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TRANSCRIPTION FAX SHEET

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DATE:

Please note:

1. When typist is unsure of names, speakers will be identified by title.
2. Transcriptions are typed verbatim, and typist, when unsure of jargon and industry terms, will do phonetic spelling followed by (unsure)

INTERVIEWER: It's June 14th, and we are in Centurion, and I'm interviewing Nico van der Walt ... Nico can you just tell us a little about your background, where you come from originally ...

NICO VAN DER WALT: I was born in South Africa and I grew up in the Western Transvaal, and born on a farm and also grew up on a farm ... for the first part of my school education and went to Pretoria, and I was born (inaudible), South Africa was very pro National Party at that stage, as I already experienced it in ... we had to do national service ... which was also seen as just another part in a young man's life in the middle eighties.

INTERVIEWER: So you attended high school in Pretoria?

NICO VAN DER WALT: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: And did you anticipate ... I mean were you looking forward to doing you national service? Was it a positive thing?

NICO VAN DER WALT: In a sense I would say yes, I think they had very good programmes, having on field schools at that stage to prepare the youth for national service, the boys actually had to joint the cadets and the girls also had these programmes where they actually were, they'd say, taught how to support the boys and go to the army for two years ... (laughs) ... you know, so they had all these programmes at school, that actually ... made the youth, I would say, more prone towards this whole, let's say, effort that was at that stage ... of fighting Communism, and ...defending South Africa from its enemies.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any kids in your school that seemed that they didn't want to national service or were against it? I mean was there dissent at that point? Among the people your age?

NICO VAN DER WALT: I don't think the school where I was, it was ... I would say very pro ... what can I call it ... establishment, school at that stage, it was an Afrikaans school

and we were taught that there was this, you know, onslaught against South Africa, total onslaught, and we had to defend our country, so there was this patriotism, one could actually, you know, see and experience I would say the whole school at that stage ...

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember what the ... and you mentioned just now that the girls were prepared to sort-of support the men who were going to join the army ... what sort of things did this involve?

NICO VAN DER WALT: I know they did ... even the courses like say, first aid courses, and stuff like that ... not much on the tactical side, but more, let's say, psychological ... conditioning maybe, towards this whole effort that there was at that stage, to make them more positive about guys and possible boyfriends that would go on a two-year stint ... things like that. I know we had, we actually had, there was a day in the week, let's say Wednesday or Friday or Thursday, anybody would know that that was ... as we would say, "jeugweerbaarheid" stuff you know, sort of cadets periods, most of the day we'd spend for that you know ... where they ... where the boys would go and they'd do drilling and target shooting and stuff like that, and the girls would get lectures on the onslaught and get other courses like first aid courses and things like that ... so ja, that was part of our school and the passion(?) at that stage ...

INTERVIEWER: Were the guys who were best at the drills and shooting and things more popular with the girls?

NICO VAN DER WALT: That's a good question ... (laughs) ... I think with certain girls maybe ...

INTERVIEWER: Certain girls ... okay ... Tell me, what did your mother and father do when you were a child? When you were growing up?

NICO VAN DER WALT: I come from a, let's say a farming community ... my dad and my mother actually gave up their studies to go farming, my grandfather passed away and my dad had to take over the farm, and he was actually studying psychology at that stage

and my mother became a music teacher, which she still is today ... my dad actually, eventually got to finish his studies as well, psychology and he became a businessman as well, but he actually also became involved with the military you see ... you know at that stage they would use the citizen force wherever they could, and his knowledge and also he had very good background knowledge of Angola ... he toured Angola quite extensively, and that's why we moved, to Pretoria ... he assisted the army regarding Angola ...

INTERVIEWER: When you say he toured Angola, you mean in a sort of leisure way?

NICO VAN DER WALT: Ja, ja he would take his ... 4x4 and his caravan ... we went with him a few times when I was a small boy ... he'd go on holiday, vacation and spend a few weeks in Angola, before the ... civil war started ...

