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TRANSCRIPTION FAX SHEET

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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, industry terms or individual's names, will type phonetic spelling followed by (unsure)

INTERVIEWER: It's October the 6th 2005, and this is an interview with Brigadier Gert Nel in Pretoria. Shall we start from the beginning and tell me how you ended up in the military.

BRIG GERT NEL: Well, when I was at school I wanted to become a pilot. My father was involved in the part-time forces and he was a commandant in those days, lieutenant-colonel, and I was brought up in a military house to say that ... but it just happened that I went to Air Force Gymnasium, I did all the tests, but before I could do the selection my father refused to sign the papers, telling me that he will not allow me to be trained in aircraft that we were using at that stage ... Harvard aircraft, and I spent my year and I left, and then I became an engineer. But in the meantime, Parachute Battalion was established, but I stayed in the part-time forces. I did a lot of courses in the military then, and the moment I read about Parachute Battalion, I knew that's where I wanted to be. I only worked ten months as a qualified engineer, when I joined Parachute Battalion as an infanteer, not in my profession. I spent ten years in Parachute Battalion ... ten of the most wonderful years any soldier can ...

INTERVIEWER: What years were those?

BRIG GERT NEL: Parachute Battalion.

INTERVIEWER: But which years were you ...?

BRIG GERT NEL: I jointed the military in 1963, and I stayed until 1973, in the meantime I did all the possible courses, even the army staff course, in those ten years ... and, then they transferred me to the Army College, where I was an instructor in tactics for the South African Army. And from there they sent me to the Defence College, I was an instructor there, also again in tactics. And ... then the Army took over, with the possibility to fight the land war. Before that it was an organisation, the fighting of air force... actually coordinated, the army, air force and navy, wherever they were involved. But in 1974, it was given the land battle to the army, the air battle to the air force and the sea battle to the ... and then one of the ... I was actually asked, if I would be the first Staff Officer,

Operations for the army. Which I agreed to, and then I started as a Staff Officer Operations. Actually for fighting the war in Namibia against SWAPO. Not very long after that Savannah started, and I was very much involved ... first from army Headquarters in Savannah, you can say from Headquarters side, not on the ground fighting ... actually organising, doing the planning, et cetera, et cetera. And then, when we started our own organisation, which is Task Force, I was then sent to be the Staff Officer Operations for 101 Task Force, who was responsible for the latter part of Savannah. After that ... that was the beginning of '76, I'm talking about now, when we moved ...

INTERVIEWER: You were in Pretoria?

BRIG GERT NEL: No I was born ... the latter part I was in Rundu and in Angola, but ...

INTERVIEWER: You were going to Rundu then ...

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja, but as a staff officer, not as a ... operational officer, but controlling the operations, you understand ...

INTERVIEWER: What do you remember ... this is now the tail end of Operation Savannah?

BRIG GERT NEL: No, from the ... very start of the operation, then I was in army Headquarters, when we started the Operation Savannah ... you must remember we had General Viljoen, he was then the Director of Operations, and I was his Staff Officer Operations ... so we were responsible for Savannah from army Headquarters side, and then they sent me to General van Deventer, to assist him, was the Task Force Commander for the whole Savannah, so I was involved from the very, very start till the closing down of Savannah. During... so that is my military background, how I, from Parachute Battalion, sent as instructor, again instructor, then we got involved in operations and that's how I came back to South Africa and ... meantime Jan Breytenbach got hold of people, his Bravo Group ex-people plus a lot of people at the (inaudible place name) in Chitido, it's the most western part of Angola, where we placed them. And he took them, and his Bravo Group and he moved them to the Okavango and

then to start ... fighting against SWAPO in Angola. Once again, the logistics and the planning and that through army Headquarters was my responsibility, as Staff Officer Operations. He was the OC and it was his unit, but he had to get somebody on top to help him, and that was me.

INTERVIEWER: Okay ... so there was Col Breytenbach and ... have you seen the unit at this stage, this unit that was made up of Angolans, there must have been a lot of scepticism then?

BRIG GERT NEL: That was in the unit at that stage, Bravo Group was just a ...

INTERVIEWER: Okay it wasn't a unit yet, but it was a battle group?

