne Soldiers. In addition, the force comprised four companies from 101 Battalion, which was generally referred to as the 'Ovambo' battalion, because its soldiers were recruited from the Ovambo region of South West Africa/Nambia and were often members of the same tribes as the SWAPO soldiers. The soldiers of 101 Battalion were conveyed to military operations in Casspir armoured troop carriers. The Casspir was specifically designed and built to cope with rough terrains and the types of treacherous conditions which were encountered in the area in which Operation Firewood was carried out. Although they could operate under extremely difficult conditions, even these extraordinary vehicles suffered breakdowns when they were pushed beyond their limits. There were numerous breakdowns en route to remote enemy locations, which was also to be the case for Casspirs travelling to the village of Indungo, as travelling extremely long distances often resulted in the capabilities of the vehicles being exceeded.

Since 1976, the SADF had been conducting cross-border operations inside of Angola regularly and almost continuously. Each year, the primary objective of the larger operations of the SADF was to search for and attack SWAPO targets and bases before infiltrations by SWAPO were due to commence at the end of each year. Many lessons were learnt from each operation. By 1987, the core of the soldiers of the SADF, perhaps with the exception of a few sections which had been formed from newly recruited soldiers, was

hardened, experienced, battle fit, and eager to undertake almost any challenge which might be placed before them. Consequently, it was surprising that casualties should be suffered on the scale which they were at the late stage of the war during which Operation Firewood was carried out.

Operation Firewood commenced on 30 September 1987, when the SADF units which were to participate in it were mustered at a military base at Oshivelo. Oshivelo was situated approximately 120 kilometres south of the border of South West Africa/Namibia and Angola and frequently served as a point for mustering Task Force units in preparation for operations against SWAPO. The units performed crucial rehearsals at Oshivelo and received their final training and instructions for the operations which they were about to carry out.

The Task Force for Operation Firewood was equipped with four Ratel armoured vehicles, each fitted with an 81-mm mortar pipe, a number of Casspir armoured vehicles, and Buffalo Mine Protected Vehicles. As it has been explained, during the carrying out of Operation Colosseum the previous year, the 51<sup>st</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup> Recce Commandos had been mounted on Casspir vehicles, which were fitted with single-barrel .50 Browning (12.7-mm) medium machine guns. Eight Casspir vehicles were specifically assigned to the two Commandos for the operations. They were supported by up to eight additional Casspirs, each of which was fitted with a .50 calibre Browning machine gun. The vehicles were able to provide immense firepower during an attack. The soldiers of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Recce Commando were mounted on the regular Buffalo vehicles, along with D company of 1 Parachute Battalion. The echelon of the Task Force was augmented by a variety of recovery and logistical vehicles, which were loaded with provisions and supplies.

The 81-mm mortars which were mounted on the Ratels were not the weapons of choice for the operation, because they were not able to deliver intense firepower and they could not inflict sufficient damage on the enemy at the commencement of and during an attack. The preferred weapons would rather have been larger artillery pieces, such as the 140-mm G-2 Howitzer guns and

the greatly favoured 127-mm Multiple Rocket Launchers mounted on Unimog vehicles. Although Colonel Eddie Viljoen, the Senior Staff Officer Operations Officer at the military Sector 10 headquarters at Oshakati, who had formerly served as the commanding officer of 32 Battalion, had requested General Kat Liebenberg, the Chief of the South African Army at the time, to equip the Task Force with the Multiple Rocket Launchers for the operation, the request was refused.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, the Task Force was obliged to attempt to make do with the 81-mm mortars which were supplied.

Another difficulty arose as a consequence of deploying the Casspir armoured vehicles and the Buffalo Mine Protected Vehicles during the same operation,<sup>73</sup> as the designs and specifications of the two types of vehicles were significantly different. Owing to the narrower axle length of the Buffalos, they encountered a great deal of difficulty in attempting to follow in the tracks which the Casspirs had left behind. The difficulties arose owing to the deep tracks which the Casspirs imprinted in the soft sand in Angola. The Buffalos also had smaller engines than the Casspirs, which made it difficult for them to keep up with the faster Casspirs. The Buffalos also made slower progress while driving through densely wooded areas, owing to their limited bush-breaking ability,<sup>74</sup> by comparison with that of the better suited Casspirs. It needs to be emphasised that operational planning should have taken adequate cognisance of the likelihood of such an eventuality. Like any other similar large army of its kind at the time, the SADF did not standardise its range of different vehicles with respect to axle size.

## **2. Official planning for Operation Firewood**

On 20 April 1987, the general officer commanding the South African forces in South West Africa/Namibia, Brigadier F. J. (Frank) Bestbier, received an order from the SADF Army Headquarters in Pretoria in a document which bore the title 'Op Instruksie 36/87', which read 'The General Officer Commanding the

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<sup>72</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 where reference was made to paragraph 5.b and 5.f of the Appendix to the report on the reflection of Operation Firewood.

<sup>73</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetraging - OP Firewood B, p. A-5, Department of Defence Archival Service, 1 December 1987.

<sup>74</sup> The general term used in Afrikaans: "bosbreekvermoë".

SA forces: South-West Africa should inflict maximum losses upon the PLAN forces in the central and eastern areas, south of the Cuvango, during the period 1 November 1987 to 30 November 1987'.<sup>75</sup>

Although Brigadier Bestbier had been tasked with overseeing the successful completion of the operation, the order does not indicate who was to assume command of the operation at Indungo. From information which the researcher gleaned from subsequent reports, it became evident that Colonel James Hill, the commanding officer of 5 Reconnaissance Regiment, was the officer in command of Operation Firewood.<sup>76</sup> He was to perform in this role because he had also been the commanding officer during the carrying out of Operation Colosseum the previous year and because he was the most senior officer of the Recces. As he drafted the report of the status of the Task Force immediately after the operation ended, it would be logical to assume that the responsibility for doing so would have fallen to the commander of the operation.

The instructions for the carrying out of the operation included a number of directives and some restrictions, which can be summarised as follows:

- The operation was to serve as an area operation with the South African Army as its executing authority.
- PLAN was to be considered as the primary target and engagement with FAPLA should be avoided at all costs.
- Offensive air support was to be provided for the operation.
- The forces which were to participate in the operation were to consist of BG Special Forces, provided by BG SA Army Forces SWA, from its own sources. No additional support was to be provided by the Republic of South Africa.
- Security and the element of surprise were to be taken into consideration during the planning and execution of the operation.

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<sup>75</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, , Nabetrugting - OP Firewood B, Department of Defence Archival Service, 1 December 1987, p.1, translated from the Afrikaans text.

<sup>76</sup> L Bothma, *Anderkant Cuito Cuanavale, 'n Reisverhaal van die Grensoorlog*, Episode 94's interview with Sergeant Major Koos Moorcroft.

- Passive air defence regulations were to be strictly adhered to.
- The safety of the members of the SADF who participated in the operation and their equipment was to receive high priority and to serve as a criterion against which the successful conclusion of the operation was to be measured. Significant risks were to be limited.
- The psychological outcome with respect to increasing the morale of the SADF forces and degrading that of the enemy forces was to be accorded high priority during the carrying out of the operation.
- It was imperative that the operation should be coordinated with other operations in the fifth military sector, under the auspices of Operation Luxor, whose execution was to be effected no later than 31 October 1987.

It was planned that Operation Firewood was to be carried out by adhering to the procedures which were prescribed for the following phases:<sup>77</sup>

Phase 1 was to be the preparatory phase, which was to be carried out from 30 September until 26 October 1987. During this period, the force was to assemble at Oshivelo, where it was to prepare and receive training for the operation.

At the commencement of Phase 2, the SADF Task Force was to infiltrate into Angola from 26 October to 1 November 1987, through Rundu Headquarters, which was situated in Sector 20. The force was to cross the Angolan border and follow the northern route, which runs parallel to the Cavango River. On their arrival at the headquarters of the Tactical Operations frontline base of the SADF at Ionde, the members of the Task Force were to be provided with logistical support, fuel, and other provisions.

During Phase 3, which was also known as Operation Firewood A,<sup>78</sup> the Task Force was to locate the Central Area Headquarters of PLAN and

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<sup>77</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, Department of Defence Archival Service, 1 December 1987.

attack the target, thereby carrying out Operation Firewood B, before commencing area operations from 8 November to 30 November 1987.

During Phase 4, the force was to demobilise from 30 November to 4 December 1987, after withdrawing from Angolan territory.

### **3. The first phase of Operation Firewood: 30 September to 26 October 1987**

The members of the Task Force for Operation Firewood were given clear instructions for assembling for the task ahead. From this point, the sequence of events is narrated by following the progress of one of the members of the Task Force, namely, Corporal Chris Snyman. He received instructions at his home in Pretoria on 14 October to return immediately to 101 Battalion in South West Africa/Namibia, as an event of great significance was about to take place. He boarded a military C-130 Hercules transport aircraft which departed from Waterkloof Air Force base in Pretoria and flew to Grootfontein, a large military base inside of South West Africa/Namibia. Snyman was met by Lieutenant Johan D'Assonville, who assisted him to load equipment which consisted of seven .50 calibre Browning machine gun mountings onto the aircraft. The mountings were destined for 101 Battalion, to be fitted to Casspirs. After a brief stopover, the aircraft departed for the Sector 10 main air force base at Ondangwa. Snyman accompanied Colonel Sydie van der Spuy Sr., a veteran of the Special Forces.<sup>79</sup>

On his arrival at the 101 Battalion base on 15 October, Snyman was informed that his unit was due to deploy Casspirs to participate in military operations. He questioned the viability of the decision, as their trusted Casspirs were being deployed elsewhere at the time, with the 902 and 903 companies of 101 Battalion, which were participating in Operation Modulêr in south-east Angola. Snyman's company was subsequently assigned other Casspirs from the 901 and 904 companies of 101 Battalion. The base of 101 Battalion was a scene

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<sup>78</sup> According to a report, which has no heading, this segment of the phase was carried out from 19 July to 30 September.

<sup>79</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

of feverish activity, with soldiers making haste to load supplies onto their support vehicles, to which they often referred as 'Kwêvoëls'. The supplies consisted of bags of potatoes and onions and boxes which contained milk. After nightfall, they feasted on a stew which is known in South Africa as 'potjiekos' and consumed copious quantities of liquor into the late hours.<sup>80</sup>

On 16 October, the Tiffies of the unit, which is the traditional term in the SADF for mechanics, performed last-minute repairs on the vehicles which needed attention. At approximately 15:00, the unit departed for Oshivelo, which was to be the assembly area for the Task Force for Operation Firewood. After their arrival at Oshivelo on 17 October, the members of the unit cleaned their equipment and performed much-needed maintenance on their vehicles. They also carried out rehearsals and training in a deserted area to the south of Miershoop, after being joined by soldiers from the Reconnaissance Regiments and the Parachute Battalion.

D Company of 1 Parachute Battalion was stationed at Ford Ref, a military base which was situated at the Ondangwa Air Force Base in Sector 10.<sup>81</sup> The unit awaited instructions for being deployed for military operations inside of Angola. Each of the operations was expected to have a duration of in the region of three months. Senior officers of the Recces approached Captain Johan Kruys, a Parachute Battalion company commander, to request the support of his company during the coming military operation. Captain Kruys is the son of Colonel George Kruys, who served as the SADF commander at an earlier battle which took place at Ebo during Operation Savannah in 1975. He selected soldiers from his unit to form four platoons, which were also referred to as 'Valke'.<sup>82</sup> Two 'Valke' would serve under the command of Kruys and two would serve under that of Frik Wiese.<sup>83</sup>

At Oshivelo the unit took part in military rehearsals and training with the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiments and 101 Battalion, in preparation for

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<sup>80</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Translated in English as: "Falcons".

<sup>83</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

Operation Firewood. The soldiers who were under the command of Kruys were mounted on Buffalo Mine Protected Vehicles, while the 51<sup>st</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup> Recce Commandos of the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment had access to the more advanced Casspir armoured vehicles, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment also travelled in Buffalo mine protected vehicles. The convoy was also to be accompanied by four Ratel armoured vehicles from the 61 Mechanised Battalion, each fitted with an 81-mm mortar pipe.

The Task Force for Operation Firewood continued with its rehearsals until 23 October, when a general operational briefing was provided by the commander of the operation, Colonel James Hill. Now the operation was ready to commence. On Saturday, 25 October at 06:00, the Task Force began its journey. It travelled along the long tar road which traverses Grootfontein towards Rundu, a small town which is situated on the banks of the Okavango River on the border with Angola, in the north-eastern part of South West Africa/Namibia. The convoy arrived at Rundu late that night and on Sunday 26 October, the exact date on which preparation for the operation was to be completed, final repairs were made to the call-sign 3C Casspir vehicle, which was being plagued by engine trouble. The soldiers enjoyed a quick bath in the Okavango River, which is renowned for its large population of crocodiles. Early on Monday, 27 October, while the soldiers were filling the water tanks of their vehicles with water which they pumped from a small river, some large crocodiles approached them. Koos Maritz quickly fired a burst of rounds from his .50 calibre Browning machine gun, which was mounted on his Casspir, killing some of the crocodiles.<sup>84</sup>

Colonel Hill was accompanied by Commandant A.J. (Koos) Verwey, the commander of the 51<sup>st</sup> Recce Commando.<sup>85</sup> When the attack on Indungo commenced, Lieutenant Willie de Koker of the 51<sup>st</sup> Recce Commando assumed command at the main target, by moving with the attacking force,

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<sup>84</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, to which reference is made in paragraph 8 of Appendix 1 in the the annexures, in the report which provides a reflection upon Operation Firewood. According to Snyman, the report confirms that Jaco Kruger conferred with Koos Verwey and not James Hill concerning the direction of their movements for the attack on the enemy target. It supports the contention of Kruger, who reported to Verwey, that Verwey had a senior role in the carrying out of Operation Firewood, a perception which Roelofse shares.

while Commandant Verwey remained at the stationary command vehicle behind. Lieutenant Christo Roelofse accompanied De Koker and served as the second-in-command of the attacking force for the attack on the Northern Front Headquarters of SWAPO.<sup>86</sup> Sergeant Major James Teitge also joined this team for the attack.

In addition, the following high-ranking officers and non-commissioned officers served as the operational commanders of the various formations of Operation Firewood:<sup>87</sup>

Major D. Rykaart was in command of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Recce Commando, while Sergeant Major Jan Meyer, with Shawn Gullen, and Eddy Edwards, who were in charge of their respective Casspirs, comprised the leader group. Although the researcher was able to establish that Major S.N. du Toit was in command of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Recce Commando, it was not possible to establish the names of the men who had held positions of leadership in the leader group of the Commando. Major Jan van der Merwe was in command of the Citizen Force 2 Reconnaissance Regiment, while Sergeant Major J.J. (Koos) Moorcroft was in charge of the echelon of 5 Reconnaissance Regiment.

Major J. Kruger was the commanding officer of 101 Battalion and of the four companies from the battalion which participated in Operation Firewood, while Sergeant Major C. Schutte was in charge of the echelon of the battalion. Major R. Berry was the commander of the Medical Element, while Captain P. Pienaar was the commander of the contingent from 1 Parachute Battalion and Major P. Carrolan led the Mobile Air Operations Team (MAOT) of the SAAF.

The Task Force for Operation Firewood consisted of the following components:<sup>88</sup>

- The 51<sup>st</sup> Commando of the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment: 53 men.
- The 52<sup>nd</sup> Commando of the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment: 20 men.
- The 53<sup>rd</sup> Commando of the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment: 22 men.

<sup>86</sup> K Stadler, *Recce, Kleinspan-operasies agter vyandelike linies*, p. 265.

<sup>87</sup> An unidentified report which does not have a heading.

<sup>88</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

- Elements from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment: 19 men.
- C and D Companies of 1 Parachute Battalion: 141 men.
- Elements from 7<sup>th</sup> South African Infantry Battalion: 17 men.
- The Engineering Corps (referred to as the Sappers): 34 men.
- The Medical Corps: 33 men.
- Electronic Warfare: 28 men.
- The Headquarters Element: 19 men, which consisted of twelve from the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment, three from 101 Battalion, and four from the main HQ.
- The Echelon elements: 70 men.
- The South African Air Force: 5 men.
- 101 Battalion: 605 men.
- UNITA advisors: 5 members.

The numbers of soldiers who were drawn from the 53<sup>rd</sup> Recce Commando were small, as they were already engaged in preparing for another vital operation, to demolish the bridge at the strategic crossing of the Cuito River at Cuito Cuanavale, as an objective of operation Modulêr, in the eastern war theatre.

The Medical Task Team 10 for Operation Firewood consisted of eight medical officers, a pharmacist, and twenty-three medical ordinances. They travelled with four Rinkhals Ambulances. The medical officers who participated in the operation were Major A.R. Barry, Captain J. de Beer, Lieutenant P.A. Human, Lieutenant H.A.S. Collane, Lieutenant C. de Hoog, Second Lieutenant J.P. Pirie, Lieutenant Booyesen, Lieutenant Scholtz, and Lieutenant J. Pretorius.<sup>89</sup>

The commanders of the medical teams with call sign J11 were two medical officers, Captain J. de Beer and Lieutenant H.A.S. Collane. Together with two medical ordinances, the medical teams followed immediately behind the vehicles of the Recces during the attack on Indungo.<sup>90</sup> The vehicle of Lieutenant J.P. Pirie, a medical officer with call sign J12, remained behind at

<sup>89</sup> Annexure At MED 10/UG/309/1 OP FIREWOOD GED February 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>90</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service; An unidentified report which does not carry a heading.

londe, serving in a rear support role in the operation.<sup>91</sup> Call sign J13 comprised Major A.R. Barry, the medical commander, Lieutenant P.A. Human, a medical officer, and Lieutenant J. Pretorius, the pharmacist who was assigned to the medical unit. Immediately before the commencement of the operation, call sign J13 was tasked with establishing a medical post 3 kilometres west of Indungo.<sup>92</sup>

Three medical officers were deployed with the Reconnaissance Regiment and three more with 101 Battalion, the latter three travelling with a Rinkhals Ambulance. Four more medical officers and four medical ordinances performed stand-by duty at a field hospital which had been established for the operation at londe.<sup>93</sup>

The Task Force comprised a total of 1 071 soldiers, which is generally considered to constitute a battalion-strength force.<sup>94</sup>

Although it is stated in a report of the Medical Services of the SADF that the Task Force which carried out the attack at Indungo comprised 750 men,<sup>95</sup> according to other documentation which the researcher consulted the combined contingent of Recces, paratroopers, and soldiers from 101 Battalion who comprised the main force for the attack amounted to 860 men.<sup>96</sup> Consequently, it can be concluded that even if the numbers for support staff for the operation are disregarded, the figure of 750 men which is cited in the report is incorrect.

The vehicles which were made available for the operation consisted of eighty-one from the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment, more than double that of the vehicles which had been deployed during the carrying out of Operation

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<sup>91</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service; An unidentified report which does not carry a heading.

<sup>92</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service; An unidentified report which does not carry a heading.

<sup>93</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service; An unidentified report which does not carry a heading.

<sup>94</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>95</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service; An unidentified report which does not carry a heading.

<sup>96</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

Colosseum the previous year, and seventy-eight from 101 Battalion, or one hundred and fifty-nine vehicles in total.<sup>97</sup>

The term 'Task Force' in military terminology denotes a large force which is made up of a number of smaller units. For Operation Firewood the Task Force consisted of infantry companies or parts of infantry companies from at least four different units, the 51<sup>st</sup>, 52<sup>nd</sup>, and 53<sup>rd</sup> Commandos of the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment, the C and D Companies of 1 Parachute Battalion, an under-strength company from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment and four companies from 101 Battalion. Although 101 Battalion had been mustered as call sign 901 and call sign 904, to avoid any potential confusion, the call signs of the battalion were changed and it functioned as call signs 10, 20, 30, 40 during the carrying out of Operation Firewood. Each of the four call signs was generally referred to as a Reaction Force call sign or team. As the companies of 101 Battalion had been recently formed, they consisted mainly of new SADF recruits. Consequently, Operation Firewood would provide their maiden engagement with the enemy.<sup>98</sup>

Each of the four companies of 101 Battalion was divided into four teams and each team was equipped with four Casspirs. As the command Casspir brought the total for each company to seventeen, the four companies of 101 Battalion fielded sixty-eight Casspirs altogether. In addition, the Casspirs were augmented by a further ten vehicles, which accords with the figure of seventy-eight vehicles for 101 Battalion which was cited earlier.