INTERVIEWER: So before independence ... when Angola was still a Portuguese colony ...

NICO VAN DER WALT: Before '75/'76 ... I remember the last time we went there, was in '74 ... beautiful country ...

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so your father was also with the military ... were there other military people in your family? Was it anything like a family tradition?

NICO VAN DER WALT: No ... nothing like that. Actually we are all farming and academically as well ... my grandfather was a journalist ...

INTERVIEWER: What year did you do your national service?

NICO VAN DER WALT: I started in 1986 ... and I was elected to do a junior leader's course in Oudtshoorn to become an officer and then ... I knew about 32 Battalion, before I went there, because of my father's involvement ... and after the course my plans was to join the unit and ... spend a few more months or years with Defence as possible ...

INTERVIEWER: How had you heard about 32 Battalion and what did you know about them?

NICO VAN DER WALT: I went with my father to Rundu at one stage and I saw these guys walking around with their camouflage, berets ... not the common regular soldier, but I saw and I asked around, and then I heard about this battalion. It was quite secretive at that stage, you know I had to do a few enquiries before I got the whole story of the battalion and it was just fascinating ... you know I was a boy of about twelve or thirteen years old and it fascinated me at that stage, and to have ... this sort of secret battalion that was actually ex-Angolan fighting there, in Angola ... so ... it sounded like quite an adventure and then from there it was something that I wanted to do .. I would say wanted to do because you knew that you had to go and do national service ... and I think that is one thing I've learnt, from my grandfather that is, if you have to do something you ... do it good, while there do it good and well, so that is why I decided to go and join a unit like that.

INTERVIEWER: So you turned an obligation – national service – into something that you ...

NICO VAN DER WALT: Ja it was an opportunity ...

INTERVIEWER: When you saw the soldiers walking around ... did you see some of the Angolan soldiers as well? The black soldiers?

NICO VAN DER WALT: Ja, I saw some of them, I heard things you know ... talking and speaking Portuguese ...

INTERVIEWER: And what did you think of them? Do you remember the impression you got from them?

NICO VAN DER WALT: Ja ... it was ... I would almost say an exotic impression I got, from these people ... you know, these foreigners speaking Portuguese, and they ... they gave me an exotic feeling, I would say. ... Out of the ordinary ... (chuckles) ...

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so ... let's go back to your national service. What do you remember the best about the time you were doing national service? Just describe the

period a little to me, the training ...

NICO VAN DER WALT: The first year was ... not that exciting, we were actually ... as I said, I was ready to go and do a junior leader course in Oudtshoorn, and although I think it was very good training, there was not really an excitement in it then ... as we were expecting ... we would go up to the border. That was something I think, that played a very important part in many young guy's life at that stage, was the excitement ... that you associated with going up to the border and actually partaking in battles and stuff, so although the junior leader course was I would say, a very tough time in my life, it was not the highlight ... the highlight started when I went to Chetiquera (unsure), you know the first day when I got to the Battalion, we knew about this Battalion, we knew that they were seen actual (inaudible word), and you had to prove yourself to get into the unit, for a start, you know they had these orientation courses, the selection courses, and then ... that was a highlight you know, passing the selection course. And then actually getting ... or becoming part of the units ... and then I would say 1987 and 1988 ... were the two most exciting years of my life, when it comes to that part of my life, because we got to particular operations ... the big ones like... the battle of Cuito Carnivale (?) and then the ops pigeontaled (inaudible ...) and then we did, I also partook in the last guerrilla operation we did, and in central (inaudible) where I had to do clandestine mortar bomb (inaudible word) of bases and things like that, you know that was quite exciting. I would say that was one of the highlights ... ja, that I would say was one of the highlights.

INTERVIEWER: So your period of service with 32 Battalion was 1986 ...