BRIG GERT NEL: It was a battle group ... it wasn't a unit, but he utilised them to try and prevent SWAPO from coming down, but in the meantime it wasn't SWAPO coming down ... it was the MPLA moving down, and they became so strong with ... the superior weapons, armoured cars and whatever, that they chased probably to the borders of Namibia. It was quite ... there were a few losses, not ... a few losses at that stage. But the success was there, and the fact that it was all Angolans doing it, and they voluntarily did that ... In any case, they did quite well for themselves, so much so that Jan Breytenbach convinced the generals that we should make a safe(?) unit.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about this transition between Operation Savannah and Bravo Group ... So Bravo Group came out of Operation ... some of the members of Bravo Group were involved in Operation Savannah, and they were FNLA correct?

BRIG GERT NEL: Most of them were ... there were a few UNITA amongst them. That's why I say it were refugees ... Bravo Group people were still ... just north of Rundu, about three-four hundred kilometres north, but over three thousand other refugees, or ex combatants of Savannah, but also their women and their children, and other strugglers were sent to Chitado, maybe I must give you that bit of history.

INTERVIEWER: I think so too because I'm having trouble getting clarity on who was, you know, a soldier in the FNLA and who was a refugee, and where exactly people were

recruited, it's all a bit ...

BRIG GERT NEL: Let me just explain what happened near to the end of Savannah ... South African soldiers were fighting there, mostly, well all of them were Permanent Force, or National Servicemen, and the battle servicemen had to clear out and the Permanent Force had to get home, because they were there for about six months without being home once, or anything like that. So the task was given to us, Operations, to get the Citizen Force ... call them up and take them to do the defensive line in Angola, stopping whoever, MPLA , Cubans or whatever moving down to Namibia. So I was at the stage at Sá da Bandeira and I had to regroup all the battle groups that came from the north, and regroup their weapons, so that I could hand over that citizen force regiments that came in. At that stage, the Americans said ... but while I was busy with this, the American said they're not interested any further, and we decided to withdraw completely, and not establish defence position in Angola.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you suppose it was cut short? A lot of people reflect on this and ... even Col Breytenbach says we did the whole thing with one hand tied behind our backs, I mean why ...

BRIG GERT NEL: The CIA was involved ... in those years the CIA did things without ... the American government knowing they were. At the 70's, you read history you'll find out the 70's, the CIA ran wild in America, they did not ... many things the Government didn't know about, that was one ... they had their political ideas and they helped UNITA and they helped us ... when all of a sudden they thought this is becoming too big and they ... well they pulled out, but nevertheless while I was at Sá da Bandeira, (now Lubango) because I was then in charge of all the battle groups, the moment they came to Sá da Bandeira, they were actually – how can you say – their command was taken away from them, they were just ordinary soldiers that had to go back, and I was then in command, re-organising their battle groups, making sure that they go to where they were supposed to go to... but at one stage ... UNITA came to me, their leader, and told me that there is

a group coming down from the northern areas, causing a lot of problems, and they are shooting at UNITA, when they see UNITA they just shoot at them you know, also where they had posts, and things like that, and they told me that when they come through, they are going to actually try and do revenge ... so I had agreement with them, try and unarm those people, and stop them from carrying on the way they were doing. And I did that. About 15 kilometres north of Sá da Bandeira, I unarmed them, but at that stage there were over 3 000 people, about thousand plus call it soldiers who belonged to one or other battle group, and women and children and mothers and fathers, with lorries, and cars ... they were actually then, a lot of ... like refugees, because there was a lot of refugees as well. When I came inside there were 15 000 refugees which I also had to get down south, so that they could get out of the way, they also ... then they became refugees. The soldiers went back to South Africa but these Angolans then were refugees.

INTERVIEWER: But some of them had been soldiers? Previously...

BRIG GERT NEL: Most of them, but the men ... I would say 90% plus of them were soldiers, or fighters, let's put it this way, because they were not soldiers they were fighters, they were actually fighting without our leadership and their own leadership like Quoti was a lieutenant colonel. In his own regiment, it is not only leadership, their leadership as well. So what happened there is, they started to ... when I put them in the same place where I had about ten thousand refugees, place called Dongo about two hundred and forty kilometres from Sá da Bandeira south towards Namibia, and there they started, when they got there, started taking money, valuables and ... like I say, like real criminals, from those refugees there, so I had to unarm them for a second time, because they had weapons and that still in the lorries, I only took the weapons they had with them, I didn't know they had so many other weapons and ammunition and stuff with them.