The 51<sup>st</sup> Recce Commando was equipped with four of its own Casspirs, which were fitted with .50 Browning single-barrel machine guns, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Recce Commando had four Casspirs, the 53<sup>rd</sup> Commando also had Casspirs, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment of the Citizen Force travelled in three Buffalos, and D company of the Parachute Battalion in eight Buffalos. The map in Figure 2 of the map and illustrations annexure depicts the movements and

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<sup>97</sup> According to an unidentified report that does not have a heading there were 153 vehicles.

<sup>98</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

positions of the force as it moved towards the target area at Indungo.<sup>99</sup> The Task Force accomplished Phase 1 of the operation according to plan.

#### **4. The second phase of Operation Firewood: 26 October to 30 October 1987**

During phase 2 of Operation Firewood, the SADF Task Force was to cross the border, infiltrate into Angola, and move towards the Tactical Operations Headquarters of the SADF at Ionde during the period from 26 October to 1 November 1987. C Company of 1 Parachute Battalion joined the Task Force late, while it was heading towards Angola. The company did not participate in the training exercises at Oshivelo earlier and neither was it a component of the main force which attacked the SWAPO base at Indungo. Instead, its role was to serve as a reserve force which would be deployed at the main target area only if the need should arise owing to unforeseen circumstances.<sup>100</sup>

On 26 October, the Task Force travelled northwards and established a temporary base after dark. The vehicles formed up in a protective box formation for the overnight stay. Some soldiers constructed makeshift beds inside their Casspirs with the aid of metal trunks, on which they placed loose seat covers from the vehicles. During a sudden downpour they erected shelters using plastic body bags. Although their intended purpose was to enclose the remains of soldiers who had died in combat, in this instance the bags provided the soldiers with much-needed protection from the rain.<sup>101</sup>

On 27 October, the Task Force proceeded in a north-westerly direction. Progress was slow, as the convoy suffered another breakdown as a consequence of a broken centre bolt and damaged leaf springs in the call sign 22C Casspir. After making the most basic repairs to the vehicle and resuming the journey, the Task Force arrived at its first destination, the Tactical

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<sup>99</sup> See map at Fig. 2.

<sup>100</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, Company Commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>101</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

Operations Headquarters at Ionde during the night of 27 October.<sup>102</sup> This temporary base housed the helicopter administrative area (HAA) and served as the main headquarters from which joint military operations inside of Angola were coordinated by high-ranking officers of the South African Army and Air Force during 1987. After the Task Force had made repairs to its vehicles and carried out appropriate maintenance, a final order group was held to provide it with final operational instructions.<sup>103</sup>

Snyman was surprised to meet an old school friend, Renier Kruger, who was serving with the Parachute Battalion. Kruger told him that his unit had experienced great difficulty travelling over the uneven terrain and through dense bush in Buffalo Mine Protected Vehicles. The Task Force was not permitted to travel on any roads, owing to the high risk of encountering enemy landmines. Consequently, the soldiers found the travelling exhausting, as the swinging motion of their vehicles on uneven surfaces made the experience an extremely unpleasant one.<sup>104</sup>

## **5. Air attacks by the SAAF and Operation Daffodil**

Air attacks were essential to the success of Operation Firewood. The South African Air Force (SAAF) operated from its bases at Grootfontein, Ondangwa,<sup>105</sup> and Rundu, at which the Mirage III, Mirage F1-AZ, Mirage F1-CZ, Impala Mk I, and Impala Mk II jet aircraft were refuelled.<sup>106</sup> The Mirage supersonic jet fighters could reach speeds in excess of Mach 1.30 and were armed with up to seventy-two 68-mm rockets, two 30-mm cannons, and two AS-30 missiles. The Mirage III could carry bomb loads of up to 1 800 kilograms, while the Mirage F1-AZ and F1-CZ could carry up to 3 650 kilograms. The bomb loads included a range of bombs which could be dropped on targets, including the MK 81 (120 kilogram) bombs, air-bursting MK 82 (250 kilogram) bombs, 460-kilogram bombs and as many as eight

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<sup>102</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.a, Department of Defence Archival Service, 1 December 1987.

<sup>103</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>104</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>105</sup> D Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle: The South African Air Force during the Border War*, p. 78.

<sup>106</sup> D Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle: The South African Air Force during the Border War*, p. 78.

1 000-pound bombs.<sup>107</sup>

The Impala strike aircraft were configured to carry an array of weapons, which included four rocket pods with six 68-mm rockets in each, two 30-mm cannons with 180 rounds. They could also carry bomb loads of up to 1 814 kilograms, which could be made up of 120-kilogram, 250-kilogram, 460-kilogram bombs, or Alpha bombs. The weaponry of the fighters had the potential to inflict significant damage upon enemy targets.<sup>108</sup> The aircraft were deployed to perform air strikes upon enemy positions once specific targets had been identified.<sup>109</sup>

Before the attack at Indungo by the Task Force which carried out Operation Firewood on 31 October, another relatively small SADF Task Force, which was known as Task Force Daffodil, had been conducting an operation at reference point 9060WN, in the region of Cuvelai, to the south of Indungo.<sup>110</sup> The aim of Task Force Daffodil was to deflect the attention of SWAPO away from the approaching Operation Firewood Task Force, which was moving towards Indungo.<sup>111</sup> Task Force Daffodil was comprised of members of 101 Battalion and 10 Armoured Squadron, who comprised its Tactical Operations Headquarters, infantry soldiers mounted on armoured vehicles, a 140-mm artillery battery, along with its echelon and protection elements.

At 17:30 on 27 October, four SAAF Impala strike aircraft departed from their airbase at Ondangwa and launched air-to-ground attacks on various targets to the east of the position which the Task Force held, in the Mupa region of the central part of southern Angola.<sup>112</sup> At 07:05 on 28 October, four Impalas launched another air-to-ground attack upon Mupa. The SADF intercepted radio messages from FAPLA, which revealed that twenty-two enemy soldiers

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<sup>107</sup> D Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle: The South African Air Force during the Border War*, p. 177.

<sup>108</sup> D Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle: The South African Air Force during the Border War*, p. 117.

<sup>109</sup> D Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle: The South African Air Force during the Border War*, p. 88.

<sup>110</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.v, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>111</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.v, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>112</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.v, Department of Defence Archival Services.

had been killed in the attack upon its base in the area.<sup>113</sup> These strikes were followed by more air strikes by the SAAF and artillery bombardments by SADF ground forces in the Mupa area.

On 28 October, a fierce SADF artillery bombardment south of Indungo in the Mupa area was followed by the approach of SADF infantry towards enemy targets from the west. The advance was met with enemy fire from B-10 recoilless guns and 82-mm mortars. At 14:50, a member of Task Force Daffodil was killed and three men were wounded by friendly fire. The casualties resulted from the inaccuracy of the 140-mm artillery guns and some instances of misdirected fire. At 19:00, the Task Force reported that enemy fire had died down, whereupon the force vacated the Mupa area.

On 30 October, from 12:26 to 13:16 and again from 15:45 to 17:03, eight Impala aircraft carried out more air strikes, this time on a large FAPLA base which was situated at the town of Cuvelai, south of Indungo. The strikes were followed by an artillery bombardment by Task Force Daffodil of selected enemy targets at Cuvelai with 140-mm artillery guns, from 19:30 to 20:00. Impalas flying over the target area provided aerial cover during the artillery bombardment.<sup>114</sup>

Intercepted FAPLA radio messages revealed that twenty-seven FAPLA soldiers had been wounded during the attack. FAPLA responded with a counter-offensive, by firing its 80-mm artillery guns at SADF positions to the east of Cuvelai. At 23:40, further intercepted FAPLA radio messages requested support and the deployment of tanks which were positioned at Techamutete.<sup>115</sup>

The diversionary attacks by Task Force Daffodil on enemy positions near Mupa served no real purpose, other than to draw the attention of the enemy

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<sup>113</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.v, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>114</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.v, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>115</sup> File INL / 404 / 09 November 1987, Department of Defence Archival Service.

away from the advance of the main SADF Task Force as it made its way towards the Indungo area, in order to carry out Operation Firewood. Preoccupying the enemy with the presence of the SADF force at Mupa created an opportunity for a surprise attack by the main Task Force on Indungo, further to the north of Mupa and Cuvelai. While the events at Mupa and Cuvelai were unfolding, the Task Force to carry out Operation Firewood arrived at Ionde on 27 and 28 October, thereby completing Phase 2 of the operation, according to plan.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE THIRD PHASE OF OPERATION FIREWOOD: THE ATTACK ON 31 OCTOBER 1987

#### 1. Towards the target

The principal objective of the third phase of Operation Firewood was to locate and attack the Central Area Headquarters of PLAN on 31 October 1987. The attack on the target was to be followed by carrying out area operations during the period from 8 November to 30 November. The Task Force departed from londe on 29 October and moved into an area which was known as Chilombo,<sup>116</sup> which is situated 53 kilometres south-east of Techamutete. While the convoy was en route to Chilombo, a Buffalo flipped over as a consequence of driver error. Although available information concerning this incident appears to be scant, it is probable that members of the Technical Services Corps who participated in the operation and were equipped with spare parts and tools would have repaired the vehicle.

The Task Force received intercepted FAPLA radio messages which alerted the Eastern Area Front Post and Eastern Area Headquarters of SWAPO that South African forces were entering southern Angola from their position in Oshivelo.<sup>117</sup> From this message it is evident that SWAPO received information from its various sources, which provided PLAN soldiers with early warnings concerning the movements of SADF forces. Although the objectives of the SADF inside of Angola remained a closely guarded secret, the report which provided accurate insights into the capabilities of SWAPO with respect to intelligence did not appear to have been of any real concern to the SADF, as the Task Force continued to carry out Operation Firewood in accordance with instructions which it had received.

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<sup>116</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.iii, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>117</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.iii, Department of Defence Archival Services.

It was crucial to conduct a comprehensive reconnaissance of the area before the attack. Accordingly, the Recces located the SWAPO base at Indungo and obtained relevant information regarding its layout and the strength of the SWAPO force which it housed, in order to assist in the planning of the attack.<sup>118</sup> Phase Three of the operation had also entailed the conducting of a reconnaissance operation by two highly trained Recce operators, who were known only as Pele and Santos, before the operation received final approval. Both men were former SWAPO fighters and high ranking members of the organisation. They had first-hand information and extensive experience of the methods which SWAPO employed. Detailed information concerning how and when the two men conducted their reconnaissance could not be obtained, as their operation had been kept strictly secret and sources close to them were reluctant to go into detail.

It appears to be entirely plausible that they were able to complete their reconnaissance in time to supply information to the commanders of the operation, as it is unlikely that the final attack of the operation would have been approved without adequate intelligence concerning the location and strength of the SWAPO base at the time. While the Recce operators were searching for the SWAPO base, some medical practitioners who were members of the team from the 7 Medical Battalion of the SADF were in the area, rendering assistance to UNITA soldiers. They also visited local villages to provide medical treatment to the inhabitants and to gather valuable information.

A recce operator who accompanied them was known by the nickname Piet 'Vaattjie'. Although the Kwêvoël 100 vehicle in which they were travelling detonated a landmine prior to an ambush by enemy soldiers, Piet 'Vaattjie' was able to drive through the ambush before the vehicle could be destroyed. Lieutenant Christo Roelofse, who was twenty-three years old at the time, and his fellow operator, who went by the name of Neto, were members of a small

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<sup>118</sup> P Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969-1994*, p. 537.

team of Recces from the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment. They were assigned the task of locating and recovering Piet 'Vaattjie' and his team.

After Roelofse had successfully completed the task, the team received further orders to reconnoitre the area south of the Indungo base from 19 July to 30 September 1987, before the commencement of the first phase of Operation Firewood. The purpose of the assignment was to establish whether there were any significant obstacles on the access route to Indungo, such as enemy minefields, which the convoys of the approaching force would need to avoid. By this time the location of the SWAPO base was known.

Roelofse's small team attempted to make radio contact with their base from their position near the main approach road to Indungo. The rechargeable battery of the Syncal 30 radio which the team used had gone flat, as a consequence of reduced capacity from building up a memory over time owing to frequent recharging. As a result, the team was unable to make its scheduled radio contact with its base. The standard emergency drill was to return to the previous location which had been reported to the headquarters and await support from a Telstar aircraft, which was to fly over the last known location. Consequently, the area in which the team had been carrying out the operation, south of the Indungo base and adjacent to the main road, was the most likely location for finding the team. The procedure which the team was required to follow under these circumstances was to make contact with the aircraft by means of its small VHF radio set, which was capable of transmitting a signal over a short distance, in order to arrange an appropriate location for its evacuation. It was not considered by the SADF to be safe for units to operate without having access to standard channels of communication or without making scheduled radio reports.

Going against all standard procedures, the team which Roelofse led continued with its reconnaissance. The members of the aircraft crew which had been tasked with the rescue operation were unable to locate the team, as it was not at the location at which it could be expected to be found. Disturbing news was then received from intercepted enemy radio messages that two

South African soldiers had been captured. The discovery resulted in a great deal of tension at the highest levels of command, as preparations were made for briefing the political leadership of the Republic of South Africa concerning the diplomatic fallout which was sure to ensue, once the capture of the soldiers inside of Angola had been made public.

The Recces deployed several small teams to carry out a search and rescue mission, to recover Roelofse and his small team. By following their tracks, the teams successfully located the missing Recces, who were subsequently returned to base. The reports of FAPLA concerning two captured South African soldiers proved to be inaccurate, as no members of the SADF had been held hostage.

Roelofse revealed that his team had located a large village<sup>119</sup> which was situated west of the main road near Indungo. He confirmed that it did not house SWAPO soldiers, as the soldiers were stationed within the safety of their base at Indungo and would not have countenanced the risks which being discovered in an unprotected local village would have entailed. The team had been able to make relevant observations and vital information concerning the location and size of the SWAPO base at Indungo.<sup>120</sup> The information, in conjunction with aerial photographs of the area, provided the basis for formulating plans for the carrying out of Operation Firewood. It was decided that the optimal course of action would entail the Task Force approaching the target from the north-west.<sup>121</sup> As will be discussed in due course, the plan according to which the target was to be approached from the north-west was not followed, as the Task Force attacked the target from the west.

After the reconnaissance of the area had been completed by 30 September and all the relevant information had been passed on to the higher command, permission was given to proceed with the operation. The Recce teams joined

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<sup>119</sup> See Fig. 4.

<sup>120</sup> See Fig. 3.

<sup>121</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b, Department of Defence Archival Service, 1 December 1987; Interview with Christo Roelofse, company commander of 5 Reconnaissance Regiment on 26 October 2018.

the main force during the final training exercises, which took place from 17 to 25 October.

Before the day on which the attack was to be carried out, Koos Maritz of 101 Battalion had interrogated a captured enemy soldier. With a little customary persuasion, the SWAPO soldier provided additional valuable information concerning the target area.<sup>122</sup> It was confirmed that both the Eastern Area Headquarters and the Central Area Headquarters were situated east of the Indungo-Kuvango road and that both headquarters housed troops who had returned after receiving training at the Tobias Hanyeko Training Centre at Lubango, which was also known as the THTC.<sup>123</sup>

From aerial photographs which had been taken during the reconnaissance flights which the SAAF made over the area, additional signs of enemy movements were discovered.<sup>124</sup> The information which the two Recce teams, the SWAPO informer, and the aerial photographs had generated was cross-referenced and served to confirm that Operation Firewood should go ahead to locate and destroy SWAPO's base in the area. On 28 October, the leader group of the Task Force group, which consisted mainly of low-ranking and non-commissioned officers, was briefed by four members of the Recce teams which had reconnoitred the area. They constructed a makeshift sand model to resemble the target area. The final plans for the operation during which the attack was to take place were taking shape.<sup>125</sup>

This sand model depicted the main features of the target area according to scale. Its features included the main road which ran from north to south, the T-junction at which the access road towards the enemy base at Indungo joined the main road, the direction of the access road towards the base, and the size of the target area, all according to scale. It also depicted the large

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<sup>122</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.iv, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>123</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.iv, Department of Defence Archival Services; OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, (FIR/070/31OKT87), paragraph 7, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>124</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.iv, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>125</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

Vinjamba Shona or marsh, which lay to the south of the base. On the main road there were at least four low water bridges, where the road crossed dry riverbeds and small ditches. At the commencement of the attack, a stopper group of 101 Battalion was to be positioned at the fourth bridge, which crossed a river, the Linque Oshona, to preclude any interference by elements of the enemy which endeavoured to reach the base from the main road from the north while the operation was proceeding.<sup>126</sup>

As the base at Indungo was surrounded by shonas on three sides and the access road from the west, the decision to attack it from the west, by following the access road, was not a difficult one to make. The direction for the attack by the main Task Force was indicated on the sand model, as were the areas which vehicles of 101 Battalion were to patrol to the north, east, and west of Indungo and the directions in which they were to travel. In addition, the model included representations of the locations of the temporary operational headquarters and the medical post to the west of Indungo and also of the area in which the vehicles of the echelon were to remain, at a safe distance further away to their south. The sand model served as a very basic representation of the area and to orientate the different companies which comprised the Task Force with respect to the tasks which they were to perform. It also enabled the companies to become aware of where they could expect other companies to be positioned, in order to minimise the risk of confusion and responding to friendly fire.

During the night of 29 October, the convoy of the Task Force proceeded under the cover of darkness, to avoid detection from the MiG-21 fighter aircraft of the enemy. Had it travelled during the day, its presence could easily have been detected, owing to the large dust cloud which its movement raised. The vehicles of call signs 29E, 22E, and 22C of 101 Battalion suffered additional technical failures owing to broken central nuts and suspension, which again made their progress very arduous.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> L J Bothma, *Anderkant Cuito – 'n Reisverhaal van die Grensoorlog*; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 where reference was made to paragraph 4.b of the Appendix to the report on the reflection of Operation Firewood.

<sup>127</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 26 March 2019.

After dark, on 30 October, the Task Force arrived at an area which was approximately one hours' drive from the target area at Indungo. Captain Koos Maritz surprised everyone in his circle by producing a bottle of Red Heart Jamaican rum, which was duly enjoyed by all who partook of it. Lieutenant Hentie Marais, who was a member of the call sign 10 group of 101 Battalion, had sustained an injury to an eye from a branch. The injury was to have great significance for Marais, as he was replaced by Lieutenant Botes as the commander of call sign 10, who was subsequently killed during the attack.

That night the men passed the time as they had done many times before. On Radio Orion, a popular South African radio station, Esmé Euvrard played familiar songs, which were dedicated to 'all those brave men in brown serving somewhere on the border'. Snyman wondered how she would have responded had she known where he was.<sup>128</sup>

## **2. D-day for the attack at Indungo**

Under the command of Colonel James Hill, the vehicles of the Task Force formed up at 02:00 on 31 October,<sup>129</sup> the day of the attack, to begin its journey to the target, the Central Area Headquarters of SWAPO at Indungo.<sup>130</sup> The vehicles did not travel in one group, as the individual battalions formed separate convoys. The convoy of the Recces formed up at the front, followed by that of 101 Battalion. At this point the Task Force comprised approximately 150 vehicles.<sup>131</sup> The complement of vehicles was made up of the four Casspirs each of the 51<sup>st</sup>, 52<sup>nd</sup>, and 53<sup>rd</sup> Recce Commandos, a logistical vehicle which was assigned to each Commando, the Buffalos of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment and those of the C and D Companies of the 1<sup>st</sup>

<sup>128</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>129</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.b, Department of Defence Archival Services; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, in which reference was made to paragraph 3.a of the Appendix to the report on the reflection upon Operation Firewood. In addition, according to paragraphs 5, 8, and 15, Commandant Jaco Kruger made a request to Commandant Koos Verwey to proceed with the main force to the main SWAPO target, when the Recces went past their convoy to take up their formations before the attack started.