NICO VAN DER WALT: 1987 ... ja and then we were given the option of joining for longer, I was short service or permanent force and at that stage Permanent Force looked like a better option although I didn't want to make the army my career ... it was just one big adventure at that stage, so I joined Permanent Force and I stayed with that unit until 1990 ... just after the unit came down to South Africa and when I resigned.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Your decision to carry on, after national service ... to carry on with 32 Battalion, did ... what influenced this decision? You say it was an adventure, but were you also quite aware of the security situation and the political situation ...did this have any influence on your decision? What was your understanding of what was happening ... in South Africa at the time?

NICO VAN DER WALT: Happening in South Africa ... we were actually not that part of, I have to admit ... I saw myself as part of the fight against communism you know, and ... in a sense yes, that was a noble cause to fight for at that stage, that's how we saw it ... the situation in South Africa was very far away, it was almost as if it was something that was happening on the moon at that stage, we were not ... really part of that ... all I knew of South Africa was we called it "The States" ...we referred to The States at that time ... it was when we would come down for leave, two weeks in every six months, the rest of the time you were there up in Namibie(?) and most of the time spending in Angola ... and fighting a bush war there. So we were separated from this whole issue in South Africa.

INTERVIEWER: And your experience of race relations is probably quite different ..

NICO VAN DER WALT: Ja, ja, it was ...

INTERVIEWER: ... in 32 Battalion than it was for the average South African?

NICO VAN DER WALT: I think so, definitely, I mean with pre-selection, when we were still in Infantry School and we went to see the guys from 32, the selectors, they told us ... the first thing they told us was that we had to keep in mind that our troops will be black, and Portuguese speaking ... so we had to make that decision then, are we going to work with black troops and going to speak Portuguese ...

INTERVIEWER: Was there anyone who turned that down at that stage? Who said I don't want to work with black troops and I'm not interested in learning Portuguese?

NICO VAN DER WALT: I think by that time everybody knew already what the unit was about, so there would only be just the few guys who were really interested in going to the

Battalion ... that ended up at the table, and filling in the application forms to go to 32 ...
let's say five or six or seven guys out of a total of thousands ...

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any friends who were coming along with you, or were you pretty much by yourself?

NICO VAN DER WALT: Only friends I made in Infantry School ... not friends from school or so, no ...

INTERVIEWER: Only Infantry School ...but you carried on, I mean you served alongside some of the people who were at infantry school ...

NICO VAN DER WALT: That's right ...

INTERVIEWER: ... but Infantry School you did after national service?

NICO VAN DER WALT: No, no that's the first year that I ... when I did my junior leader course ... that's Infantry School ... We were actually, I would say a few guys, three or four, who ... some who got to know each other and we knew would go the 32 Battalion, who wanted to go to 32 Battalion, at Infantry School, we became good buddies and friends and then the selectors came down for the 32 pre-selection and from there further ...

INTERVIEWER: What was the selection like? Was it similar to recce selection?

NICO VAN DER WALT: I think ... ja, probably ... ja, quite similar to that, pre-selection at Infantry School consisted of physical tests and psychological tests and ... then we had an orientation phase where we went to Buffalo, which I think was much like the special forces orientation, they also have this (inaudible word) I think they call it, and then we had a selection march, as well, so ja it was quite similar to that, I think.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a bit about the psychological tests ... Do you remember them at all?

NICO VAN DER WALT: Ja it was actually questionnaires we had to fill it ... just normal what-do-they-call it, I can't remember the name, just the normal ...

INTERVIEWER: IQ test or ...?

NICO VAN DER WALT: Ja. IQ test and other tests as well ... you'd get a question they asked you ... there is a truck coming, you know racing down a hill, on the one side there is an old man walking, on the other side there is a child walking and you know the truck is going to hit one of the two, which one will you save ...those type of questions they'd ask you ...

INTERVIEWER: And to you think that those sort of tests, were they effective in separating the people who were psychologically suitable and the people who weren't? ... Or were they a bit ... were they a bit of a joke?