INTERVIEWER: So they were not really under any command at this stage, they were ...?

BRIG GERT NEL: Well, not really, they were ... gangs, some of them were still under South African command, but they actually were handing over to me, see, so the moment they hand over they are not military any more, they became refugees. Now, to get them out of my hair and to get my other work done, I placed them as far west as I could, out of the way, where they could do no harm to nobody, because there was nobody ...

INTERVIEWER: So you moved the lot of them out there? You moved the lot of them out to the western ...?

BRIG GERT NEL: The whole ... all that three thousand, four thousand people were there that night, I moved in toto to a place west ... of the dam, of Ruakana waterfall.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, but not ... this is not the Caprivi now, you just ...

BRIG GERT NEL: That was in Angola ... but when Jan Breytenbach came, and he had the idea, that he wanted to use these people, he first had his Bravo Group, but his Bravo Group was not enough, so he knew about all those people then ... so he went and he took, he brought those people over with his Bravo Group. Okay, so that were, let's say. ex soldiers with hangers-on. But there was a third element, there was a refugee camp Rundu ... and that refugee camp there were a lot of UNITA people amongst them, there were a lot of FNLA and just citizens, ordinary people, amongst them. And Jan also got a few volunteers so he had, three groups became Bravo ... or rather he kept the name Bravo Group, so he got these three elements together in a Bravo Group, and they became 32 Battalion.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, now I see. So they came from several different sources then?

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja, and ... so Jan started 32 Battalion, but General Viljoen decided that he wants me to take over the Battalion, and Jan had to go and do the army staff course which he never did, which I did as a young officer still with the Parachute Battalion. So ... he forced Jan to do, because Jan couldn't get any promotion any further, if he didn't do that course, so they took him and later on they gave him the Recce Brigade, et cetera, et cetera. But they sent me to take over 32 Battalion. So I, when I got there, they

were actually terrorists, I've got no other words for them. There was no organisation, there was no nothing ... amongst other things I found nine platoons living in the bush, they only came out twice a week to get rations from the parade, there is a big tent full of rations, and they would dish out rations. The reason they couldn't be utilised because we didn't have any leader element, and it was so that when the lorries went out to do the job, some of them jumped off, and when they got to the other side, half or a quarter or a third of the troops did not arrive, we had an operational base in Ovamboland, Pamoni, and what happened is, from Pamoni we were at that stage was a secret unit in Angola. From there back to Buffalo, so that was over three hundred kilometres apart, these two bases. My first priority was to get leaders for quality purposes. And then, to make them soldiers. Start training them. So the moment they were out of operations, they went down to a training area where they were actually trained as soldiers, also as NCOs and mortem and you name them ... so we got, out of them we've made a unit.

INTERVIEWER: So if they had basic infantry, very basic infantry ...

BRIG GERT NEL: They have basic terrorist training ... (laughs) ... but that's what they were ...

INTERVIEWER: And was it apparent among them, I mean when you talk about creating leaders, do you mean selecting from among the troops people who could be leaders ... getting leadership from Pretoria, I mean what was the process of creating this leadership?

BRIG GERT NEL: They allowed us to go and select young national servicemen from the Infantry School platoon...

INTERVIEWER: Right, so even though for the first intake of the Infantry School ...

BRIG GERT NEL: Jan did the first intake, I did from the second, I didn't do the first one, he did ... but he also had some people he knew, senior, more majors and captains and that, which he asked to go to Bravo Group and then to 32 Battalion. Also Army Headquarters, through us, we said there is now a unit, because it was a very secret unit,

and it was a need-to-know basis, not anybody was supposed to know about, so we also had few people which we sent there, so he had a core of leaders, but not nearly enough to do everything ... he didn't have vehicles, he didn't have ammunition, weapons, he had nothing, he had a lot of women and children to look after, and a lot of people that he had to fight with, and didn't have the means to do so ... he had a very tough time. When I got there, I started sorting this out, because I ... knew from the very beginning what was going on, I started sorting out while I was told I was going there, while Jan was still there.