<sup>130</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, (FIR/070/31OKT87), Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>131</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

Parachute Battalion, the Casspirs of the four Companies of 101 Battalion, command vehicles, and in the region of sixty logistical vehicles.

Several of the soldiers of Snyman's unit were suffering from severe stomach cramps, for which the South African military slang term was 'jippo guts'. A medical report confirmed a number of soldiers had suffered from gastroenteritis, as a consequence of drinking dirty water. As there was no time to stop, the rear doors of vehicles were opened to allow affected soldiers to relieve themselves while the convoy was in motion, much to the amusement of all but the hapless sufferers.<sup>132</sup>

The convoy of 101 Battalion travelled alongside the road which led northwards, bypassing the village of Indungo, in order to avoid being noticed by any of its inhabitants. As it can be seen on any standard area map, the small village which is known as Indungo is situated further south of the location of the enemy base, to which the records of the SADF also refer as Indungo. To avoid any potential confusion, for the purposes of this study the location of the enemy base is referred to as the enemy base at Indungo or simply Indungo, although the target area was to the north of the village of Indungo.

The convoy entered the main road at a position approximately 3.5 kilometres north of the village of Indungo, in order to accelerate the advance of the Task Force.<sup>133</sup> According to another report, the position was 2.5 kilometres north of the village of Indungo.<sup>134</sup> Although the convoy of 101 Battalion endeavoured to make up for lost time, it again came to a standstill, owing to the failure of the suspension of the call sign 22C Casspir in which Snyman had been travelling. A decision was made not to replace the broken part, as doing so would have entailed the loss of still more valuable time. Instead, the vehicle

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<sup>132</sup> Annexure At MED 10/UG/309/1 OP FIREWOOD GED February 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>133</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services; OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 3, Department of Defence Archival Services; FIK /070/31Okt87, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>134</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.i, Department of Defence Archival Service, 1 December 1987; H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services; OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 3, Department of Defence Archival Services.

was to remain at the rear of the convoy, with the logistical vehicles. Snyman was relieved from performing specific duties with the vehicles under the command of call sign 20, such as patrolling the area and participating in the activities of the stopper groups on the outside perimeter of the target area.<sup>135</sup>

As the convoy of 101 Battalion encountered difficulties of its own as a consequence of frequent breakdowns, a decision was made, at a point which does not appear to have been recorded, to alter the course which it would follow to approach the target area.<sup>136</sup> Travelling over vast distances over uneven terrain had made for slow progress.<sup>137</sup>

During its advance towards the target, the convoy of 101 Battalion, having caught up with the vehicles of the Recces and the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute battalion, overtook them. The decision to do so was an error of judgement, as a specific instruction had been issued that the Recces and the paratroopers should spearhead the attack.<sup>138</sup>

It is possible that the officers of 101 Battalion may have had other plans, as they were accustomed to performing a unique role as a Reaction Force. The style of attacking which the Reaction Forces had developed was predicated upon approaching enemy positions at great speed, in order to overrun them. It is possible that their customary operational style of operation could have encouraged them to consider taking over the roles which had been assigned to the Recces and the paratroopers for the operation, or that for a brief moment they had believed that their revised strategy could have been viable. Irrespective of the motivations which may have underlain the unilateral move, the convoys of the Recces and the paratroopers were soon to overtake that of 101 Battalion and resume leading the attacking force.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 when reference was made to paragraph 6 of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report on the reflection of Operation Firewood.

<sup>136</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services; OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 2, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>137</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraphs 2 and 14.b, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>138</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 where reference was made to paragraph 1 of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report on the reflection of Operation Firewood.

<sup>139</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 when reference was made to paragraph 6 of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report on the reflection of Operation Firewood.

By this stage the Task Force was making greatly improved progress on the main road, heading north towards the target area at Indungo. At daybreak it moved past a small hill where an abandoned Soviet-manufactured GAZ truck was standing next to the road. As the Casspir in which Snyman was travelling drove past the vehicle, an object on its front seat caught his eye. He was surprised to find that it was an unopened case of Angolan Cuca beer. He stopped, picked up the case of beer, and carefully secured his precious booty between his feet in the Casspir.<sup>140</sup>

At a junction which joins the access road towards Indungo with the Indungo-Kuvango main road from an easterly direction, the main contingent of the convoys of the Task Force turned right, in order to approach Indungo from the west. Some of the men in the convoy of 101 Battalion reported that they had seen a large rural village, which comprised in the region of 200 traditional huts, to their west.<sup>141</sup> The village, which was subsequently identified as Ilaula, had not been reported to Snyman's unit after the reconnaissance of the area, although it should have been plainly visible in aerial photographs of the area. This crucial information should have been included in the briefing which the soldiers received along with their orders for carrying out the operation. From a distance, the members of the Task Force were able to make out a number of SWAPO soldiers leaving the village in great haste. It appeared to be plausible that the soldiers could have been accommodated in the village while they performed training exercises in the area.<sup>142</sup>

Snyman's convoy left the road once more and entered a large shona marsh. The convoy formed up in an extended line formation. A few Casspirs became bogged down in the muddy conditions and were unable to make any further progress. However, the powerful Wolf recovery vehicles came to their rescue. The rescue operation required a considerable amount of ingenuity. The first

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<sup>140</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 when reference was made to paragraph 3 of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report on the reflection of Operation Firewood. Here reference is made to an Urral.

<sup>141</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 3, Department of Defence Archival Services; See Fig 4.

<sup>142</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 when reference was made to paragraph 4 of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report on the reflection of Operation Firewood; according to paragraph 4.d thereof, call sign 10 who was supported by call sign 20 entered the village, where 2 enemy soldiers were killed; according to paragraph 6 thereof, call sign 30 was then tasked to perform a search through the village, at reference point 3874XP, which appears to have been a second enemy base with an extensive trench system which were south and west of the base.

attempt entailed linking the first of the vehicles which had become mired in the mud to a second, by means of a kinetic recovery rope, which, in turn, was linked to a third vehicle, and then to a Wolf recovery vehicle, in a single line. The first unsuccessful attempt to free the vehicles from the shona marsh was followed by a second, into which the recovery team drafted a second Wolf recovery vehicle, which facilitated the releasing of all of the vehicles from the marsh.<sup>143</sup>

The commander of 101 Battalion was Commandant J.K. (Jaco) Kruger and the regimental sergeant major was Sergeant Major Chris Schutte. Each company from 101 Battalion was comprised of four teams, each of which consisted of four Casspirs. The company commanders of 101 Battalion during the carrying out of Operation Firewood were call sign 10, Captain Koos Maritz, call sign 20, Lieutenant Nicolaas Jacobus André (Seis) Prinsloo HC, call sign 30, Captain Radies Rademeyer, who was to be killed during the operation, and call sign 40, Captains Daffie Conradie and Izak van Niekerk.

The various known call signs of which the individual companies were comprised were as follows:

Captain Koos Maritz (call sign 10) commanded four platoons, whose call signs were: call sign 11: Lieutenant Pierre (Blikkies) Blignaut, accompanied by Sapper Casper Steyn, who was to be killed during the operation, call sign 11C: Corporal Hannes (Bronkies) Bronkhorst, call sign 12, for which the platoon leader is unknown, call sign 13: Second Lieutenant Marco (Velle) Smit, accompanied by Captain Koos Maritz, who was to be wounded, and call sign 14: Corporal Frans Badenhorst,<sup>144</sup> who was also to be wounded.

The call signs of the four platoons which Lieutenant Prinsloo (call sign 20) commanded included call signs 21, 21A, 21B, and 22, Second Lieutenant

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<sup>143</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>144</sup> I Uys, *Cross of Honor*, p. 134 and p. 135, where the name of Corporal Frans Frederick is included in a heading and in the text. Although the author maintains that he served in 101 Battalion, Frederick is unknown to some of the veterans of the battalion. The book also appears to contain another error, in that the caption which accompanies a photograph of a group of people identifies one of its members as Cronje. As the person who is incorrectly identified as Cronje is another member of 32 Battalion, it is evident that no photographs which include either Frederick or Cronje appear in the book.

Johan (Das) D'Assonville, who at one point accompanied the mortar group, call sign 22C, Corporal Chris Snyman, who spent some of the operation with Major Obie Oberholzer, Sergeant Major Chris Schutte, and Corporal Hallies Holtzhausen, and call sign 23. Corporal Justin Theunissen HC.

Captain Rademeyer (call sign 30) was accompanied by Lieutenant Cobbold of the Recces. Both men were to be killed during the carrying out of the operation. Associated call signs included call signs 31 and 32, Second Lieutenant David Anthony Collin Bock, call sign 33, Second Lieutenant Anton Botes, yet another fatality of the operation, who was accompanied by Lance Corporal Blignaut, the operational medical orderly, and call sign 33C, Corporal Trevor (Tandekas) Stander HC. Before the commencement of the attack at Indungo, Botes assumed the roles of the injured Lieutenant Hentie Marais of call sign 10.

With Captains Van Niekerk and Conradie (call sign 40) were call signs 41, 42, and 43.

The affiliations of the following members of the Task Force could not be verified: Sergeant Lappies Labuschagne of call sign 903 in 101 Battalion, Corporal Olivier, who was to be killed during the operation, Corporal Abrahams, Lieutenant Zon (Whisky) Meyer, Daniël Lodewikus (Wikus) Cronjé HC, the intelligence non-commissioned officer of the Recces who assumed command of the men who had been under the wounded Captain Koos Maritz, John Lombard, and Pine Pienaar. Some of these soldiers may have been affiliated to other units, including the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion or the Recces.<sup>145</sup>

The tactical operational headquarters of the Task Force and the medical post of Medical Task Team 10 were established in an area which was 3.5 kilometres west of the target, a safe distance which would not expose them to mortar fire from SWAPO.<sup>146</sup> The tactical operational headquarters were manned by the command Casspir of Colonel James Hill and (Skillie) Van der

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<sup>145</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>146</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

Walt of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion and C Company of the battalion, who served in reserve to protect the headquarters of the vehicles of the Task Force echelon.<sup>147</sup> High frequency radio communication was established in order to communicate with the headquarters of the SADF in South West Africa/Namibia, at which the General Officer Command Special Forces, Brigadier Joop Joubert, assisted by Commandant Jab Swart, was stationed at either the Sector 10 Headquarters at Oshakati or at Ford Ref, the base of the Recces at Ondangwa.

Some Casspirs had members of the South African Corps of Signals (SACS) on board, whose function was engaging in electronic warfare (EO) in the area. They were equipped with advanced radio equipment, which enabled them to jam the radio frequencies of the enemy and to disrupt their communication networks. They also monitored the radio networks of the enemy for information concerning imminent threats which enemy soldiers who could be dispatched from nearby positions could pose and to provide early warnings of enemy reports which were intercepted concerning possible aerial attacks by MiG fighter aircraft.

Approximately 30 kilometres to the south of the target area, a helicopter administration area (HAA) had been established, to enable Puma helicopters to have access to a safe landing zone. The helicopters flew from this location to evacuate wounded soldiers and the remains of soldiers who had been killed and transport them to either the field hospital at Ionde or the main hospital at Ondangwa.

The platoons of 101 Battalion arrived at their designated positions which had been determined in order to encircle the target area. The platoons of call sign 10 patrolled the areas which had been assigned to them, north of the target on an axis which ran from east to west. The platoons of call sign 30 were joined by Captain Koos Maritz and patrolled an area to the east of the target, on an axis which ran from north to south, while the platoons of call sign 40

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<sup>147</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

patrolled areas on the road to the west of the target area, on an axis which ran from north to south. They were optimally positioned to serve as cut-off groups, which are also referred to as stopper groups. Should the SWAPO soldiers attempt to flee the target area after the main force of the Task Force had attacked, 101 Battalion would ambush their retreat, ably assisted by a significant tactical advantage over the dispersed soldiers, which would enable the soldiers of the battalion to maximise the damage which they inflicted by eliminating fleeing SWAPO forces.<sup>148</sup>

A small group from 101 Battalion was ordered to remain behind the main attacking force. It was to enter the fray only in the event of significant reverses during the attack, such as a platoon of the Task Force becoming trapped as a consequence of an unexpected engagement with SWAPO forces or should the SWAPO forces demonstrate superior strength. As it was explained earlier, the main Task Force which spearheaded the attack on the main target at Indungo was made up of members of the Special Forces units or Recces and the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion.

### **3. H-hour for the attack at Indungo**

According to the plans for the attack, the ground forces were to be in their positions immediately after the air strike by the SAAF had been completed. The air strike was to commence at H-hour, at 10:00 on 31 October.<sup>149</sup> The SAAF was to launch the air strike only after it had been ordered to do so. For reasons which will be explained, H-hour for the air strike was postponed to 11:45, 1 hour and 45 minutes later than had been planned. The H-hour for the air strike was subsequently adjusted once more, to 12:00.<sup>150</sup>

The SADF was blessed with near perfect weather conditions on the day of the attack, with bright sunshine, open skies, and no cloud cover. At the finally

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<sup>148</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 6 of Appendix 1 to the annexure which contains the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood. While call sign 40 (which was actually call sign 42) moved west of the main road, the soldiers turned in an easterly direction and soon reached an area in which there were enemy soldiers present (which may have been a smaller third enemy base), at reference point 3274XP, to the north-east of the main target area.

<sup>149</sup> Unidentified report without a heading.

<sup>150</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, (FIR/070/31OKT87), Department of Defence Archival Services.

determined H-hour, the fighter jets dropped their loads of bombs on their targets and immediately left the area. They softened the target area with a range of different weapons, thereby inflicting a great deal of shock upon the troops who manned the positions of the enemy. Consequently, the enemy forces were at their most vulnerable during the immediate aftermath of the air strike.<sup>151</sup>

According to an official military report, at 12:00 on 31 October eight Mirage F1-AZ fighters, each armed with six MK-81 Bombs, commenced their strike on the Central Area Headquarters of SWAPO at Indungo.<sup>152</sup> The aerial bombardment was followed by three more sorties by two Impala strike aircraft, which remained above the SADF force at the target area for a further twenty minutes. Four Mirage F1-AZ fighters also provided overhead combat support when the ground attack commenced.<sup>153</sup> Having air cover during the start of the attack by the ground forces provided the Task Force with a measure of protection, should it come under heavy enemy fire from the medium 14.5-mm and 23-mm anti-aircraft guns which were expected to be deployed against the ground forces of the SADF. The additional protection which the fighters provided proved not to be necessary. The bombardment of the target area had been sufficiently effective to sow confusion and panic among the enemy, of which the Task Force could take full advantage during its attack.

Although a further air-to-ground bombardment was carried out by the SAAF on the target area at the Central Area Headquarters of SWAPO,<sup>154</sup> soon afterwards the SAAF was forced to cancel any further air-to-ground strikes on the target area. The aircraft returned to base because their turning time was limited, owing to the vast distances which they needed to cover in order to ensure their safe return.<sup>155</sup> Snyman watched the SAAF Mirage fighters as they performed multiple airstrikes on the target area.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.iii, Department of Defence Archival Service, 1 December 1987; Recollection by Wickus Cronjé.

<sup>152</sup> OPS/361/31 Oct 87 310640B, Department of Defence Archival Service; File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.iii, Department of Defence Archival Service, 1 December 1987.

<sup>153</sup> File OPS / 359 / 30 October 1987, Department of Defence Archival Service.

<sup>154</sup> File OPS / 359 / 30 October 1987, Department of Defence Archival Service.

<sup>155</sup> File OPS / 359 / 30 October 1987, Department of Defence Archival Service.

<sup>156</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

Although official reports maintain that there was no SAAF presence at the target area after 12:30, reports from men who had served under Captain Kruys are significantly at variance with the contention. They maintained that they had noticed some SAAF Impalas approaching their position, ostensibly to neutralise the anticipated threat of the greatly feared 14.5-mm medium anti-aircraft machine guns, which could wreak havoc among ground forces if they were fired horizontally. The guns, which were positioned to the left of the companies of the 5<sup>th</sup> Recce regiment, began firing at them once they had advanced sufficiently close to the target to be within their reach.

By contrast, Roelofse refutes the suggestions of the men who had served under Kruys that SAAF aircraft remained in the area after the air strike had been carried out. He maintains that the aircraft also did not provide additional air support to the ground forces by firing upon enemy positions, although the support could have been needed. Although firing upon selected enemy targets was common practice during air strikes, Roelofse is adamant that he saw no aircraft overhead when the ground forces made their first contact with the enemy at the target area and that the aircraft did not use their on-board weapons to fire on targets on the ground.<sup>157</sup>

The account of Roelofse is certainly a credible one, as only he and Kruys were qualified front aerial controllers (FAC), who are able to direct attacks from the air. The validity of Roelofse's account is further underscored by the reason for which they left the target area: they had no holding time, owing to the remoteness of the target from their bases, to which they needed to return before they ran out of fuel.

The plan for the attack by the main Task Force entailed the force attacking with tremendous force while chaos still prevailed at the target area in the aftermath of the air strike. Unfortunately for the members of the Task Force, there was a significant disparity between the battle plan and its execution. The

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<sup>157</sup> Personal interview with Christo Roelofse, company commander of 5 Reconnaissance Regiment on 26 October 2018.

air strike had already been completed before the Task Force was able to take up its designated attacking positions. Consequently, the SWAPO force was allowed time to recover and to regroup before the Task Force could engage it and the infantry riflemen were again exposed to the defences of the enemy.

Before the ground forces of the Task Force formed up, one of the most capricious series of events during the carrying out of the operation occurred. At approximately 12:00, the Casspir of Sergeant Major James Teitge reached a predetermined point. As one of the company commanders of the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment, he was to be positioned in his Casspir in the middle of the attacking formation when it formed up to commence the attack on the target. He had been assigned this role because he was the highest ranked and most senior soldier among the Recces who participated in the operation in terms of years of service.

To his dismay, he discovered that his vehicle was accompanied by only three Casspirs, as the remainder of the convoy had been temporarily delayed, for reasons of which he was unaware at the time. As a consequence, a considerable distance had opened up between the Casspir which followed his vehicle and the remainder of the convoy. His predicament was further compounded when he discovered that the curly cord which had been attached to the radio by means of which he monitored the internal network had been broken, thereby depriving him of all means of radio communication with his force. Although the absence of the remainder of the Task Force caused him great alarm, he was later to learn the reasons for the delay became clear from reports which he received subsequently.<sup>158</sup>

According to one account of these events which took place after 12:28 on the gravel access road which leads towards the target area, the events commenced when a section of the Task Force convoy came to an unscheduled standstill. This unanticipated stop resulted in its becoming separated from the Casspir of Teitge and the three others which accompanied

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<sup>158</sup> Recollection of Teitge.

it. This segment of the convoy subsequently encountered a number of SWAPO soldiers travelling from the opposite direction in a Soviet-manufactured URAL vehicle, which was carrying a load of supplies in the form of maize meal.<sup>159</sup> The vehicle had arrived from the north on the main road. At the junction with the gravel road which took an easterly direction towards the base at the target area, as the driver of the URAL was about to turn left towards his base, a driver of a vehicle in the convoy of the Task Force signalled by means of its indicator light that he should join their convoy. Totally unaware that the convoy consisted of SADF vehicles, the driver fell in with the line of vehicles and continued to drive with the SADF convoy for a while. When the occupants of the URAL caught sight of the flashes and smoke from the exploding bombs which had been dropped by the SAAF aircraft on their base, they realised they had made a potentially fatal mistake, panicked, and opened fire with small arms at the Casspirs in front of them. The Casspir of Koos Verwey responded to their fire. After a brief exchange of fire from small and medium arms, the SWAPO vehicle, with its occupants inside, became engulfed in flames as a result of the fire from the members of the SADF Task Force. While these events played out, this part of the convoy lost some valuable time, which resulted in it arriving late at the point at which the Casspir of Teitge had stopped.