NICO VAN DER WALT: I don't think so ... it is difficult to say ... I think it is difficult to say ... it's always been, I think, a controversial issue, psychological tests ...

INTERVIEWER: I always kind-of had the impression that it was the physical training that was also a bit of a psychological test ...

NICO VAN DER WALT: Ja ... ja ... I think, at 32 they also emphasised that, the physical side ...

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel during the physical training that your psychological endurance was being tested as well?

NICO VAN DER WALT: I think so, ja definitely ...

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so now you've passed, and you're in 32 Battalion. Tell me about your first day at school ... (laughs) ... what was it like? How did people treat you? The people who were already there?

NICO VAN DER WALT: Okay the Battalion's motto is "Privio Precusi"(?) which means "forwards/forged(?) in battle", so how it works at 32, after you've done your orientation and selection, there is a whole experience ... how we experienced it. You actually were not part of the unit ... yet, you had to prove yourself. And as a junior leader, of an officer, you had to prove yourself as a good leader for the troops, they would scrutinise you, and

you ... you were aware of that ... so yes, first day at school was not ... like being a person who has arrived at his new position ... actually I would say, a bit uncertain of what was lying ahead ...

INTERVIEWER: Like the real test was about to begin ...

NICO VAN DER WALT: Ja, the real test was now to begin.

INTERVIEWER: And do you know of anyone who bluffed, or who ... sort-of didn't survive these initial days, of being tested by the black troops, you know check to try and see what your leadership qualities were, was there anyone who didn't make it through that 'prove yourself' phase?

NICO VAN DER WALT: No so much being tested by the troops, but there was one guy who, after his first combat, he came and said, no I'm not able to do this, and he left. Another guy asked for a transfer to Askew, not so much of that, I think it was more of a personal problem, but ... I think we, if I remember correctly, we were about nine guys, new junior leaders from Infantry School, and out of the nine, seven remained ...

INTERVIEWER: And did you sort-of have the attitude that you were about to learn something from these black troops who had been there for a while?

NICO VAN DER WALT: Oh yes definitely. Ja, it was ... it was almost a tit-for-tat situation, you know we were there to look after them from a junior leader's side, we were going to look after them and also lead them, but they were actually the skilled fighters as well as the bush ... experienced, they knew the bush ground and we were going to learn this from them ... so ja it was, you know the one teach the other the situation, from both sides ...

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever have any doubts about working with these Angolans, I mean who were, at an earlier stage of their lives, part of a liberation struggle, in the same way that FAPLA or SWAPO already came with ... did you every sort-of reflect on that and think, well who are these people who we are fighting alongside?

NICO VAN DER WALT: What is interesting is ... just the other day I spoke to one of the officers who had been with the unit in the early phase, 1976/1977, and they had that experience, sort of ...they still had this idea, or this feeling, let's say feeling, of these guys being liberation fighters and they still had the full unit, whereas we joined later ... I didn't experience it like that, I saw these soldiers as SADF soldiers fighting with us, and fighting communism, because that's what was also said you know, that we were fighting communism in Angola ... so ja, there was never this idea that ... that I had ...

INTERVIEWER: So you never doubted that ... you didn't doubt their loyalty?

NICO VAN DER WALT: No I never doubted them ... no ...

INTERVIEWER: Tell me, the liberation movement, they all had their political commissars ... did you have any sort-of indoctrination, any political messages ... brought to you in 32 Battalion, was that a part of your ...

NICO VAN DER WALT: No .. it's most interesting, we never had that ... as a matter of fact, although there was this anti-communist sentiment, the main thing that started taking over was, I think (inaudible) we were fighting (inaudible ...) ... the way the unit was treated by other South African units as well, it was difficult to say what ... how other units perceived us, but there was ... you could feel there was this distance between us and other units, so we basically became ... how can I say, empire on our own ...

INTERVIEWER: A microcosm ...

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