INTERVIEWER: So you knew what to expect then? You knew what to expect, or were you still ...?

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja, because ... I knew exactly what to expect. Because I was very much involved with 32 Battalion, but being at Army Headquarters, and having Viljoen behind me, I could go to those people that was supposed to give the leaders and ammunition, and the weapons, and that and putting my training there already. So when I moved to 32 Battalion to Rundu ...

INTERVIEWER: You had most of your resources already ...

BRIG GERT NEL: I had a lot of ... organised a lot of stuff already ... so I was in a much better position than Jan Breytenbach ...

INTERVIEWER: Ja, it sounds like he had a struggle ... trying to get people and ammunition ...

BRIG GERT NEL: Well he had ... because he was a secret unit, they asked, Who are you, why do you want this, who gives you the authority to No... why I can. And also, his personality, he wasn't always loved by some of his colleagues ...

INTERVIEWER: A bit rebellious maybe?

BRIG GERT NEL: No, because he is unorthodox and he does things ... he is a very good soldier, make no mistake, so he does things, but he doesn't normally (chuckle) ...do it always lawfully, and you can't run, you know he actually ... okay I'm not criticising but you can't run, especially a unit like that, where you need discipline,

organisation and order ...

INTERVIEWER: He was a bit stuck though without the resources and he was in a bit in a rock and a hard place wasn't he?

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja, but there, it is ways of doing things as well, you see. So ... why do you think I went there? You see ...

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so your charge was basically to turn this into a regular ...and one of the things you did was... I'm very interested about the young men from the Infantry School, because I interviewed quite a number of them and they tell me about ... really having no idea what to expect ... you know they knew, at some stage they knew that there were some Angolans involved, that they would be working with black soldiers, but I don't think any of them had any idea of what was in store for them ...

BRIG GERT NEL: You couldn't tell them ...

INTERVIEWER: ... and so they were ...

BRIG GERT NEL: ... because the unit was secret. It was all on a voluntary base ... you told them that they are going to ... you did tell that they were going to make war, they are actually going to do what they have been trained for ... and they are going to work with black troops.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that the training at the Infantry School prepared them for what they were ...? It did. So they training was pretty good and you were able to promote these ...

BRIG GERT NEL: I did. The moment that they got to Buffalo, I gave them the three weeks reality training, what they were really going to do.

INTERVIEWER: On the job training?

BRIG GERT NEL: On the job training.

INTERVIEWER: And did you rely on the Angolan soldiers ... to an extent to ...?

BRIG GERT NEL: They were doing this training with these people. I did a selection course, if they couldn't make it, they were out, and then I, with these soldiers they had to

do the training. They had to learn Portuguese they couldn't communicate any other way.

INTERVIEWER: These were young men, eighteen, nineteen years old ... This must have been quite an experience for them, having to work with Angolans ...

BRIG GERT NEL: It was ...

INTERVIEWER: ... who were mostly older than they were, I would imagine ...

BRIG GERT NEL: A guy was, you must remember, eighteen, nineteen ... and many of the people he is responsible for, is thirty years old, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, thirty years old ...

INTERVIEWER: So they were the older ones already ...

BRIG GERT NEL: ... and the best part of it, very soon we got to realise these Angolan soldiers would not fight under their own leaders, they wanted these young people. They were respected, although they didn't know all the ins and outs, especially of bush-craft and anything like that, they knew they were well trained, they knew they were dedicated, and they knew they were loyal, so we did promote a few of them ... they didn't want to go with them, they preferred these young people before they used their own people ... it took years before we could make them fight under their own ... a lot of pain.

INTERVIEWER: Trust their leaders ... Angolan leaders?

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja, ja. These people had to prove themselves as leaders ... and it took a lot of training before we established that, but it was these young people who did that, and I only really realised what's happening when my son had to do the same. So ... in any case, I think we had wonderful, wonderful young men to do so. So we were actually, after about a year, there was too much pressure and the fact that there was a unit like 32 Battalion ... the secrecy was taken away.

INTERVIEWER: What was happening at home at this stage? I mean was 32 Battalion appearing in the local media, the foreign media, were a lot of stories?