These events are also covered in another official military report, although the account is somewhat different, as it describes three SWAPO soldiers having escaped unscathed after a short firefight had broken out.<sup>160</sup> Another official military report describes a similar incident, which took place later at 12:55, in which two SWAPO soldiers were killed when their URAL vehicle was hit by the accurate fire of the Task Force.<sup>161</sup>

To make up for the time which had been lost, the section of the Task Force rushed towards the assembly area at which all of the vehicles which were to comprise the main Task Force were to arrive to form up for the attack. With

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<sup>159</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.b.iv, Department of Defence Archival Services; OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 3, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>160</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 3, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>161</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.vi, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

the main road at their backs, they formed up in an extended line in a north-south direction, in order to launch an eastward attack.

The predetermined point at which the Casspir of Teitge stopped was intended to serve as a reference point for an imaginary axle line along which the vehicles of the Task Force were to move in a spread-out line formation towards the target area. The 51<sup>st</sup> Recce Commando of the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment formed up on the left flank of the advancing force, to the left of the Casspir of Teitge, while the 52<sup>nd</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> Recce Commandos and D Company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion, together with the men from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment, formed up in an extended line to his right. The movement had been rehearsed repeatedly, to ensure that all vehicles were properly aligned and faced towards the target area.<sup>162</sup>

Although the plan had the makings of a well-coordinated attack which could deliver the desired tremendous force, it was to unravel in practice.

The vehicles formed up in a specific order, in readiness for the imminent attack. The 51<sup>st</sup> Recce Commando made use of its own four Casspirs, which were armed with .50 (12.7-mm) Browning single-barrel machine guns. The vehicles were respectively under the command of Roelofse, who was second-in-command of the 51<sup>st</sup> Recce Commando and travelled with Willie de Koker, the overall commander of the Commando, Sergeant Major James Teitge in the middle Casspir, and Sergeant Major Jan Meyer. To their right were the four Casspirs of 52<sup>nd</sup> Recce Commando, which were respectively under the command of three higher ranking soldiers, namely Duncan Rykaart, Shawn Gullen, and Eddy Edwards. To their right was the 53<sup>rd</sup> Recce Commando, the names of whose leader group are not known. To their right were the Buffalo vehicles of Major Jan van der Merwe and the Citizen Force detachment from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment, whose members travelled in three Buffalos. On the far right flank were Lieutenant Johan Kruys and Frik Wiese,

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<sup>162</sup> Recollection of Teitge.

with their eight Buffalos which carried soldiers from D Company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion.

Kruys confirmed that all of the vehicles of the Task Force took up their positions in their formation, with his company being positioned in the middle of the right flank of the advancing force. Also with D Company were a few members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment, while the bulk of the company from the regiment took up a position on the right side of the formation. According to Kruys, the vehicles moved towards the target in a diagonal line, rather than the vertical line which Roelofse describes, from a westerly to an easterly direction, while all the infantry from D Company remained in their Buffalos.<sup>163</sup>

The vehicle of Kruys was the leading vehicle of the formation in which the remainder of the company from the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion approached the target. His group was also made up of Shaun Cappie, Greg Ashton, and Major Jan van der Merwe. The Casspirs of the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment, which had formed up in the formation to his left, made better progress towards the target area, while for the Buffalos the going was more arduous.<sup>164</sup>

It became difficult for the vehicles of the Task Force to maintain their positions in a straight line as they advanced towards the target, owing to the dense bush and thick undergrowth which restricted visibility and made navigation towards the target almost impossible. As the drivers of the Buffalos were forced to perform wide circular movements to avoid running into some of the larger trees, they lost their fixed positions in the extended line. As a consequence, some of the vehicles in which members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion travelled found their way into the formations of those of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Recce regiment. On their left, the progress of the faster Casspirs of the 5<sup>th</sup> Recce regiment was not impeded by the same difficulties. They proceeded to the front, thereby also leaving their fixed positions in the extended line. As many of the vehicles of the Task Force had encountered great difficulty in

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<sup>163</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>164</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

negotiating the dense bush, it is quite evident by hindsight that the rehearsals for the advance towards the target should have been carried out under similar conditions during the training for the operation. Their platoon leaders should also have coordinated the movements of their vehicles by issuing clear instructions over their radio networks to report instances in which vehicles had broken the line.<sup>165</sup>

The chaos which resulted from the lack of an adequately unified approach to the target precluded the possibility of ensuring that the entire force was in position as had been planned and ready to commence with a properly coordinated onslaught. Instead, sections were obliged to operate almost as individual units in the attack. A case in point can be provided by the vehicles which transported the members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion, which had made good progress in their approach. Kruys explained that although the paratroopers had not initially encountered a great deal of resistance in the form of enemy fire, they unexpectedly attracted the first severe bursts of fire from the enemy positions. All hell broke loose subsequently, as the men under Kruys and the enemy exchanged heavy fire with a range of weapons and rockets were exploding everywhere. The air was immediately filled with smoke and clouds of dust engulfed the men of the Task Force during the fighting. One of the vehicles reversed to avoid a direct hit from enemy fire, driving over a paratrooper, who is recorded as Gert, who sustained a broken pelvis in the accident.<sup>166</sup>

The advancing vehicles then reached an open area which had been cleared of vegetation. To his great consternation, Kruys discovered that the area had been cleared for the purpose of providing SWAPO soldiers with highly visible targets at which they could fire. It came as a still greater shock to discover that SWAPO had B-10 recoilless 122-mm single-rocket guns which were mounted on tripod stands which were fitted with small iron wheels. Although they were used mainly to play supporting roles in anti-tank activities,<sup>167</sup> the SWAPO soldiers were able to make effective use of them by scoring direct

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<sup>165</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>166</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>167</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

hits on the approaching vehicles of the Task Force. Kruys was also surprised to find that female SWAPO soldiers were operating some of the B-10 recoilless guns which were firing on them. He immediately drew the attention of the driver of his Buffalo to the imminent threat which the enemy fire posed, by tapping him on the head to point out the positions of the B-10s to him, thereby escaping certain death when some rockets narrowly missed their vehicles.

Roelofse, who had been with the 51<sup>st</sup> Reconnaissance Commando, continued the narrative by providing his account of the events which unfolded on the left flank of the Task Force during the attack. The vehicles of the Commando had proceeded towards the target area according to plan, making contact with the enemy force when their Casspirs drew fire from the enemy positions. The Commando immediately returned concentrated fire from its main medium machine guns, which were fitted onto the turrets of their Casspirs. Some of the soldiers who travelled with the Casspirs and Buffalos disembarked from their vehicles.

SADF soldiers wore light chest webbing, which was sometimes also known as a combat jacket. In their small backpacks they carried sixteen extra magazines, from 100 to 200 rounds of ammunition, assorted additional munitions such as hand grenades, a few water bottles, and other personal items. Additional ammunition was available when it was needed from the rear sections of their Casspirs. Their small arms varied from PKMs to RPDs and AK-47 rifles. Some soldiers were issued with hand-held M-79 grenade launchers, a weapon which was also affectionately known in the somewhat vulgar slang of the SADF as the 'snotneus' or 'snotnose'. They were capable of inflicting severe damage upon the positions of the enemy by propelling grenades over considerable distances through the air before they exploded.<sup>168</sup>

Kruys observed a Buffalo from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Recce Commando to the rear of his position receiving a direct hit from a rocket which had been fired from a B-10

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<sup>168</sup> Personal interview with Christo Roelofse, company commander of 5 Reconnaissance Regiment on 26 October 2018.

recoilless gun. This vehicle was immediately knocked out. The soldiers who were still mounted on the vehicle had a lucky escape, as they all survived the explosion, although a few sustained multiple shrapnel wounds. According to another official military report, eight members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Recce Commando sustained shrapnel wounds while disembarking from their Buffalo when an enemy 82-mm mortar exploded next to their vehicle.<sup>169</sup> Although the injuries were officially attributed to a mortar bomb,<sup>170</sup> Kruys maintains that a rocket from a B-10 recoilless gun was a more likely culprit.<sup>171</sup>

The men under the command of Lieutenant Roelofse formed up in an organised line in front of their vehicles when an order which had been transmitted through the radio network was repeated loudly by the section leaders: 'All battle stations move forward!' The soldiers started moving in an extended line formation towards the target area with their weapons set to firing positions. For a short while, they were afforded protection by fire from the medium machine guns which were mounted on their vehicles. The covering fire which they provided suppressed the ability of enemy soldiers to respond effectively with their own fire, as they were obliged to seek protection by taking cover. Later, when the vehicles which were under the command of Roelofse reached an area in which they were concealed by dense bush, the Casspirs ceased their fire, as the gunners took care not to fire while the men in their unit crossed into their line of fire.

Right before the men under Roelofse the zigzag forms of the trenches in which the dreaded enemy would be hiding were clearly visible. When the soldiers who had remained in their vehicles saw the trenches, they became acutely aware that the vehicles would be exposed to heavy enemy fire. They also alighted from their vehicles and continued on foot, leaving the limited protection which their Casspirs could have provided behind. These Casspirs were no longer deployed to provide supporting fire, unlike the role which the

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<sup>169</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 6, Department of Defence Archival Services; File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.vii, Department of Defence Archival Services 1 December 1987.

<sup>170</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services; FIR/070/31OKT87, Department of Defence Archival Services, paragraph 5.

<sup>171</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

Ratels often performed in similar circumstances. The decision was made in response to intelligence concerning the presence of SWAPO medium anti-tank artillery in the area, which posed a great danger to the relatively soft-skinned Casspirs. Their men quickly headed forward in response to the orders of their section leaders, who were screaming at the tops of their voices, as they carefully carried out coordinated fire and movement drills. Their leapfrog movements entailed one line of soldiers continuing to fire while they were concealed behind tree trunks, while another line moved a few paces forward towards the target.

The men under Kruys also formed up in an extended line, to commence the attack on foot. They arrived at another large open area, which resembled a military parade ground, where they were again exposed to fierce enemy fire. As a consequence of a lack of cover of any sort, six paratroopers were killed instantly by enemy small arms fire.<sup>172</sup>

Meanwhile, casualties were beginning to arrive at the medical post of call sign J11 of the Medical Task Team 10. At 14:20, two injured soldiers with shrapnel wounds arrived from the front in Buffalos.<sup>173</sup> Twelve more wounded soldiers, who had sustained a variety of injuries owing to shrapnel wounds, bullet wounds, and burns, were to follow. The bodies of four dead soldiers were subsequently brought to the post. Call sign J11 commenced evacuating at least five soldiers who had sustained very serious injuries and transported them to the helicopter landing area which was situated at a safe location, some 30 kilometres from the target area.<sup>174</sup>

According to a military report, at 15:00 a detachment of the Task Force approached a network of enemy trenches to the south of the main target and encountered heavy resistance in the form of fire from SWAPO soldiers.<sup>175</sup> On one side, the SADF soldiers were able to identify the sound of at least one

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<sup>172</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service; An unidentified report which does not carry a heading.

<sup>173</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 11, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>174</sup> Annexure At MED 10/UG/309/1 OP FIREWOOD GED February 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>175</sup> FIR/070/31Okt87, Department of Defence Archival Services; H Leër/D OPS/309/1 OP Firewood B, 01 December 1987, at paragraph 6.v.viii.

12.7-mm enemy anti-aircraft gun, firing rapidly in their direction. The failure of the Mirage fighters to silence it was a grievous omission which severely compromised the ability of the Task Force to carry out its mission successfully.

The fierce resistance which the Task Force encountered from SWAPO resulted in one of the most bitterly contested battles many of the SADF soldiers could recall. Consequently, progress was exceedingly slow. When they encountered a trench, they broke into it, fired with their RPG-7s, and bombarded the enemy with more 60-mm mortars.

The men under Kruys then made their way past the parade ground of the SWAPO base, only to find before them a network of well-constructed enemy trenches.<sup>176</sup> According to Roelofse, SWAPO had prepared its defences in order to repulse an attack from the south of the base. SWAPO had anticipated that any imminent threat from a Task Force of the SADF would emanate from the south, rather than from the west, the direction from which the Task Force launched its attack.<sup>177</sup>

The men found it difficult to move along the SWAPO trenches in order to clear them of any enemy presence.<sup>178</sup> The trenches were differently constructed from those which they had used during their training exercises. They were fairly narrow and had sharp corners. As a consequence, the men under Kruys were exposed to shrapnel wounds from their own hand grenades as they exploded in the trenches.<sup>179</sup> The company managed to maintain its forward movement, which is crucial to the success of any combat operation. Although the men succeeded in clearing the enemy trenches by carrying out mopping-up drills, at 15:00 they encountered fierce resistance from enemy soldiers who were hiding inside trenches<sup>180</sup> to the south-west of the target area.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 6, Department of Defence Archival Services; FIR/070/31Okt87, Department of Defence Archival Services, paragraph 6.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with Christo Roelofse, company commander of 5 Reconnaissance Regiment on 26 October 2018.

<sup>178</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 6, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>179</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, p. A-1, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>180</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion 19 May 2019.

<sup>181</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 7, Department of Defence Archival Services; File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.vii, Department of Defence Archival

After the men under Roelofse had reached the enemy trenches, they also performed coordinated manoeuvres to clear them. Each time they entered a section of a trench, one of the men threw a hand grenade into it. After the explosion, two soldiers jumped into the trench, firing to their left and right. They found it extremely difficult to maintain forward momentum each time they encountered resistance from enemy soldiers who fired at them from inside of their trenches. Among the trenches there were also underground bunkers, which posed additional threats of enemy fire. Consequently, the bunkers also needed to be cleared before the soldiers could move on.

The Task Force soldiers experienced great difficulty in remaining in their formations and maintaining their forward momentum as a consequence of encountering additional pockets of enemy resistance. At this point of the operation, the 81-mm mortar group of the Task Force had been intended to commence firing their mortars according to a fire plan which entailed the bombs exploding at a safe distance in front of their advancing force. The infantry riflemen soon discovered, to their shock and disbelief, that the 81-mm mortars did not start firing in accordance with the plans for the operation. The setback was an enormous one, as they were in dire need of support from the mortars while they were under severe enemy fire. Their predicament will be discussed in more detail in due course.

After some fierce fighting, the soldiers were able to drive the enemy away, as the SWAPO soldiers fled the target area. Although the company which Kruys commanded made good use of small arms fire and explosions from hand grenades inside the trenches, its efforts were rewarded with additional fire from enemy small arms, machine guns, 60-mm and 82-mm mortar bombs, and rockets from shoulder-fired RPG-7 rocket launchers.<sup>182</sup>

During the evacuation of the soldiers who had been wounded, the positions of the company were marked with red smoke grenades to direct the evacuation

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Services, 1 December 1987; Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion 19 May 2019.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion 19 May 2019.

teams towards them. The smoke signals attracted a great deal of attention and, as a result, enemy soldiers intensified their fire upon the positions.<sup>183</sup> In an amusing anecdote, Kruys recounted how he had received complaints from some of his soldiers during the fighting. Attached to his battle jacket were two small VHF radios. He used an A-72 radio for ground-to-air communication with the Impala fighters and an A-53 radio to communicate with his platoon leaders to coordinate their advance. The two radios had protruding blade antennas, which were clearly visible above Kruys' head. As they were also visible to the enemy, they enabled the enemy to ascertain the position of his company and to concentrate fire upon it. His troops became irritated, angry, and no doubt more than a little anxious, which they expressed by pleading with him to move away from their position, in order to avoid receiving more enemy fire. Although he did not comply with their request, he nonetheless retracted the antennas of the radios.<sup>184</sup>

At 16:00 Kruys received two reports from higher command. The first revealed that two enemy MiG fighter jets and the second that an additional MiG, along with some enemy helicopters, had been detected in their immediate vicinity. The intelligence was more than sufficient to communicate that it was imperative for the Task Force to retreat, as it was under imminent threat of an aerial attack.<sup>185</sup>

The 51<sup>st</sup> Recce Commando made satisfactory progress and managed to advance through the target area with relative ease. At least one company reported that it did not encounter more resistance from enemy positions. The Recces were ordered to perform a final sweep of the area and to leave. After they had accomplished their mission, they withdrew from the area.<sup>186</sup>

At this stage of the operation it was established that the target at Indungo was the Central Area Headquarters. At 15:10 it was reported that other targets had

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<sup>183</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph p. A-1, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987; Interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion 19 May 2019.

<sup>184</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>185</sup> FIR/070/31 Okt 87, Department of Defence Archival Services, paragraph 8.

<sup>186</sup> Interview with Christo Roelofse, company commander of 5 Reconnaissance Regiment on 26 October 2018.

been identified. The Eastern Area Headquarters of SWAPO was found to be situated 5 kilometres to the north of the enemy base near Indungo, although only a small group of from 40 to 60 SWAPO soldiers had been at their base during the attack.<sup>187</sup> The Eastern Area Headquarters were obviously not the same as the Central Area Headquarters. According to sources<sup>188</sup> both headquarters were at the target area at the Indungo base. While the Eastern Area Headquarters housed only a small component of SWAPO soldiers, the Central Area Headquarters housed a much larger SWAPO force. Although the size of this force remains uncertain, it must have been substantial, in the light of the fierce resistance which the SWAPO troops put up during the long drawn-out battle at Indungo. In addition, the encounter yielded a correspondingly substantial body count of from 100 to 150 SWAPO soldiers, which were recorded by the various units of the Task Force, which will be covered in more detail in due course.

The larger component of the SWAPO force had been away, conducting military exercises at the Tobias Hanyeko Training Centre at Lubango.<sup>189</sup> According to Roelofse, large numbers of SWAPO soldiers began arriving at the Indungo base, only to come immediately under SADF fire, with severe casualties being inflicted.

#### **4. Near disaster from the air**

As it was explained earlier, several air-to-ground strikes by SAAF Mirage and the Impala strike aircraft upon the SWAPO base in order to soften the target and reduce resistance from SWAPO soldiers marked the commencement of the attack. Although the air strikes had been planned to provide the ground force with an advantage which would enable it to rout the enemy force with minimal casualties, it is evident from official military reports that in several

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<sup>187</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 7, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>188</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.iii, Department of Defence Archival Services; H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, paragraph 6.a.iv, Department of Defence Archival Services; FIR /070/31Okt87, paragraph 7, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>189</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

instances the objective was not accomplished in the manner which had been planned.<sup>190</sup>

The account of Captain Kruys includes an instance in which an SADF company was almost attacked by SAAF aircraft. Although Kruys maintained that his company had been exposed to friendly fire from SAAF Impalas while the 5<sup>th</sup> Recce Commando was clearing the SWAPO trenches, it seems probable that the incident occurred much earlier, before the SAAF aircraft left the target area. When Kruys overheard the request of Koos Verwey on the radio network for the SAAF to launch another air strike at the target area,<sup>191</sup> he immediately realised that the Task Force was by then already very close to the target area and he hurriedly cancelled the airstrike. It was a standard procedure for members of Task Forces to attach yellow dayglow strips to the backs of their helmets, to render them easily recognisable and to prevent SAAF pilots from confusing them with enemy soldiers. The pilot of an advancing Impala nearly fired its 30-mm guns at members of the Task Force, as, at the very last moment, he noticed the dayglow on the helmets of the soldiers who were standing next to the enemy trenches.<sup>192</sup>

Kruys also made an urgent call on his A-72 radio to the pilots of the Impalas to warn them of the presence of the Task Force and to enable them to avoid firing on their positions. As the aircraft had a limited amount of flying time over the target area owing to the location of their refuelling point some 400 kilometres away, they were unable to respond to further calls to fire at additional enemy targets.<sup>193</sup> After the completion of the operation, one of the Impala pilots at the Ondangwa Air Force Base abjectly apologised to Kruys for almost firing at his company.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 5, Department of Defence Archival Services; Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion 19 May 2019.