BRIG GERT NEL: There was ... because they were fighting in Angola, they were given SWAPO a lot of trouble ... and they were all dressed like SWAPO, they carried

SWAPO's weapons, and so we always had the supplies on our side ... so then they realised that ... they could speak Angolan, so they knew that, and then they ... know how this thing travel, they realised that we had these ex-Angolans, so had from the United Nations, actually from the Angolans first, then the United Nations, that they want 32 Battalion moved from the border ... and luckily our politicians didn't fall for that. They wanted, they said if you carry on with any peace talks or anything like that, 32 Battalion must move at least 250 kilometres from the border.

INTERVIEWER: When was this?

BRIG GERT NEL: That was in ... '77, beginning '77 ...

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so already there was some international attention. And did they give some reason why ...?

BRIG GERT NEL: Well because they said that Angolans ...

INTERVIEWER: ... the war going on ...

BRIG GERT NEL: They say it is FNLA troops ... you know also FNLA's boss ... Alberto(?), he came to 32 Battalion, to Buffalo ... he wanted to claim these people as his own, and take them back to Angola ... but these people refused, say what can you give us? You can't give us anything.

INTERVIEWER: This was already in the late 70's, as early as the late 70's ...

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja, and that was in '76 ... so there was a lot of international talks. So that is why, in fact he must have told people about the base in Namibia, so that is how it leaked out ... and any case, it was decided we stay, and we are going to carry on like we are carrying on, but going back to the refugee camp, you had soldiers that couldn't communicate ... they could in Portuguese but not any other language ... he had women, if you wanted to talk to him you had to use at least ... three different interpreters in the languages, because all of them couldn't speak Portuguese, they only spoke some of the Angolan languages .. you had about two thousand soldiers at that stage, and about a thousand available women ... so you had chaos ... you had a town of women and

children and old people, about three thousand plus, plus you had about one thousand five hundred to two thousand soldiers which you as a soldier had to run, all secret ...

INTERVIEWER: So this was now the original, the sort-of first calculation of Buffalo base as we know it in the books ...

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja ... so ...

INTERVIEWER: ... only there was nowhere for them to live, they were unstructured and there was no ...

BRIG GERT NEL: ... so we had a tent camp where the women lived, we had a tent camp for the men, we started building huts and stuff for them, but I had to start a school, a clinic, a shop ... you name it, I had to have sewerage, you had all rubbish you had to take away ... it is a town, but it was part of my military duties. I had to prepare these people, and fight with them, and run the town.

INTERVIEWER: You obviously needed a lot of people doing civilian jobs, like rubbish collection and ...

BRIG GERT NEL: That was the older ... I couldn't use this infanteers any more ... you see they couldn't carry that weight and go into Angola, that's the people I made my ... rubbish team, or my back team, or that team ...

INTERVIEWER: Okay, your municipal services ...

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja, and also, like Quoti, he and his wife was responsible to dish out the food to the people, because a woman there ... sons got their rations, but we also have to give the women rations, where do they get food? You had to give it to them. So him and his wife ... so we found out that he sold this food to them, he didn't give it to them ... I had a lot of problem with Quoti, that's why I say, it went many years, so that's the type of thing that happened. I was very strict about alcohol, they could have beer, but no ... I didn't allow any strong liquor on the base ... beer, they could have their six beers, nothing more. But what they did, they changed beer for cigarettes and things, but in any case I could keep the lid on that pot. There were a lot of things like that, which got

nothing to do with ... why I'm telling you this, you said you wanted to talk about the people ... the other side ...

INTERVIEWER: Ja ... so you had a whole, probably a lot of really social problems on your plate ...

BRIG GERT NEL: You can name that!

INTERVIEWER: ... in terms of ...

BRIG GERT NEL: What I did to try and sort this out, I took all the family, like my wife and my children and ... all the leader element lived in Rundu, the white people, I had family days in Buffalo, where I took all those whites so they could mix with ... those women and those men that we can ... we had sport days and we had days which they ... showed off what they were doing, those days they were still very ... much thinking about Angola, because their dances and their songs were all about one day we will go back to Angola, to our mother country, and it was ... sometimes you had a tear in your eye, what they were saying there ... and what I had, was cake competitions, where the women bake, and then I got ... I gave it to the troops, after I'd given them a present ... and also other competitions, getting everybody involved ...