<sup>191</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 7, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>192</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>193</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>194</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

After 16:00, platoons from 101 Battalion and the Recce Commandos performed a final sweep of the enemy base.<sup>195</sup> The company which Kruys commanded joined up with the Recce groups of Pine Pienaar and Christo Roelofse. They moved in a westerly direction towards the main road, under the cover of dense bush. Kruys realised that he had lost track of time. By then it was already becoming late and nightfall was fast approaching. The soldiers boarded their Buffalos and withdrew from the area.<sup>196</sup>

As it was already dark when the paratroopers and Recces withdrew and some SWAPO trenches had not been cleared, call signs 12 and 13 of 101 Battalion were tasked with clearing them instead. The call signs duly formed up in an extended line and approached the target area.<sup>197</sup> At 16:40 SWAPO commenced with another heavy mortar bombardment, in a concerted effort to launch a counter-attack on the positions of 101 Battalion.<sup>198</sup> SWAPO did not follow up the mortar fire with a large-scale infantry attack, although an opportunity to launch an attack on the weary retreating Task Force had certainly presented itself. Perhaps the onset of darkness was perceived to make the launching of a new offensive an imprudent option.<sup>199</sup>

## **5. The injuries sustained by the Ratel 81-mm mortar team**

As it has been explained, before the attack by the Task Force commenced, SAAF Mirage and Impala strike aircraft bombarded the SWAPO base by carrying out several air-to-ground strikes, in order to soften the target and reduce the likelihood of resistance from the SWAPO soldiers at the base. The advantage which the air strikes were intended to afford the ground force was to be capitalised upon by the commencement of a bombardment of the base

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<sup>195</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 8, Department of Defence Archival Services; File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.x, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>196</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>197</sup> H Leer/D SEIN/UG/309/1 OP Firewood B, 01 December 1987, at paragraph 6.b.x; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to the appendix which contains the second map and to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood. Reference was also made to paragraph 15 of appendix 1, the annexure which contains the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood. According to one account, the Recces requested call signs 10 and 20 from 101 Battalion to perform a sweep of the main target area, as they were by that time already running low on ammunition.

<sup>198</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 8, Department of Defence Archival Services; File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.xi, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>199</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 9, Department of Defence Archival Services.

by 81-mm mortar teams in Ratels, which failed to materialise.<sup>200</sup> Although the reasons were not evident at the time, the events which resulted in the abortive mortar attack have already been touched upon in the overall narrative pertaining to the operation.

To recapitulate, soon after the commencement of the attack on the SWAPO base near Indungo, according to an official military report, the first two injured soldiers arrived at 11:55 from the front at the medical station. The men were members of one of the mortar teams.<sup>201</sup> Both sustained injuries from shrapnel wounds.<sup>202</sup> Another official military report places the injuring of two SADF soldiers from an 81-mm Ratel mortar team at 12:55,<sup>203</sup> as a consequence of the misfiring of a mortar bomb which had been fired by the mortar group of the Task Force, which subsequently exploded on top of a Ratel armoured vehicle. The report also reveals that the incident had been caused by the incorrect setting of the charge for the detonation mechanism, which resulted in the faulty firing of the mortar. The members of the mortar team had incorrectly removed both the supercharge and the extra charge while firing the mortar. The Ratel caught fire as a result of the explosion, which resulted in the soldiers who manned it sustaining injuries from burns.<sup>204</sup> The report does not provide a sufficiently accurate or comprehensive account of the events which unfolded at the position which the mortar group occupied. A more plausible account of the incident was provided by one of the two soldiers who was injured.

Jaco Steenkamp, an infantry soldier and a member of the mortar group, described how his Ratel caught fire after the firing of a mortar bomb. The members of the mortar team in his Ratel elected to remove some charges to adjust their firing range. Instead of following correct procedures for disposing of the discarded charges, which were small bags filled with explosives, they

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<sup>200</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruijs, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion

<sup>201</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service; An unidentified report which does not carry a heading.

<sup>202</sup> Annexure At MED 10/UG/309/1 OP FIREWOOD GED February 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services; OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 3, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>203</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.vi, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>204</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

left them lying on the floor of the Ratel, alongside the mortar pipe. Consequently, the injuries did not result from the misfiring of a detonation mechanism, but rather from human error.<sup>205</sup> The charges on the floor caught fire and these burnt profusely. Steenkamp sustained burns to eighty percent of his total body surface area and spent almost a year in hospital before he was able to recover from his injuries.<sup>206</sup>

The method which the soldiers used to dispose of the highly flammable explosives raises a number of questions. Their firing range should have been determined during their planning and preparing for the operation. The charges should have been set beforehand, in accordance with the distances over which the mortars were to be fired. In the event of a need to adjust the charges in order to decrease the firing range, the charges which are removed should be disposed of in a safe manner, by inserting them in a separate sealed container. They should not have endangered the safety of the team while the mortars were being fired.

Mortar fire from the 81-mm Ratels did not commence at 12:00, which had been the scheduled time. Although the mortar fire had been intended to compound the softening of the target area in the aftermath of the air strikes, the mortar teams failed to implement a well-rehearsed fire plan to preclude the possibility of an advancing enemy force. The firing of the 81-mm mortars was also hampered by the presence of large trees in the area, which made it difficult to aim the mortars in the direction from which the enemy posed a threat.

When Kruys, the commander of two platoons of the paratroopers who had been deployed on the left flank of the main force for the attack, noticed mortar bombs exploding close to his position, he made radio contact with the mortar groups on the internal network, to alert them to the inadequate range of their fire. They replied that the mortars of the Task Force had not been fired at his position. Kruys then realised that his platoons had been on the receiving end

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<sup>205</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, p. A-2, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>206</sup> Personal interview with Jaco Steenkamp on 4 December 2017.

of mortar fire from SWAPO.<sup>207</sup> Fortunately for the South African soldiers, no one was hit by friendly mortar fire.

At this point the narrative turns to the role which the companies of 101 Battalion played in the attack, whose details have been gleaned mainly from an operation report by Commandant Kruger. Call sign 10 was stationed north of the target area, while call sign 40 patrolled along the main road to the west of the main target. Call sign 30, under Maritz, was deployed to the east of the main target area.<sup>208</sup>

While the attack at the main target area was under way, the Task Force received support from Impala strike aircraft, which carried out an aerial attack on a target which the report identifies as the headquarters of SWAPO, or DSHK in SADF terminology. According to the report, the air attack did not have the desired effect of neutralising the ability of SWAPO to resist and retaliate when the Task Force attacked, because some of the soldiers of the Task Force were already in the target area when the air strike took place. The air strike by the SAAF to which Kruger refers was the same one which has been described previously as having taken place at 12:00.

At 16:30, call sign 40,<sup>209</sup> whose soldiers were at a position to the north of the main target area, reported hearing the movement of enemy vehicles to their north. The Rear Battalion of SWAPO then attacked call sign 32, killing and wounding a number of its soldiers during an intense firefight. Simultaneously at 16:40, SWAPO commenced a mortar bombardment at the main target area, its Central Area Headquarters. These incidents were components of a counter-attack which SWAPO launched in response to the attack by the Task

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<sup>207</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruijs, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>208</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood. Some of the information in Kruger's report, in which he referred to the conduct of 101 Battalion when its soldiers cleared the village near the main target area during the early stages of the operation and his contention that his companies had approached at least four more enemy bases, cannot be verified from oral evidence.

<sup>209</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 when reference was made to paragraph 14 of Appendix 1 to the annexure which contains the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

Force on their main base.<sup>210</sup> The Task Force was then ordered by Colonel Hill to withdraw from the target area.<sup>211</sup>

Thus the Task Force's withdrawal from the target area was the next step. This will be dealt with below, but we first have to investigate the role performed by the companies of 101 Battalion during the battle. It is to this account that we now turn in the next chapter.

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<sup>210</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 when reference was made to paragraph 16 of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

<sup>211</sup> FIR/070/31OKT87, Department of Defence Archival Services, paragraph 9.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE ROLE WHICH THE COMPANIES OF 101 BATTALION PERFORMED DURING THE CARRYING OUT OF OPERATION FIREWOOD

#### 1. Engagements in which 101 Battalion participated

The account of the role which 101 Battalion performed during the attack on the SWAPO base begins with Chris Snyman, Obie Oberholzer, and their Regimental Sergeant Major, Chris Schutte, who were stationed with the logistical vehicles to the south of the target area. They had been ordered to patrol the area south of the base at a shona marsh, to look for any signs of SWAPO soldiers approaching the target area from outside of the base. At some stage during the battle, they received an urgent request on their radio from Maritz to assist his sections, which were at locations to the north of Snyman's group, and to evacuate some wounded soldiers from the command post to a safer area on the main road. From this point, call sign 40 would evacuate the wounded soldiers further to their south.<sup>212</sup>

The vehicle in which Snyman found himself entered the Indungo road, which leads in an easterly direction. It was expected that by following this road, the vehicle would encounter those of the temporary tactical operations command. At a junction, his vehicle turned into the road to the right and proceeded to an area higher up, which turned out to be the military parade ground inside of the target area. To enter the area, the vehicle passed through what appeared to be a boom gate. Snyman noticed deep craters which the bombs of the SAAF had left in the ground as a consequence of the air strikes which had been carried out earlier in the day, but the Casspir immediately attracted heavy enemy fire. The men were shocked to discover that they had made the wrong turn. They immediately turned their vehicle around and hurriedly left the scene, still under heavy enemy fire and with enemy mortar bombs exploding

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<sup>212</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 10 of Appendix 1 of the annexures, which contains the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

around them. After they reached the junction in the road again, they followed the northern road.<sup>213</sup>

Snyman and Schutte were assisted by members of call sign 41 of 101 Battalion to reach the area in which their headquarters were located. Here they were met by the grim sight of the bodies of five paratroopers which had been recovered earlier at the target area, along with a number of wounded soldiers. The paratroopers had been killed during the clearing of the enemy trenches, as they had been easy targets who had attracted fierce enemy fire from a number of different directions.<sup>214</sup>

Snyman received a report on his radio from Corporal Holtzhausen that his old school friend, Renier Kruger, who had served with the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion, had been killed. Further enquiries revealed that the information had not been correct and that Corporal Olivier, instead, had been killed. Snyman also came across a gruesome site of the remains of a paratrooper who had been severely burnt by the explosion of a white phosphorous grenade which he had carried.<sup>215</sup>

From the evidence which is available, it appears that the first incident in the operation which affected 101 Battalion directly during its deployment could have occurred when some vehicles of call signs 32 and 32C were attacked by a SWAPO group to the north of the main target area,<sup>216</sup> when call signs 31 and 32 drove into a SWAPO ambush. In this incident, the soldiers under Second Lieutenant David Bock (call sign 32) and Corporal Trevor (Tandekas) Stander (call sign 32C) served as early warning groups. Although the groups of Bock and Stander came under heavy mortar and small arms fire in the ambush, they returned fire with the .50 calibre Browning machine guns which were mounted on their knocked out vehicles. The predicament in which Bock found himself was further aggravated as a consequence of some of his

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<sup>213</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>214</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>215</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>216</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, where reference was made to paragraphs 9 and 14 of Appendix 1 and paragraph 1 of the appendix which provides explanatory notes to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

soldiers being wounded and others disembarking from their vehicle and hurriedly fleeing the scene, in an attempt to escape near certain death from enemy fire.<sup>217</sup> Bock and Stander continued to fire upon the SWAPO force, in order to protect their wounded soldiers, as they refused to abandon them where they lay alongside the destroyed vehicles. After the fighting had died down, the men under Bock were the last soldiers from the Task Force to remain at the scene.<sup>218</sup>

As the unit had suffered a number of fatalities and injuries and its Casspirs had been destroyed by enemy fire, call sign 32<sup>219</sup> required support from its company. The men who served under Captain Rademeyer, the company commander (call sign 30), left their positions east of the target area, probably after their commander had received orders from Kruger for call sign 30 to make its way towards the position which Bock was holding. The group which Rademeyer commanded was heavily armed, with sixteen Casspirs fitted with .50 and .30 calibre Browning machine guns and its soldiers carrying an array of small arms.<sup>220</sup>

At 16:00,<sup>221</sup> Rademeyer's convoy drove in a westerly direction towards the main road, alongside a shona marsh. As Rademeyer had difficulty in establishing radio communication with his headquarters by means of his small radio, he requested Botes, who had radio contact, to pass his messages on to the headquarters. The convoy drove in an extended line formation alongside a shona marsh. When it encountered an obstacle in its path, the convoy was forced to form up in a single line. At that moment it was attacked in an

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<sup>217</sup> I Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 134; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 6 of Appendix 1 of the annexure which contains the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

<sup>218</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>219</sup> I Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 134; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 2 of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' and paragraphs 16, 17, and 18 of appendix 1, the annexure which contains the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

<sup>220</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>221</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 8, Department of Defence Archival Services; File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.x, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 2 of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' in the annexure which contains the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

ambush by SWAPO soldiers,<sup>222</sup> which resulted in the convoy coming under heavy fire from RPG-7 rockets and machine guns.<sup>223</sup>

Snyman heard loud noises approximately one kilometre to the north of his position, a sure indication that fierce fighting was in progress. He had heard the noise from the skirmish in which the Casspirs of Rademeyer and Botes had become bogged down and destroyed as a result of direct hits by enemy fire in the ambush, to the north-east of the target area.<sup>224</sup> Rademeyer and his 'tiffie' quickly abandoned their vehicle, while another soldier remained inside it. The soldiers in the other Casspirs attempted to come to the rescue of the wounded soldiers, but their progress was hindered when the tyres of their vehicles were damaged and deflated to the rim as a result of intense enemy fire.<sup>225</sup> Stander, in the call sign 33B Casspir, assumed command of the remaining vehicles of call signs 31 and 32.<sup>226</sup>

While Rademeyer was embroiled in the SWAPO ambush, Snyman, still on the main road, heard a terrifying noise over the radio network from someone who was obviously in great distress, screaming 'Help! Help! They are killing us, they are killing us!' Snyman realised that Lieutenant Cobbold, one of the Recces, whose Casspir had accompanied that of Captain Rademeyer, was calling for help. Snyman immediately headed in the direction of the afflicted vehicles, disregarding an earlier instruction to attend to the evacuation of more wounded soldiers.

On his way towards the position of Cobbold, Snyman requested the occupants of a vehicle which he had passed on the road to accompany him,

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<sup>222</sup> Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p 134; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 1 of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' in the annexure which contains the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

<sup>223</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 8, Department of Defence Archival Services; File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.x, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 2 of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' to the annexure which contains the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood. According to the report, the Casspirs of call signs 33, 33B, and 39s were hit by RPG-7 rockets.

<sup>224</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>225</sup> See fig. 4.3; Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 134; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 2 of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' and paragraphs 17.b and 17.c of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report upon the reflection of Operation Firewood.

<sup>226</sup> Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 134; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 2 of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' and paragraphs 17.a and 17.d of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

but they declined to do so and continued driving in the opposite direction. Corporal Mongele, driving another vehicle, was also asked for help, but he too drove away. Snyman and Schutte continued driving in the direction of the fighting. Although they noticed that more fighting was evidently in progress in other areas, the loud and foreboding sounds to their north were of greater concern to them.<sup>227</sup>

Before Snyman and Schutte could reach the scene, more events took place which require our attention. Other vehicles of call sign 42 of 101 Battalion were instructed to join up with Seis Prinsloo and Justin Theunissen (call sign 20) to provide support and render assistance to the call signs which were under attack by SWAPO. They arrived at the contact area at almost the same time as call sign 10 under Maritz. Call sign 10,<sup>228</sup> which was positioned to the south of the company under the command of Rademeyer, was also requested to provide reinforcements to the beleaguered convoy. Maritz was accompanied by Corporal D. L. (Wickus) Cronjé,<sup>229</sup> a Recce intelligence operative. According to Cronjé, when their Casspir came under small arms fire, Maritz sustained two gunshot wounds from bullets which went through one of his arms, which left him unconscious. Although he was obliged to assume command of the men who had been under the command of Maritz, Cronjé was unable to stanch the severe bleeding from his wounds.<sup>230</sup>

After some time had elapsed, call sign 10 left the scene of the contact, but the Casspir became bogged down owing to damage which had been suffered by its tyres. After Maritz had been rescued by Prinsloo, he was taken to the medical post, where his wounds were treated and his life was saved.<sup>231</sup> When call signs 10 and 42 arrived at an open shona area, the Casspirs formed up in an extended line formation. They charged forward through a shona and passed a hill on their way towards the SWAPO positions. The purpose of the

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<sup>227</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>228</sup> Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 134; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 3 of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' attached to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection of Operation Firewood. The report incorrectly places Maritz with call sign 30.

<sup>229</sup> Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 134.

<sup>230</sup> Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 134; PERS OPS/705/1 Nov 87, Department of Defence.

<sup>231</sup> Recollection of Corporal D. L. (Wickus) Cronjé.

feint was to draw the attention of SWAPO away from the Casspirs in Rademeyer's convoy.

The soldiers under the command of Maritz also came under attack from SWAPO soldiers. Corporal Daniël Cronjé saw a few SWAPO soldiers jumping onto a Casspir, which was adjacent to the one in which he was travelling, while the vehicles were in motion. SWAPO had employed the tactic in the past, when they had endeavoured to force Casspirs of the SADF to stop by opening their rear doors in order to throw hand grenades into them. In this instance, the SWAPO small arms fire bounced off the sides of the armour of the Casspirs.<sup>232</sup> Had the attempt by the SWAPO soldiers succeeded, the soldiers in the Casspir would have been killed.

As the fighting continued, Lieutenant Pierre Blignaut (call sign 11) also assisted Rademeyer and Botes.<sup>233</sup> Blignaut's .50 calibre Browning machine gun was immediately rendered unserviceable when the turret on which it had been mounted was destroyed by a direct hit from an RPG-7 rocket. Blignaut's vehicle was a mere 50 metres away from where Rademeyer and Botes were last seen. As a consequence of the hit, Blignaut sustained a wound to his right arm, while Sapper Steyn, who had accompanied him, was killed instantly. Blignaut managed to continue firing his R-4 rifle with his left arm, abandoning his Casspir and running under heavy enemy fire for safety towards the Casspir of Botes. He sustained a further wound as a consequence of a sliver of shrapnel which became lodged in his eye, for which he subsequently received treatment upon arriving at the medical post.

Although Botes (call sign 33) abandoned his vehicle just moments before it burst into flames from the explosion of an enemy rocket, his body was engulfed in flames and he died<sup>234</sup> next to his burning vehicle. Ironically, he

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<sup>232</sup> Recollection of Wickus Cronjé.

<sup>233</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 when reference was made to paragraph 4 of the Appendix called explanatory notes attached to the annexure to the report on the reflection of Operation Firewood.

<sup>234</sup> I Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 134.

had been ordered to replace Lieutenant Hentie Marais, who may have died in the skirmish if his place had not been taken by Botes.<sup>235</sup>

The valiant efforts of Snyman to reach the distressed Cobbold were to no avail. Dave Drew, who was at the scene of the contact, provided an eyewitness account of the incident. The Casspir in which Cobbold was travelling drove directly into a well-positioned SWAPO ambush. B-10 rockets found their target with a direct hit to the front of the vehicle and Cobbold was killed. Snyman's men subsequently came upon the lifeless body of Captain Rademeyer,<sup>236</sup> lying some distance from his vehicle, under a bush beside a large pile of discarded bullet shells. One of his arms had been severed by enemy fire and he had died as a consequence of severe blood loss.<sup>237</sup>

Next to arrive at the scene of Blignaut's plight was Corporal J.J. Bronkhorst (call sign 11C), who rushed to his rescue.<sup>238</sup> He was joined by Casspirs of call sign 40, which arrived at high speed at the scene. They drove into a group of SWAPO soldiers, ran them over, and ruthlessly crushed them with the large tyres of their vehicles. Bronkhorst's driver unceremoniously also drove into a group of at least seven heavily-armed SWAPO soldiers, who had been carrying a variety of RPG-7 rockets and machine guns. Bronkhorst suffered a wound from a projectile which entered and exited one of his arms.<sup>239</sup> Sergeant Labuschagne sustained two broken ribs when his Casspir smashed into more SWAPO soldiers, pulverising them against the side of a large anthill.<sup>240</sup>

The vehicle of Second Lieutenant Velle Smit, call sign 13 of 101 Battalion, took a direct hit from an RPG-7 rocket, which left both his gunner and his driver dead.<sup>241</sup> Smit continued to urge his driver to proceed forward, unaware

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<sup>235</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>236</sup> Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 134.

<sup>237</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>238</sup> Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 134; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 4 of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' attached to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection of Operation Firewood.

<sup>239</sup> Pes/542/13 Nov 87, Department upon Defence Archival Services.

<sup>240</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>241</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 4.b of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood. According to this report, the other two call signs which were hit by RPG rockets were call sign 11, according to paragraph 4.a of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes', and call sign 11B, according to paragraph 4.c of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes'.

that he was already dead. Under severe fire from SWAPO RPG-7 rockets, Smit also abandoned his vehicle. He grabbed an R-4 rifle from one of his bewildered men, with which he managed to kill some enemy soldiers.<sup>242</sup>

The next significant incident which concerned 101 Battalion after the contact which the men under Captain Rademeyer made with a SWAPO group occurred when Snyman, Schutte, the vehicles of Seis Prinsloo and Justin Theunissen of call sign 20, and the men of call sign 42 under Captain van Niekerk were sent to render assistance. They drove on the left side of the main road in an extended line formation,<sup>243</sup> anticipating that they would make contact with the SWAPO group which had attacked the soldiers under the command of Second Lieutenant David Bock. As they experienced a great deal of difficulty in maintaining their formation, the vehicles soon started moving off in different directions. Seis Prinsloo and Justin Theunissen<sup>244</sup> opened fire at an enemy BM-14 truck which was fleeing the scene. Owing to the accuracy of their fire, it was quickly set ablaze and destroyed.

Snyman, driving in the extended line formation, pushed northwards along the road which would take the convoy to the position of the beleaguered vehicles of the men under Bock. As he left the road, he was obliged to make a sharp right turn.<sup>245</sup> Theunissen, in a Casspir accompanying that of Snyman, was unaware of the sudden change of direction which the formation had taken. He proceeded along the road, but soon realised that he was driving alone towards the positions of the enemy. He made an abrupt turnabout and beat a hasty retreat.

Theunissen was later awarded the distinguished *Honoris Crux* medal for the bravery which he had demonstrated by continuing to drive while under severe

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<sup>242</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>243</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 1 of Appendix 1 and paragraph 6 of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

<sup>244</sup> Uys, *Cross of Honour*, p. 135; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 18.d of Appendix 1 and paragraph 1 of Appendix 2 to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood. The report states that that three enemy soldiers were killed and one was captured while they attempted to flee the area.

<sup>245</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 18.b of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

enemy fire. According to the report which served as the motivation for making the award, he had endangered his own life by committing to a course of action which saved the lives of several other SADF soldiers. It is possible that Theunissen had made an error of judgement by continuing to head forward after the other vehicles in the formation had already left the road.

According to Frans Lombard, the SWAPO soldiers were sufficiently well trained to enable them to fire their rockets with accuracy and precision. It seems likely that Operation Colosseum in the previous year had provided them with an opportunity to learn some valuable lessons, as the SWAPO soldiers were clearly much better prepared to defend themselves against an attack during the carrying out of Operation Firewood than they had been the previous year.

SWAPO soldiers who were busy performing routine military training exercises and rehearsals had attacked Rademeyer's convoy to the north of the main target area. When they heard the loud noise of the attack on the main target area, they immediately dispatched their anti-tank platoons to engage in defensive action. The SWAPO soldiers were all heavily armed, each carrying a number of RPG-7 and RPG-75 rockets. They approached Rademeyer's convoy and engaged the vehicles by rapidly firing their rockets, reloading and again firing in rapid succession. Owing to the rapid rate of fire which the rockets afforded them, many rockets found their targets, penetrated the armoured steel of the Casspirs, and detonated inside of them, setting them alight.<sup>246</sup>

According to Snyman, the detachment of SWAPO soldiers who had been to the north of the main target area unexpectedly crossed paths with the Casspirs of Rademeyer and Botes, whereupon an intense firefight broke out. Had the SWAPO soldiers not encountered the Casspirs, they may have passed them undetected and been able to join the forces at the main target area and provided much-needed reinforcements to fend off the main attack of

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<sup>246</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

the Task Force. By being at the wrong place at the wrong time, the Casspirs of 101 Battalion were able to halt this advancing force, thereby saving the lives of many SADF soldiers at the main target area.<sup>247</sup>

Snyman and Schutte came across the remains of two Casspirs which had earlier been destroyed and left abandoned next to the road.<sup>248</sup> They came to the aid of some of the desperate and wounded soldiers lying next to their damaged vehicles. They saw more Task Force soldiers who had abandoned their vehicles in order to flee the scene of the fighting. Some soldiers continued to run for several kilometres before they paused to catch their breath.<sup>249</sup>

The mortar groups went into action by starting to fire at enemy positions with 81-mm mortars from their mortar pipes.<sup>250</sup> They were guided by Second Lieutenant D'Assonville, who pointed out the enemy targets which needed to be neutralised. Without his assistance they would not have been able to take aim and fire at the enemy positions. Had the Task Force elected to deploy forward observation posts (FOPs) from its previous vantage points, mortar fire from an appropriate range for the Task Force could have been effective once enemy targets had been relayed to the mortar teams. Although it is uncertain when the mortar fire commenced, it was at an already late stage of the day. The commencement of 81-mm mortar fire by mortar teams in Ratels was the only occasion on which Snyman noticed the presence of the Ratels of the mortar teams during the battle.

Snyman's group then joined up with call signs 21A and 21B<sup>251</sup> and headed in the direction of call sign 30 and Koos Maritz of 101 Battalion. He was unable

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<sup>247</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>248</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraphs 2.a, 2.b, 2.c, 4.a, 4.b, and 4.c of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood. According to this report, a total of six vehicles were destroyed, of which three were left behind in the area.

<sup>249</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>250</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to map appendix (map 2) to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood. According to this report, the positions of the mortars were east of the main road, adjacent to a target area which is referred to as target F.

<sup>251</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 when reference was made to paragraph 18.d of the appendix 1 to the annexure to the report on the reflection of Operation Firewood.

to locate their vehicles, as he was unable to establish radio communication with their radio networks.

Snyman did manage to make radio contact with Bronkhorst (call sign 11C), who requested that he should search for and to rescue the SADF soldiers who were missing in the area to the north-east of his position as a consequence of having abandoned their knocked out Casspirs and fled the scene without giving a great deal of consideration to where they might be headed. He found more bodies of SWAPO soldiers and came upon a gruesome scene in which a SWAPO soldier had been killed as a result of having been driven over by a Casspir. He met up with the medical orderly at the scene of Blignaut's deserted Casspir, from which, with the aid of the men who were with him, he recovered the lifeless body of Sapper Steyn.<sup>252</sup>

Snyman heard more small arms fire from forward of his position, where immense plumes of smoke filled the air. Bronkhorst and Snyman moved closer when they noticed a group of men running past them. They aimed their double-barrel .50 calibre Browning machine guns at the running men, but refrained from firing them, as they realised just in time that the men were SADF soldiers. They had narrowly avoided a catastrophe.

Snyman collected his friend Stander and his tiffie from among the men who had been fleeing. Stander was clearly traumatised and in a state of severe stress and shock from the fighting. He was also left partly deaf as a result of an explosion which had taken place near him. The men with Snyman continued to search for the abandoned Casspir of Stander, where they believed more soldiers had been left behind. They found the vehicle in a position which was approximately 200 metres away from the damaged Casspirs of Blignaut and Botes. When Snyman assessed the damage to the vehicles, he saw that the two barrels of the .30 calibre Browning machine guns of one of them had been completely dislodged from their mountings, probably as a result of a direct hit from an enemy RPG-7 rocket. The barrel of

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<sup>252</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019; See Fig. 5.

the machine gun of another vehicle was bent in a banana shape and lying to one side of it. He also saw evidence of a well-directed RPG-7 rocket which had penetrated another vehicle through its front window, striking the gunner directly in his face and killing him outright.<sup>253</sup>

Stander was severely disorientated when he met up with Snyman and asked him to render assistance to his men. They found Badenhorst, who was sitting behind his vehicle. He had sustained what appeared to be a bullet wound to his stomach. They quickly loaded him and more wounded soldiers onto their vehicle and attended to their wounds, saving their lives by doing so.<sup>254</sup> They recovered more vehicles. After they had replaced the rear tyres of Blignaut's Casspir, they towed it away with the aid of other Casspirs.<sup>255</sup> Snyman coordinated a search to find Stander's abandoned Casspir and the remainder of his men. After failing to locate the Casspir or any more missing soldiers in a concerted search, they left the area and drove south towards the medical post.<sup>256</sup>

Stander sat between Snyman's legs, shaking profusely from anxiety and shock. His hairline had been scorched on one side by an RPG-7 rocket which had penetrated his Casspir, probably missing him by only a few inches. Snyman offered him one of his bottles of Cuca beer in an attempt to calm him down. He eventually managed to find a modicum of composure only after he had consumed the contents of at least four more.

In the midst of the chaos which prevailed in the aftermath, Snyman and the men who accompanied him started to recover more vehicles, which they found in scattered locations in the bush. They sought the assistance of a recovery vehicle to help with the recovery of the damaged vehicles. They found approximately nine abandoned vehicles, which they retrieved and relocated to a safe area at their headquarters.<sup>257</sup> Some Ratels were also used

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<sup>253</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>254</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>255</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, p. A-4, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>256</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>257</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

to tow away more stricken Casspirs from the area, in order to avoid abandoned vehicles and equipment being left behind at the target area.<sup>258</sup>

Snyman passed Commandant Kruger at the side of the road, along with Bronkhorst and Pienaar, who were attending to a number of wounded soldiers before he arrived at the medical post, accompanied by Stander and Badenhorst. There he informed Colonel Hill of what he had witnessed. More wounded soldiers were arriving at the medical post in scores. Corporal Abrahams, one of the wounded, described to Snyman how the 'enemy took his arm'. He had been wounded by exploding rockets from B-10 recoilless guns as a consequence of having come under heavy enemy fire.<sup>259</sup>

As an official military report confirms, three destroyed Casspirs were not recovered from an area to the north of Indungo.<sup>260</sup> Oberholzer has confirmed that two of the vehicles were the Casspirs of Botes and Rademeyer.<sup>261</sup> The third, the Casspir which had been abandoned by Stander, was subsequently discovered by FAPLA and placed on public display for propaganda purposes.<sup>262</sup>

According to Snyman's recollections, some Casspirs were destroyed as a result of hits by rockets from B-10 recoilless guns, rather than by exploding RPG-7 rockets. The Casspir which Stander (call sign 33B) abandoned was riddled with bullet holes, although its body appears to have remained intact. A large opening which could have been caused only by the explosion of a rocket

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<sup>258</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>259</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>260</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 10, Department of Defence Archival Services; FIR/070/31 Okt 87, Department of Defence Archival Services, paragraph 10.

<sup>261</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services; File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetrugting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.xiii, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987. (Both reports state that three burning Casspir vehicles were recovered). Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to positions 1, 2, and 3 on the second map, which depict the positions of the abandoned vehicles. The map is attached to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood; Reference was also made to paragraphs 2 and 7.b of the explanatory notes and paragraph 5 of Appendix 2 to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood. According to paragraph 19.b of the report, four Casspirs were recovered, three of which had been totally destroyed. As it was later confirmed from photographs, the third Casspir remained completely intact. According to paragraph 20.a of Appendix 1, at midnight, six Casspirs were towed by other types of vehicles. In addition, according to paragraph 19.b, the last remaining three Casspirs were left behind at 20:00, owing to heavy bombardment of the area by the enemy.

<sup>262</sup> See Fig. 7.

from a B-10 gun was visible on the side of another Casspir. Snyman verified that Cobbold, who was killed by the explosion, had been inside this vehicle.<sup>263</sup>

Snyman and the men who accompanied him then left the area, as darkness was approaching rapidly. They managed to join up with the remainder of the Task Force vehicles, which continued their recovery operations until 20:00 and succeeded in recovering a further three or four Casspirs, which had been set ablaze by enemy artillery fire. The vehicles then made their way to the logistical area, where their occupants endeavoured to remain silent and still until midnight.<sup>264</sup>

The officers of the Task Force experienced great difficulty in accounting for all of its soldiers. Oberholzer confirmed that the bodies of two soldiers who had been members of the platoon under Botes, Rifleman T. Sheepo and Rifleman M. Vuushona, had been left behind inside their Casspir.<sup>265</sup> The name of a third soldier who had been killed in action but not been accounted for, Rifleman Epafu, was also added to the list.<sup>266</sup>

Owing to the enormous difficulty which the Task Force had experienced in recovering abandoned Casspirs which were not accounted for and preventing them from falling into the hands of the enemy and the impossibility of returning to the target area near Indungo to do so, an alternative strategy was necessary. On 1 November, the SAAF launched another air strike on the target area, in an attempt to destroy abandoned Casspirs with rockets.<sup>267</sup> It is unclear how many of the abandoned vehicles had been successfully destroyed beyond recognition after the carrying out of the air strike. A photograph of FAPLA soldiers standing next to at least one intact Casspir at Indungo provides compelling evidence that at least one had remained unscathed.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>264</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>265</sup> Recollection of Oberholzer.

<sup>266</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>267</sup> Recollection by Oberholzer.

<sup>268</sup> See Fig. 6.

## 2. The captured Buffalo

While the Task Force was retreating from the target area in the aftermath of the operation, a call sign 22B Buffalo vehicle drove into a large hole, overturned, and landed on its side. The excavation resembled a bunker which had been prepared to hide a tank in the hull-down position. As the occupants of the Buffalo were not injured in the accident, they were to board another vehicle.<sup>269</sup> Although Snyman recalled that the vehicle had been recovered from the hole,<sup>270</sup> his recollection appears not to accord with documented evidence. A military report of the SADF clearly states that the Task Force was unable to recover or destroy the stricken vehicle.<sup>271</sup> According to the report, the intact Buffalo vehicle, with its camouflage net and some equipment, was left behind at the target area. The abandoned Buffalo was a significant find for FAPLA, which also later displayed the vehicle at Luanda. A photograph of the vehicle also serves as proof that it fell into the hands of FAPLA.<sup>272</sup>

It was not the first occasion on which a Buffalo was captured by the enemy. On 13 September 1987, several weeks before the battle at Indungo, FAPLA announced at a meeting at Lubango that a SADF Buffalo Mine Protected Vehicle and an Eland 90 armoured vehicle had been captured, which were subsequently put on display.<sup>273</sup> This Buffalo was obviously the vehicle which had been captured on 2 September 1987, near Cuamato. The Eland 90 had probably been abandoned by the SADF more than a decade previously, during the carrying out of Operation Savannah in 1975.

## 3. The withdrawal of the Task Force after the battle at Indungo

During the fighting at Indungo on 31 October, the SADF intercepted radio messages from SWAPO soldiers at Indungo who transmitted appeals through their radio networks for support from other SWAPO groups and Cuban soldiers who were situated at bases north of Indungo. The SADF was able to

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<sup>269</sup> Personal interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>270</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>271</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 10, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>272</sup> See Fig. 7; FIK/070/31 Okt 87, Department of Defence Archival Services, paragraph 10.

<sup>273</sup> INL/833/08 Sep 87, Department of Defence Archival Services.

glean from the radio messages that the requests were denied and the SWAPO forces were told that they should rather contain the problem with which they were faced without additional assistance.

As it has been explained, the withdrawal of the Task Force commenced after Colonel James Hill gave the order for it to leave the Indungo area. The withdrawal was to take place in phases, with the last detachment of the Task Force, which comprised the men of 101 Battalion, leaving after they were satisfied that the last of their vehicles had been recovered. The task of the battalion was made exceedingly difficult by the many damaged vehicles which needed to be recovered and the number of soldiers who had sustained injuries during the battle. Although the difficulty of the operation was compounded by needing to withdraw under the cover of darkness, the predicament of the departing Task Force was further exacerbated when SWAPO forces fired upon it with mortars and a variety of other weapons.

It also needs to be emphasised that owing to the rapid exit which the Task Force was obliged to make from the target area, the opportunity to obtain vital intelligence from the abandoned SWAPO headquarters in the form of relevant enemy documents was lost.<sup>274</sup> After the conclusion of previous operations, the information which was contained in captured SWAPO documents had been carefully scrutinised for possible clues and information which was obtained from these sources was used to plan future operations. Although the Task Force achieved its goal of penetrating the SWAPO base at Indungo, 101 Battalion did not remain in the target area for long. When SWAPO retaliated with intense mortar and anti-tank gun fire, the battalion did not leave Indungo of its own accord, but rather because SWAPO had forced it to leave.<sup>275</sup>

As it has been explained, the paratroopers and the Recces left the target area at Indungo before the withdrawal of 101 Battalion. They placed glow sticks along the side of the main road to indicate the point at which they left the road

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<sup>274</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 7.b, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>275</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraphs 19 and 20 of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

and the route which the 101 Battalion convoy should follow. According to an account which Roelofse provided, as they left the area, the convoys of both the Recces and 101 Battalion lost their sense of direction and completed a full 360-degree circle before finding their way once more.

At 21:15, Seis Prinsloo escorted more vehicles, travelling in a southerly direction and following the illuminated markers which the members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion and the Recces had left to guide them towards the convoy of the main force. Immediately after the vehicles had been started and as a consequence of the considerable amount of noise which had accompanied the repairs which had been carried out to some of the vehicles, the convoy drew enemy fire.<sup>276</sup> At 23:20, a SWAPO detachment followed in the tracks of the convoy and fired upon it with B-10 rockets and mortar bombs, in accordance with a well-coordinated firing plan.<sup>277</sup> This fire was followed by a further ripple of mortar fire whose range had been adjusted. As a consequence, additional mortar bombs began to explode even closer than before to the positions of the convoy, narrowly missing their targets.<sup>278</sup>

It was confirmed in an official military report that at midnight on 31 October, the last elements of the Task Force vacated the target area and proceeded south.<sup>279</sup>

During the retreat from the target area, the Task Force encountered a number of close shaves. Lieutenant Zon (Whisky) Meyer, who was travelling at the rear of the convoy which consisted of at least 80 vehicles, reported that some foreign vehicles, which had their lights on, were following them. After reaching the T-junction, the driver of one of the vehicles in the convoy made an error of judgement by taking a wrong turn and driving in the opposite direction from that of the convoy, towards the enemy. A soldier who had been given the notable nickname of Himalaya set off in pursuit of the vehicle and assisted its

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<sup>276</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 11, Department of Defence Archival Services; FIR/070/31 Okt 87, Department of Defence Archival Services at paragraph 11.

<sup>277</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 11, Department of Defence Archival Services; FIR/070/31 Okt 87, Department of Defence, at paragraph 10.

<sup>278</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraphs 19, 20, and 21 of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

<sup>279</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

driver to rejoin the convoy. A driver from call sign 11E, towing a call sign 12E vehicle, nearly collided with the vehicle in which Regimental Sergeant Major Schutte was travelling. The potential hazards of an unscheduled stop by the convoy were minimised when the broken steering arm of the vehicle which Corporal Bester had been driving was repaired in almost record time.<sup>280</sup>

The retreating Task Force continued driving for a further 20 kilometres in a southerly direction. At 02:00 on 1 November,<sup>281</sup> after the soldiers in the convoy had established a temporary base, several men quickly fell asleep. They arose at 06:30 to perform much-needed repairs to their vehicles. The broken suspension of Snyman's vehicle was repaired at this point. The men noticed fresh damage to the armour of their vehicles, in the form of holes from the bullets of AK-47 assault rifles and deep scars from RPG-7 rockets which had exploded.