INTERVIEWER: So you had to build a community ... you had to make a community out of a refugee camp, and a lot of military people ...

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja ... that's right.

INTERVIEWER: That's fascinating.

BRIG GERT NEL: Now I've got a record, I think it can go to the Guinness, at one Sunday morning I married three hundred and fifty four couples ... in one go. I'm telling you, that is the other side of the story, that's not the soldiering side. What happened is, as these people went into operations, not being enough women, he moves out, another body moves into his home ... not everyone, but a lot of those women there, were actually ... the one who gave them the biggest present, or the most money or whatever, that's the one she would have with her, until that one comes back again. ... This off the record. At

one stage I had seven companies in the base, of the nine which were formed there. So I told them, this nonsense of having, you know one moving in and the other one moving out, stop now. They now have to legally have to marry the women. According to South African law, so that we can get this thing sorted out. If they get shot or something like that, who is going to get their money, or their whatever. And also, this nonsense ... so they were very happy.

INTERVIEWER: Okay .. so this resolved the social conflict that you had there.

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja. And I told them they are in the base for a month, in three week's time we will have this wedding ceremony. Then I went to Akimbo and I had all those women there, that's why I used to use four people who did it for me, different languages, but the women were more happy than the men about this ... because most of them wanted order ... and I told them, I said, look only I'm going to marry them, and the only one that can divorce them, is myself, nobody else. They believed me ... I said that's according to South African law, so I'm not going to divorce them for nonsense, they must have a very, very good reason, so we have all the paperwork done, and then I got a Padre, a Portuguese-speaking Padre, and I had the local magistrate from Rundu, I couldn't ... according to law I couldn't marry them, but they didn't know that, he could. So I did all the talking, the Padre did the sermon, and he just said, you're married, you see. But where he fitted in they never realised, but he said that he had the power of authority to do so, but the believed that I married them ... and up today I haven't divorced a single one of them because they never asked me ... (laughs) ... but we had four of them, that came to me afterwards, it was a big crowd there. Those three hundred and fifty four couples, some with children, with friends and family, they were all these, big mass in front of this ceremony, but four troops came to me, and said, Look they've got a problem, they've got two wives, which must they now marry? But no, South African law makes provision for that, but the one is your wife, the other one is not officially your wife, you must decide who is your wife, the other one ... you can because blacks have more

that one wife ... so you can do so, but you must remember that the first wife has got all the power, and everything goes to her, the other's got no say ...

INTERVIEWER: Sounds like more trouble coming ...

BRIG GERT NEL: So in any case, they went and they talked ... so they came back, all four of them came back with a woman ... and then the other three ... this took men, so the seven couples came back, the one woman told us, take me back to the refugee camp, I'm not staying here any longer, so she went back to the refugee camp. But the other seven, they got married ... afterwards.

INTERVIEWER: So the men who had two wives sorted out some other ... men to take on their second wives ...

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja.

INTERVIEWER: Okay ... (laughs) ...

BRIG GERT NEL: They all got married that day ...

INTERVIEWER: So the whole community got out to be married that one day ...

BRIG GERT NEL: And that sorted out a lot of problems. Who's responsible for whose children ... we had children there, there was a young wife, little girl, the same age as this youngster's mother ... she came there when she was just over two years old, nobody knew what happened to her father and mother. When they moved down as refugees, her father and mother either got killed or separated from the show, and this woman took her and brought her up as a ...

INTERVIEWER: This was a young Portuguese Angolan child?

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja. And you have there, the husband disappeared, or the wife disappeared, and nobody knew what happened to them, but they were actually, as far as I'm concerned, still legally married, Portuguese way to those people, but I remarried them, under South African law, without knowing if their husbands or wives were still alive.

But there was all this type of thing, and children who lost their parents ... there was a lot of hardship amongst these people as well ... that is the other side of the story.

INTERVIEWER: There also must have been, not just children, parents and children, children of soldiers, but brothers and sisters as well ... I know there were a few other key young ... some of the children who went to you to pick up high school for example, had all the brothers ... but this bring me to a really, what I find is a very interesting subject, and that's the ... almost a family tradition ... when the children of 32 Battalion soldiers joined 32 Battalion, did you see that happening?