The convoy received reports from intercepted enemy radio messages that a SWAPO force was heading in their direction. As a result, it was decided to break camp in order to relocate further south.<sup>282</sup> The convoy followed the general direction of the flow of the Bale River and a second temporary base was established. The Task Force took care to avoid detection by enemy aircraft by travelling under the cover of darkness, as FAPLA had air superiority in the area. Had the large dust clouds which the convoy inevitably raised been detected during daylight, an enemy air strike on the retreating Task Force was a highly probable consequence. Three or four Puma helicopters were dispatched from the temporary helicopter administration area of the SAAF at the Tactical Operations Headquarters at Ionde, to evacuate wounded soldiers from the convoy.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019. His recollection of the time of their arrival at the safe location was at 05:00.

<sup>281</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services; File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.b.xiv, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>282</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>283</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.c, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987; Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

#### 4. Orders for the redeployment of the Task Force

On 3 November, Colonel Hill briefed the Task Force concerning the next phase of the operation. Its members were instructed to lay a number of landmines in areas which were marked by the tracks of their vehicles, to preclude the possibility of the convoy being followed by enemy vehicles.<sup>284</sup> The Task Force remained in the area to the south of Indungo until 9 November, to carry out additional tasks, one of which was to investigate suspected enemy vehicle movements to their north. The men also met up with Staff Sergeant John West and Sergeant Mawambe, who were members of a small Recce team which was also operating in the area. Both men were former members of the Rhodesian Selous Scouts.<sup>285</sup>

On 14 November the force received orders from its main headquarters to head towards Cuvelai, where 101 Battalion was to join Task Force Daffodil, which was carrying out operations against enemy positions.<sup>286</sup> At this point, 101 Battalion comprised an under-strength force of a mere 540 soldiers and several of its leader group had either been killed or wounded. In accordance with the orders of its high command, 101 Battalion established a temporary base in the Cuvelai area, where supplies of ammunition and provisions were replenished by airlifting them to the base. It was also anticipated that reinforcements would arrive in the form of Ratel armoured vehicles, which could provide the force with crucial heavy fire power from their 20-mm guns.

At 21:00 on 14 November, the several SAAF Impala strike aircraft carried out an air strike on enemy targets at Cuvelai. Snyman stood on the roof of his Casspir to survey the area for signs of the aircraft. He saw a number of flashes from rockets exploding at the target area. He then noticed another flash, which seemed to be even larger than the previous ones. He quickly realised that this flash had not resulted from the exploding of a rocket, but

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<sup>284</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>285</sup> Personal interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>286</sup> OPS/402/09 Nov 87, Department of Defence Archival Services.

rather from an exploding Impala.<sup>287</sup> The pilot of the Impala, Captain André Stapa, was killed instantly.<sup>288</sup> Although the exact cause of the fatality remains unknown, it has been surmised that the pilot probably lost control over the aircraft as a result of a direct hit by enemy fire. 101 Battalion received orders to leave the area at the conclusion of Operation Firewood.

More SADF operations were planned for the southern areas of Angola. Platoons from the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion were deployed in the areas north and south of Ongiva to gather information concerning possible infiltrations of SWAPO soldiers into South West Africa/Namibia. Small Special Forces teams were also deployed on the road which joins Xangongo, Mongua, and Ongiva, to implement defensive measures against enemy convoys.<sup>289</sup>

On 11 November,<sup>290</sup> a team of psychologists arrived at the Ondangwa base to provide counselling to the men under the command of Kruys. When the men were questioned concerning their well-being, they chose not to complain, as they were unwilling to show any signs of weakness in front of their fellow soldiers.<sup>291</sup> The numbers of parachutists were reinforced when two more 'Valke' arrived at the base. They started with preparations to deploy for an attack that was planned at more enemy targets in the Cuvelai area. 101 Battalion also commenced withdrawing from Angola, without carrying out any further operations in the area. It briefly joined up with a UNITA force in an area near Cuvelai and at 07:00 on 11 November, the first Reaction Force teams arrived at the border of South West Africa/Namibia at Oshikango.<sup>292</sup>

Although the incident which resulted in Corporal J. Theunissen being awarded the Honoris Crux medal for bravery has already been described, four other members of the Task Force were also recipients of the prestigious award in recognition of the bravery which they had displayed during the carrying out of

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<sup>287</sup> This recollection appears to contradict an earlier report that 101 Battalion had already left Angola on 11 November, as on 14 November 1987 it was evidently still operating in the Cuvelai area.

<sup>288</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019; <https://www.warbooks.co.za/blogs/news/77937283-lest-we-forget-14-november>.

<sup>289</sup> OPS/402/09 Nov 87, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>290</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 6.c, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>291</sup> Interview with Johan Kruys, company commander of 1 Parachute Battalion on 19 May 2019.

<sup>292</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

Operation Firewood, namely, Second Lieutenant D.A.C. Bock, Corporal J.J. Bronkhorst, Lieutenant N.J.A Prinsloo, and Corporal T. Stander.<sup>293</sup> It seems probable that although their individual feats are not recounted in the book by Ian Uys, which has been cited extensively, the men would have been decorated for their roles in rescuing soldiers who were either in great distress or severely wounded, in the face of severe enemy fire, and the many lives which they helped to save at Indungo.<sup>294</sup>

## **5. Casualties suffered by the SADF during the carrying out of Operation Firewood**

Statistics concerning the numbers of soldiers who have been killed are of immense significance to historical assessments of the military battles which have been fought throughout the world. High numbers of casualties are indicators of both the significance of individual battles in world history and of the intensity with which they have been fought. Throughout the ages, the main aim of all battles, including the one which was fought during the course of carrying out Operation Firewood, is to inflict maximum casualties on the opposing side while sustaining as few as possible.

Although an early report by Colonel James Hill, the commanding officer, affords an initial assessment of the course which the battle at Indungo had taken, a fairly detailed official military report<sup>295</sup> which Hill sent at 23:00 on 31 October to Sector 10 Headquarters, the number of casualties which the Task Force had suffered was not included. The omission suggests that the report could have been compiled fairly haphazardly, probably without having conferred with the leaders of the lower formations of the Task Force. The circumstances under which he made the report, while the Task Force was in the process of withdrawing from the target area, after almost twelve hours of continuous fighting and the making of the report at almost midnight, suggest that he had experienced great difficulty in gathering accurate and

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<sup>294</sup> [https://wiki2.org/en/Honoris\\_Crux\\_\(1975\)#Recipients](https://wiki2.org/en/Honoris_Crux_(1975)#Recipients); I Uys, *Cross of Honor*, p. 134. Uys incorrectly cites a sixth soldier who received an Honoris Crux medal. Although he might have been associated with 101 Battalion, he did not participate in Operation Firewood.

<sup>295</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 11, Department of Defence Archival Services.

comprehensive information. He lacked access even to basic information to enable him to assess and to report on the physical condition of the soldiers who served under his command. The limitations which precluded him from accurately reporting losses and casualties is evident when he states in his report: 'It remains impossible to keep record of the soldiers who were killed and the soldiers who were wounded due to the fierce fighting that continued during the afternoon. It will be appreciated if the Admin HQ could confirm how many dead and wounded soldiers were evacuated from the area'.

In his next sentence, he assesses the SWAPO casualties as being characterised by 'heavy losses that were estimated between 100 and 150'.<sup>296</sup> By contrast, Snyman estimated that of the order of 200 SWAPO soldiers were killed during the carrying out of the operation, a significantly higher estimate than the one which appears in Hill's report.<sup>297</sup> The correct number of SWAPO soldiers who were killed remains uncertain because the soldiers of the Task Force would probably not have been able to make an accurate body count at Indungo, even if other factors had not constrained them from doing so, because it was already dark when they left the target area. As the soldiers would inevitably have been questioned concerning the numbers of dead bodies they had seen, any numbers which are cited would, at best, be rough estimates. Some soldiers had vivid recollections concerning the numbers of SWAPO soldiers they had killed, how SWAPO soldiers had been killed, and the states of the dead bodies which they had come upon. The soldiers were often able to make accurate observations, irrespective of the pressures to which they had been subjected as a consequence of fierce fighting or whether opportunities for doing so had been limited.

Hill's report does not contain information concerning the numbers of casualties which the Task Forces had sustained by the conclusion of the operation, but some information is provided by subsequent SADF reports and the accounts of some of the soldiers of the Task Force. Although Obie

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<sup>296</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 11, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>297</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 12, Department of Defence Archival Services; File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 7.a, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

Oberholzer provided a fairly detailed analysis<sup>298</sup> of the casualties which individual units of Task Forces suffered and the soldiers who were killed in action, even his analysis appears to be incomplete, as subsequent information has revealed.

According to Oberholzer, five soldiers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion were killed and four were wounded, but the official military report which was issued at the time sets the death toll at six.<sup>299</sup> The names of the members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion who were killed during the carrying out of Operation Firewood were:

- Rifleman Hugues Norbert de Rose (aged 21)
- Rifleman Wayne Valentine Ewels (aged 21)
- Lance Corporal Raymond Mark Light (aged 21).
- Corporal Nico Smith Olivier (aged 19)
- Rifleman Dirk Willem van Rooyen (aged 20)

Another report<sup>300</sup> confirms the names of five members of D Company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion who were killed.

According to a medical report, a sixth soldier, Rifleman Jean Mark Schuurman (aged 21), had sustained wounds at the battle at Indungo before he was evacuated to South Africa. Schuurman's name was added to an earlier list which was probably presented to the media, after he had died from his wounds on 1 November 1987, while he was flying over Botswanan airspace in a SAAF aircraft. The medical report should be accepted to be more accurate and comprehensive than that of Oberholzer and the military report, as it provides details of Schuurman's circumstances when he died.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Obie Oberholzer's report concerning the operation, which was presented during a conference at Pretoria on 27 October 2017.

<sup>299</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service.

<sup>300</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 14.h, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>301</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service.

The medical report also estimates that the wounded paratroopers numbered from twelve to fifteen soldiers. It also provides detailed descriptions of how some of the injuries were sustained. Several paratroopers sustained injuries which ranged from broken bones to smaller injuries as a result of some of the drivers crashing their vehicles into large trees. At least one soldier lost an eye and many more soldiers sustained shrapnel wounds during the attack itself.<sup>302</sup> Oberholzer maintained that one soldier from the 5<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment, Second Lieutenant Dylan Chevalier Cobbold, who was twenty years of age at the time, was killed, and four were wounded. Oberholzer also added that seven soldiers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reconnaissance Regiment were wounded and five from 101 Battalion had been killed. The latter figure has proven to be incorrect, as the names of three more soldiers have subsequently been added to the list of casualties for 101 Battalion. It is now generally accepted that eight soldiers from 101 Battalion were killed during the carrying out of Operation Firewood, all of whom died at Indungo on 31 October 1987.<sup>303</sup>

The names of the members of 101 Battalion who were killed during the carrying out of the operation are:<sup>304</sup>

- Captain Andries Hercules de Bruyn Rademeyer (aged 27)
- Second Lieutenant Deon Botes (aged 20)
- Sapper Erasmus Albertus Steyn (aged 19)
- Rifleman B. Abrahams (aged 25)
- Rifleman V. Petrus (aged 21)
- Rifleman P. Epafu (age unknown)
- Rifleman T. Sheepo (age unknown)
- Rifleman M. Vuushona (age unknown)

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<sup>302</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service.

<sup>303</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service.

<sup>304</sup> *Die Volksblad*, 3 November 1987; PERS OPS/451/01 Nov 87; Department of Defence Archival Services; PERS OPS/159/10 Nov 87, Department of Defence Archival Services.

The same eight names are also confirmed by another military report.<sup>305</sup> Although Snyman estimated that more than sixty soldiers from 101 Battalion, his own unit, had been wounded and evacuated owing to their injuries, the figure which he cited needs to be regarded as having emanated from a wild guess. Snyman was not privy to the official SADF medical reports when he was interviewed, the figure in all probability stemmed from unconfirmed information which had been passed on to him by other members of 101 Battalion. Although Oberholzer did not hazard how many soldiers of 101 Battalion had been wounded, an SADF medical report sets the figure at thirty-six, on the basis of records of soldiers who had received treatment for wounds.<sup>306</sup> He also disclosed that five soldiers from 75 Medical Battalion Group had been wounded.<sup>307</sup>

An official SADF medical report sets the final number of wounded soldiers of the Task Force at fifty-six.<sup>308</sup> As an SADF medical report is likely to be the most reliable source of information concerning numbers of casualties, this figure is accepted to be accurate. The medical records of the soldiers who had been wounded are detailed and fairly complete and, in most instances, the nature of the injuries which the soldiers had sustained is recorded.

Although the names of twelve soldiers who had been killed in action were reported at the time in *Die Volksblad*,<sup>309</sup> a South African newspaper, the names of Epafu, Sheepo, and Vuushona were not listed.<sup>310</sup> The report also stated that 150 SWAPO troops had been killed. *The Pretoria News*<sup>311</sup> was obviously drawing from the same source as *Die Volksblad*, as it reported that

<sup>305</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 14.h, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>306</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 8.b of the appendix titled 'Explanatory notes' to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood, in which it is stated that thirty-seven soldiers from 101 Battalion were wounded, and to paragraph 8.c, in which eight soldiers from 101 Battalion were confirmed to have died.

<sup>307</sup> Reflection by Obie Oberholzer.

<sup>308</sup> File MED 10 / UG / 309 / 1 op Firewood, February 1988, CF Scheepers collection box 10, Department of Defence Archival Service; An unidentified report which does not carry a heading.

<sup>309</sup> *Die Volksblad*, 3 November 1987.

<sup>310</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>311</sup> *The Pretoria News*, 3 November 1987; Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraphs 9.c.ii and 9.c.v of the annexure titled 'Explanatory notes' to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood. According to this report, the total number of enemy soldiers who were killed during the carrying out of Operation Firewood was estimated to be from 80 to 100. This number is also confirmed in paragraph 9.a, in which it is revealed that, according to the numbers which call signs 20 and 30 provided, sixty enemy bodies were counted at locations marked E, F, and G, and according to the numbers which call signs 20 and 42 provided that from 15 to 30 enemy bodies were recorded at locations marked A, C, and D.

twelve soldiers had been killed while serving in the SADF and the South West African Territory Force and that 150 members of SWAPO had also been killed.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

#### 1. Appraisal of Operation Firewood

During an official military debriefing on 15 March 1988, which was chaired on behalf of the Chief of the SADF by Brigadier Bestbier, a report was presented which covered a wide range of topics pertaining to Operation Firewood.<sup>312</sup>

According to the report, it was impossible to ascertain the extent of the damage which the Task Force had inflicted upon the enemy target at Indungo, as the force had withdrawn from the target area in great haste without conducting a proper assessment of the damage. The report also estimated that from 100 to 150 SWAPO soldiers had been killed by the Task Force at Indungo.<sup>313</sup>

The debriefing was also intended to generate an accurate evaluation of how effectively the SADF had managed to strike at an enemy base which was situated deep in southern Angola. Relevant considerations included the size of the Task Force which had been deployed and the long distances over rough terrain which the force had been obliged to travel before it could launch the attack at the target which had been identified at Indungo.<sup>314</sup>

By 1987, the SADF was making full use of its Casspir armoured vehicles. As it was explained earlier, the Casspir was designed and built specifically to cope with the types of rough terrain and treacherous conditions which were encountered by the Task Force en route to the target area. Normally the Casspir could be pushed to its limits and still be relied upon to perform adequately under extremely adverse conditions. During the carrying out of Operation Firewood, the tortuous journey to the target area was to expose the

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<sup>312</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>313</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>314</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

inherent weaknesses of these extraordinary vehicles and breakdowns were the inevitable consequence of pushing them beyond their limits.

In terms of durability, the Casspirs were not in the same class as the Ratel armoured vehicles of the SADF. Although the Casspirs were cheaper to manufacture and maintain, the Ratels were considerably tougher, as an Afrikaans idiomatic expression suggests. The English translation of 'so taai soos 'n ratel' is as tough or tenacious as a ratel or honey badger. Consequently, it should not be surprising that the report which Commandant Kruger submitted concerning Operation Firewood includes a request that in future operations, the more resilient Ratel armoured vehicles should replace the Casspirs.<sup>315</sup>

There were several expressions of surprise at the military conference concerning the ability which the enemy had displayed with respect to launching counter-attacks against the Task Force of the SADF. Although the performance of the SWAPO forces was considered as a rare occurrence during the Angolan Border War,<sup>316</sup> the SWAPO soldiers had proved themselves to be well disciplined, as they had responded not by fleeing, but by engaging 101 Battalion with a high level of commitment. By 1987, PLAN was a far better trained force than it had been at the beginning of the war and it had been able to make effective use of its anti-tank teams against the Casspirs. The SWAPO soldiers had been able to fire rapid volleys of RPG-7 rockets and they had also used the more advanced Soviet-manufactured RPG-75 rockets, which had disposable lightweight tubes. These weapons and the B-10 recoilless guns had provided their anti-tank teams with massive firepower which had enabled them to damage or destroy many Casspirs. The .30 and .50 Browning machine guns which protected the Casspirs and their crews had not been sufficient to prevent the launching of successful counter-attacks.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 5.a of the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

<sup>316</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 7.b.ii, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>317</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

Those present at the debriefing also gave due consideration to the lack of the type of support which could have been provided to the Task Force by artillery guns.<sup>318</sup> The support which had been provided by fire from 81-mm mortars mounted on the Ratels had been largely ineffective, despite the perceived suitability of the highly mobile Ratels for operations of the type which Operation Firewood had represented. In addition, the 127-mm Multiple Rocket Launchers, which would have enabled the Task Force to respond effectively to the tactics which SWAPO had employed, had not been available for the carrying out of Operation Firewood.<sup>319</sup> Conversely, artillery guns, such as the 140-mm G-2 howitzer, were not suitable for operations which were carried out deep in Angolan territory, as it was not possible to transport the guns over such long distances.

Those present at the debriefing also considered whether the main objective of Operation Firewood had been achieved, namely, to prevent SWAPO forces from entering South West Africa/Namibia in large numbers.<sup>320</sup> In the final analysis, the answer to the question was a resoundingly affirmative one, as the ability of SWAPO to infiltrate during the approaching annual rainy season had received a severe blow. As the attempts by SWAPO to establish its operational headquarters and other bases close to the border between South West Africa/Namibia and Angola in order to provide supplies and support to infiltrating SWAPO soldiers had once again been thwarted, SWAPO continued to be obliged to operate from bases which were situated far deeper inside of Angola. For SWAPO to have an effective guerrilla force, its soldiers needed to operate in areas in close proximity to South West Africa/Namibia, which enabled them to be within easy reach of their targets, to cause damage to infrastructure, and influence the local population. Instead their missions required them to travel on foot over distances of more than 300 kilometres.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 7.d.i and at p. A-5, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>319</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 when reference was made to paragraph 5.b of the annexure to the report on the reflection of Operation Firewood.

<sup>320</sup> File HLeer/d OPS / 309/1 OP Firewood B, Nabetracting - OP Firewood B, paragraph 7.e, Department of Defence Archival Services, 1 December 1987.

<sup>321</sup> H Leer/ D Sein/UG/309/1/op Firewood B, 15 March 1988, Department of Defence Archival Services.

It was also quite unprecedented that an SADF force should leave vehicles and equipment behind after carrying out an operation. After almost every attack on SWAPO bases before Operation Firewood, the SADF forces had retrieved all of their damaged vehicles. Operation Firewood had been unique in this respect, as the Task Force had left the Indungo area before all of its vehicles had been accounted for.<sup>322</sup>

A final analysis is provided in paragraph 15b of a document which bears the reference number OPS/070/311/31, in which the manner in which 101 Battalion was deployed during the attack is described as having been 'highly dangerous'.<sup>323</sup> This assessment indicates that the higher command disapproved of the risks which had been incurred during the deployment of the soldiers of 101 Battalion during the carrying out of the operation.

This official military report also acknowledges that the operations of the SADF which had been carried out under similar conditions as those under which Operation Firewood had been carried out, which had entailed attacking enemy targets deep in southern Angola, had been extremely difficult to accomplish. One of the operations to which the report referred in this context was probably Operation Colosseum of 3 November 1986, when the SADF forces suffered a similar fate. During both of the operations, the vehicles of the Task Forces had been subjected to a great deal of punishment as a consequence of travelling great distances over difficult and uneven terrain. In both instances, the recovery of damaged and destroyed vehicles from the remote areas in which the operations had been carried out had been extremely difficult.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019.

<sup>323</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 14.g, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>324</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 15.b, Department of Defence Archival Services.

## **2. An analysis of the reasons for the high numbers of casualties which were suffered by the Task Force during the carrying out of Operation Firewood**

From a careful analysis of the conditions which had prevailed during the carrying out of Operation Firewood, it becomes evident that a number of different factors contributed to the casualties which 101 Battalion suffered. The soldiers of some of the platoons of 101 Battalion which participated in Operation Firewood were inadequately trained, as the platoons had comprised mainly new recruits.<sup>325</sup> The relative rawness of the soldiers provides a plausible explanation for their inability to check the surprise attacks by SWAPO soldiers. Most of the companies of 101 Battalion were already being deployed as a segment of the Task Force for another operation, Operation Modulêr, in the Mavinga area, some 100 kilometres to the east of Indungo. It seems likely that the companies of 101 Battalion which were deployed in the Task Force for Operation Firewood had been made up of soldiers from sections which had not been selected to participate in the other operation and that they had been deployed for Operation Firewood because they had been the only soldiers who were available. In the heat of battle and while the SWAPO anti-tank teams were approaching, the platoon leaders of 101 Battalion fired their .30 and .50 calibre Browning machine guns without the support of small arms fire from the riflemen of the battalion. The soldiers did not remain in their defensive positions and instead chose to abandon their vehicles, to flee on foot to avoid being trapped inside their vehicles while SWAPO soldiers fired at them. During the chaos which ensued, they were not able to regroup and form up in proper formations to launch an effective counter-attack.

The Task Force either did not have a plan to fend off a surprise attack from SWAPO from the north of Indungo,<sup>326</sup> or, if there was a plan, it could not be implemented. Because a surprise attack from the north had not been

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<sup>325</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 14.h, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>326</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 14.b and 14.c, Department of Defence Archival Services. Colonel Hills was specific in his report when he made this remark.

anticipated, the soldiers had not been adequately trained to enable them to launch counter-attacks. A satisfactory explanation for why the leaders at the tactical operations headquarters were unable to maintain coordinated command and control over the companies of 101 Battalion appears to remain elusive. Possible reasons could be provided by the independent role which 101 Battalion had been accustomed to playing and the lack of integration of the battalion as a unit into the main force, which was made up of Recce Commandos and 'Valke' from the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion.

The support, in the form of heavy fire by artillery guns and Multiple Rocket Launchers, which the Task Force had lacked at Indungo, could have played a decisive role in neutralising the enemy forces permanently. The 81-mm mortar fire from Ratel armoured vehicles did little or nothing to compensate for the defensive firepower which the Task Force lacked at Indungo. The support which the mortars provided was ineffective, as the implementation of the plan to provide coordinated fire plan did not commence when it had been intended to do so. According to one report, the 81-mm mortars which were fired from the Ratels were not suitable for providing support fire to a mobile force such as 101 Battalion while it was on the move. Their maximum firing distance of not more than 5 kilometres also made the mortars relatively ineffective when they were required to be fired at targets which fell outside of their limited range. By contrast, artillery pieces are more effective under these conditions, because they have far greater ranges.<sup>327</sup>

The official military report assessed that it had been impossible to provide support fire from heavy artillery in the remote areas in which the operations inside of Angola had been carried out, as the heavy guns could not be deployed under the difficult circumstances which had prevailed at Indungo.<sup>328</sup> The Task Force suffered acutely as a consequence.

The members of the Task Force had difficulty in locating SWAPO anti-tank teams, before they commenced firing upon its positions. Had the Task Force

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<sup>327</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019 when reference was made to paragraphs 4.b and 5.b of the annexure to the report on the reflection of Operation Firewood

<sup>328</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 14.g, Department of Defence Archival Services.

deployed forward observation posts (FOPs) from suitable vantage points, the effectiveness of mortar fire within the ranges of its mortar teams could have been greatly increased by relaying appropriate targets to the mortar teams. The SWAPO anti-tank teams would not have been able to approach the positions of the Task Force or to fire at its soldiers from close range. In addition, SAAF aircraft were unable to identify enemy positions from the air, owing to their extremely limited overhead time. If the Task Force had been provided with information pertaining to SWAPO positions from aerial observations, the positions would have been known before SWAPO soldiers were able to attack.

The SAAF was not able to deploy Alouette gunship helicopters at Indungo, because it lacked the infrastructure to do so deep inside of southern Angola. When the Task Force attacked targets which were closer to Ionde, the gunship helicopters were able to provide covering fire from the vantage points which their height afforded them, which helped to halt the advance of enemy anti-tank teams. There was no temporary helicopter administration area (HAA) near the target area at Indungo from which Alouette gunship helicopters could be refuelled.

The commencement of the operation was delayed because H-hour, the scheduled time for the attack by the ground forces at Indungo, was postponed for more than an hour. Conversely, it appears from reports of the operation that the main Task Force still benefited from the element of surprise when the attack started. The soldiers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion and the Recces continued to fight until sunset. According to one report, the two groups of soldiers left the main target area early because their reserves of ammunition had become depleted.<sup>329</sup> The report indicates that some call signs from 101 Battalion assumed their roles at the main target area. Eventually, the lack of visibility which resulted from the onset of nightfall and the loss of several

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<sup>329</sup> Personal Interview with Chris Snyman at Pretoria on 16 March 2019, when reference was made to paragraph 15 of Appendix 1 to the annexure to the report concerning the reflection upon Operation Firewood.

officers who had been either injured or killed,<sup>330</sup> would almost certainly have contributed to 101 Battalion being obliged to withdraw from the target area.

It was always a distinct possibility that the MiG-21 and MiG-23 jet fighters of FAPLA, which enjoyed air superiority above the target area, could have been deployed to attack the Task Force from the air. The jet fighters of the SAAF were unable to match the performance of the advanced Soviet-manufactured fighters and the superior air-to-air missile systems with which FAPLA had been provided by the Soviet Union. The ground forces of the SADF took a calculated risk by launching an attack at Indungo without the support of an air force which enjoyed air superiority. The superior air power of FAPLA always posed a significant threat to the ground forces, as it was demonstrated at Mupa. At 18:00 on 2 November, two days after the carrying out of Operation Firewood, two enemy MiG fighters approached the Mupa area from a north-westerly direction, flying at very low altitudes, and launched an air-to-ground missile attack on the positions of SADF soldiers. Five members of the SADF were injured during the air strike.<sup>331</sup>

Had FAPLA elected to attack the SADF ground forces from the air, the Task Force could have been completely destroyed. The plan of the Task Force for the attack at Indungo entailed completing the operation in a short space of time, within a single day, and leaving the target area under the cover of night. It is almost certain that enemy aircraft would have struck the positions of the Task Force if its soldiers had remained longer at Indungo.

After Operation Firewood, the SADF sought to develop suitable alternatives to replace the Alouette gunship helicopters and its armoured cars, which had been superseded by the Soviet-manufactured aircraft and tanks. The old equipment could not be utilised effectively at Indungo, owing to the terrain which needed to be traversed and the long distances which needed to be travelled, although suitable replacements for the old equipment had yet to be developed and manufactured. Now that thirty more years have elapsed after

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<sup>330</sup> OPS/070/311/31 October 1987, 312300B, paragraph 15.a, Department of Defence Archival Services.

<sup>331</sup> File OPS / 375 / 02 November 1987 and OPS/385/3 November 87, Department of Defence Archival Service; P Nortje, *The Terrible Ones, A Complete History of 32 Battalion*, Volume 2, p. 971.

the conclusion of the Angolan Border War, the SANDF, the successor to the SADF, has access to modern Rooivalk attack helicopters and 90-mm Rooikat anti-tank armoured vehicles. Although they were already in their developmental stages in 1987, they became ready to be deployed under battle conditions only after the Angolan Border War ended in 1989. Had these weapons been available, the outcome of the battle at Indungo may well have been significantly different.<sup>332</sup> The battle at Indungo was the last large-scale attack on a SWAPO base during the Angolan Border War. Although it was a unique battle in its own right, the SADF was not able to put the lessons which it learnt from it into practice, as the war was soon to draw to a conclusion.

### **3. How the Angolan Border War ended**

It needs to be emphasised that the Angolan Border War did not end after the battle of Indungo. A further seventeen months were to elapse before the final shots were fired and the war ended on 4 April 1989. The war was also not concluded by a decisive military outcome. Politicians who represented the opposing parties held exploratory discussions which were followed by peace talks in London in May of 1988.<sup>333</sup> These discussions were followed again by more peace talks in Brazzaville,<sup>334</sup> in Cairo,<sup>335</sup> and in New York. Finally, the Brazzaville Protocol was signed in New York on 13 December 1988,<sup>336</sup> which was ratified by the Security Council of the United Nations on 22 December 1988.

The implementation of Resolution 435 of the United Nations required the Cuban Forces to withdraw from Angola and the SADF to withdraw from the territory of South West Africa/Namibia during 1989 and 1990. The resolution also stipulated a UN-supervised election in South West Africa/Namibia. Namibia became independent after the first democratic election was held in the country. The Namibian National Assembly elected Sam Nujoma, the president of SWAPO, as president on 16 February 1990, which was followed

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<sup>332</sup> J Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers: The Story of South Africa's 32 Battalion, 1975-1993*, p. 40.

<sup>333</sup> L Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966-1989*, p. 422.

<sup>334</sup> L Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966-1989*, p. 425.

<sup>335</sup> L Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966-1989*, p. 424.

<sup>336</sup> L Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966-1989*, p. 427.

by a state ceremony, in which he was sworn in as the first president of a free Namibia on 21 March 1990.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> P Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969-1994*, p. 552 to p. 555.

**APPENDIX: Specific military operations by the SADF during the Angolan Border War: Dates of D-days or dates when major battles took place, code names of operations, and locations where battles took place.**

| <b>Date</b> | <b>Operation</b> | <b>Location</b>  |
|-------------|------------------|--|
| 26-Aug-66   | Blouwildebees    | Ongulumbashe   |
| 14-Oct-75   | Savannah         | Cela area (Eboon 24-Nov-75 and Bridge 14 on 12-Dec-75)     |
| 29-Oct-77   | Kropduif         | Eheke  |
| 04-May-78   | Reindeer         | Chetequera and Cassinga                                    |
| 21-May-80   | Tiro-Tiro        | Savate   |
| 10-Jun-80   | Sceptic          | Smokeshell in the Chifufua area                            |
| 24-Aug-81   | Protea           | Xangongo and Ongiva  |
| 04-Nov-81   | Daisy            | Bambi  |
| 12-Mar-82   | Super            | Cambeno Valley   |
| 19-Aug-82   | Meebos           | Mupa area  |
| 12-Jun-83   | Dolfyn           | Jaula area   |
| 31-Dec-83   | Askari           | Cahama, Mulondo, Quiteve, Techamutete, Caiundo and Cuvelai |
| 11-Feb-85   | Forte            | Bale River area  |
| 12-Sep-85   | Egret            | Mavinga  |
| 23-Jun-86   | Suiderkruis      | Cuito Cuanavale  |
| 06-Aug-86   | Alpha Centari    | Mavinga  |
| 31-Oct-87   | Firewood         | Indungo  |
| 10-Sep-87   | Modulêr          | Lomba River  |
| 13-Jan-88   | Hooper           | Cuito Cuanavale  |
| 23-Mar-88   | Packer           | Cuito Cuanavale  |

## MAPS AND ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1: A copy of the map, used by the SADF, of the operational area at the South West African border with Angola during the Angolan Border War.

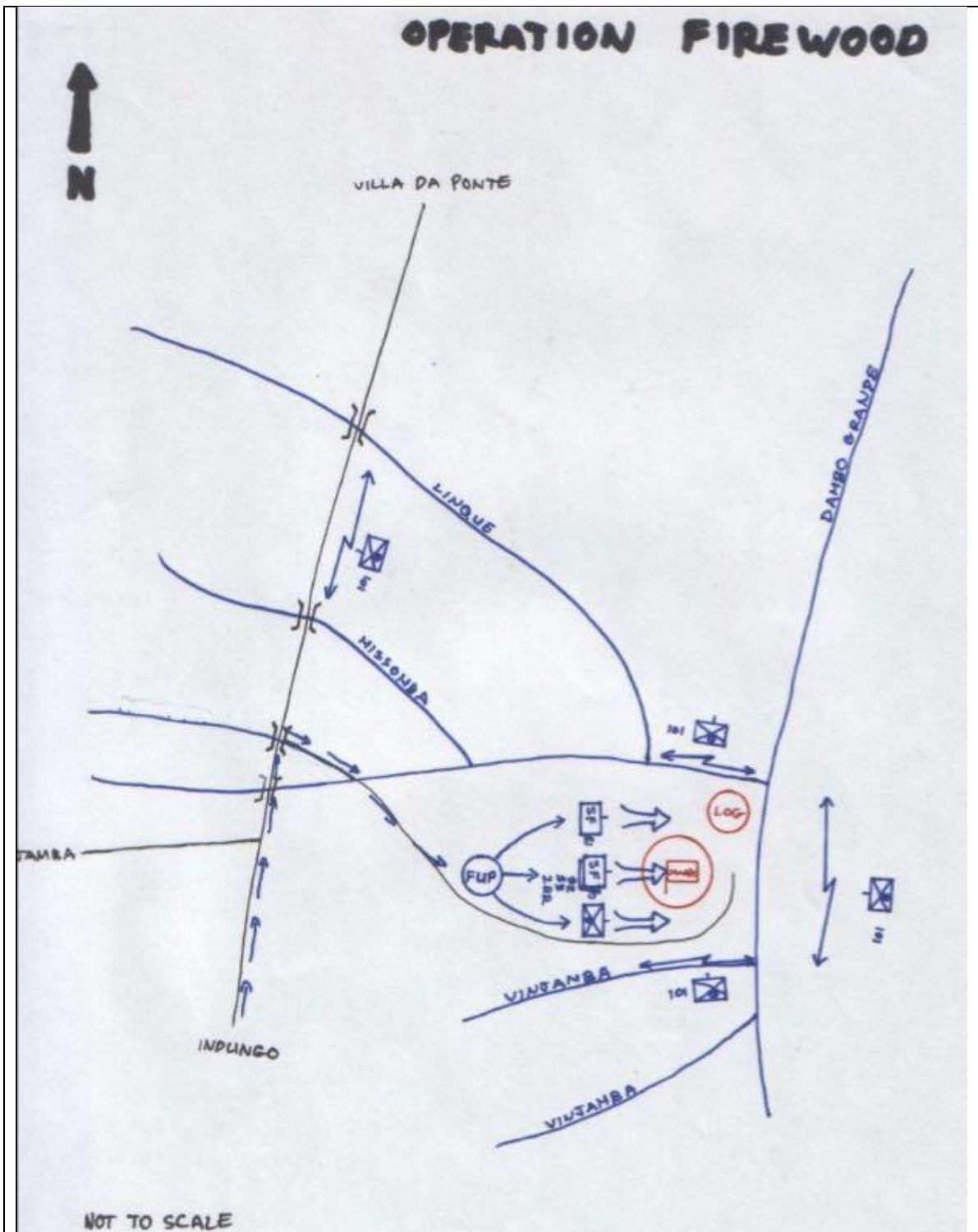


Fig. 2: A map of the attack on the SWAPO base during the battle at Indungo on 31 October 1987.

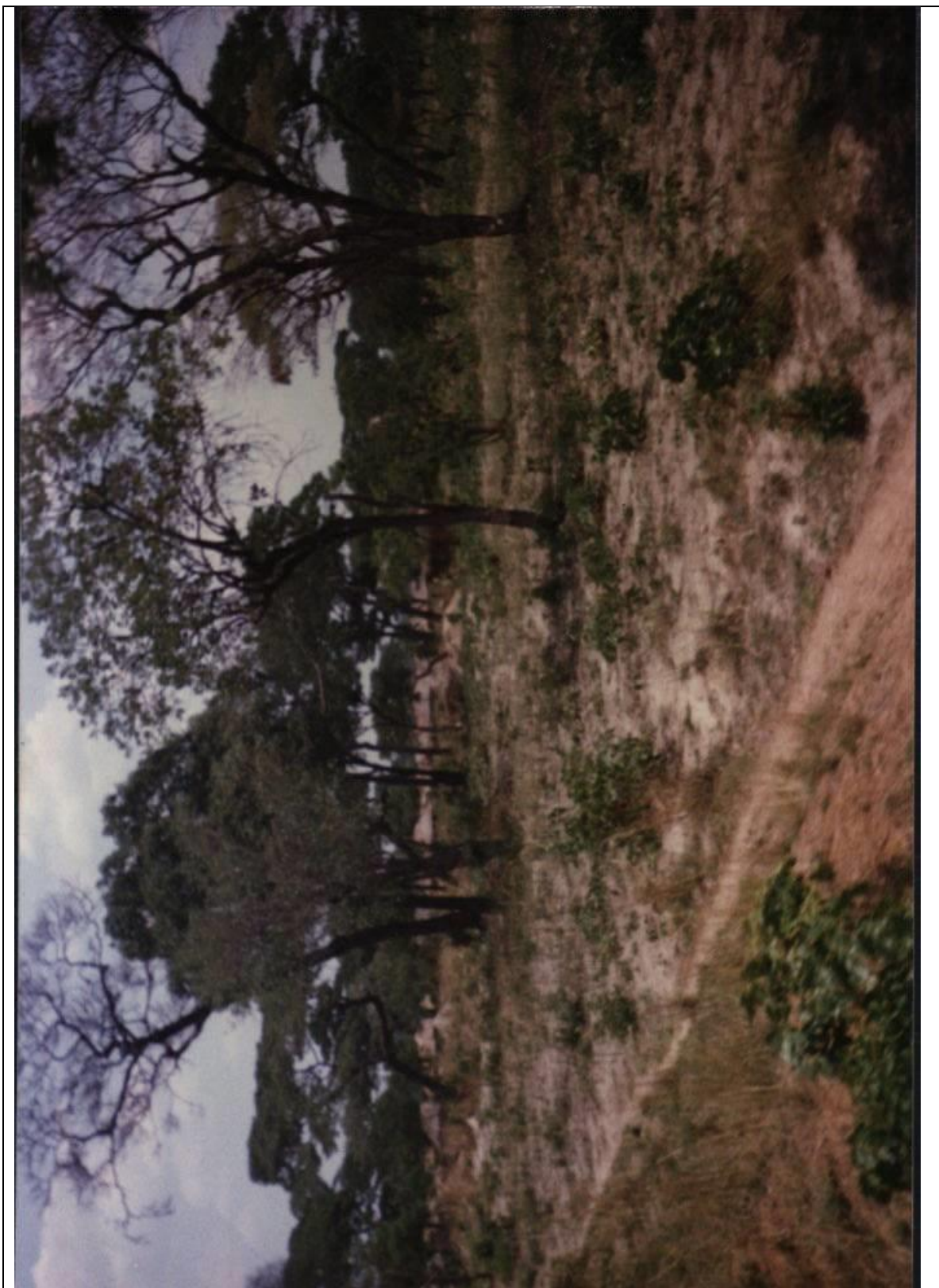


Fig. 3: The SWAPO base at Indungo during the battle at Indungo on 31 October 1987.



Fig. 4: The village of Ilaula which housed SWAPO's soldiers near Indungo during the battle at Indungo on 31 October 1987.



Fig. 5: The destroyed Casspirs of Second Lieutenant Anton Botes, at the back, and Lieutenant Pierre Blignaut, in the front, at the battle at Indungo on 31 October 1987.



Fig. 6: The SADF Casspir Call Sign 33B, which had been captured at the battle at Indungo on 31 October 1987, displayed by Cuban soldiers.



Fig. 7: The SADF Casspir Call Sign 33B with a Buffalo Mine Protected Vehicle. Both vehicles were captured at the battle at Indungo on 31 October 1987 and displayed by Cuban soldiers.

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