BRIG GERT NEL: You see, the first year the school would only taught them two things, that was English and mathematics. Why?

INTERVIEWER: So they could read and carry on a conversation?

BRIG GERT NEL: No, we had to determine what their level of education ... you could only do it with mathematics and with a language. How they can read, talk, or whatever the case may be.

INTERVIEWER: So you had to deal with the children ...

BRIG GERT NEL: Then that second year we started putting them in classes ... so you may have a child of thirteen who is still in Grade 1 ... but one of eight that is already in Grade 3, you see.

INTERVIEWER: So they came from pretty mixed up education background ...

BRIG GERT NEL: And there was no way I could establish what they had done before.

INTERVIEWER: But you must have had some teachers at this stage ... where did the teachers at the school come from?

BRIG GERT NEL: National servicemen.

INTERVIEWER: National servicemen ... okay.

BRIG GERT NEL: Except the headmaster. The headmaster, he came from the refugee camp.

INTERVIEWER: His son is now actually the headmaster at ...

BRIG GERT NEL: I got them there for another reason. I got them there to tell Quoti that if he carries on like that, he is going to disappear from them ... completely ... and then

when I saw old Mark ... he could speak eleven languages, he had very, very good education, so then I told Mark I would like him as the headmaster.

INTERVIEWER: You are talking about Kabinda ...

BRIG GERT NEL: No, no, no Mark ... no not Kabinda, Mark Kadonde (?) ... no not Kabinda. Mark ... a very soft spoken, he was a very ... also did the officer's course, when he left the Army he was a major, because he joined the military to get a decent salary, otherwise I couldn't pay him. But he was there actually as a schoolteacher, not as a soldier.

INTERVIEWER: So this is your first headmaster at the school. How many students were there from the beginning, the first year?

BRIG GERT NEL: In the first year we didn't have many, we had about hundred and twenty, still in tents.

INTERVIEWER: Okay so the school opened before ... the houses were built?

BRIG GERT NEL: Ja. But that ... you had to have some way of communicating with them, you also had to the solders, we also gave English classes, and the women that wanted to, they could attend English classes. They could communicate. And the other thing which is very important, just to get a clinic, doctors and ... there was a couple of them that had medical training, as nurses and medics and things like that, which I utilised and sent on our courses, and when we opened the hospital at Buffalo, some of those women were then actually acting as nurses and one of them was a sister. But we brought in our own doctors and our own sister ... matron and things like that. And we had to start a shop. Where could they buy? In Rundu, two hundred and fifty kilometres from there? So we had a SAWI who established a shop there, and they could buy at the same price which they bought in Pretoria, they could buy it there. Salaries, they then got paid quite ... they still got rations when they got a salary, so I stopped that. I said you can't, what does he do with his money? They just buy, you know, luxuries. So they must learn that they are responsible for their own food, they've got enough money to buy and

we gave them the shops where they could buy from, and also furniture ... The women also started their own small gardens where they had some vegetables, we had Megani(?) which was also a project where we produced a lot of vegetables and fruit, which were then sold to them, buy more ... to try and make this thing work on itself ...

INTERVIEWER: ... sustainable ... self-sustaining ...

BRIG GERT NEL: ... and okay, that's the ... the others I think you've heard most of it, most of it you've heard, from the fighting side, the training side and things like that, I think if you've spoken to Jan, he probably would have told you that, and also the other people, like a bloke like Pico (?) and people like that.

INTERVIEWER: But this is really interesting, the social side of the camp ... I never imagined it was so ... that this was ... this would have been a responsibility, I mean why was the military taking such responsibility for these people? After all they were ...

BRIG GERT NEL: We brought them out. We decided that ...

INTERVIEWER:foreigners, they were Angolans?

BRIG GERT NEL: No, no, but ... the South Africans are going in a straight line all the way, because you can't just utilise them, and leap. Either you are responsible or you're not ... and we did, they became the best fighting unit and the better they were fighting, the more respect we got for them, and the more respect we had for them, the better we.. you know, all around ... so you just can't have a ... people with that ability and not look after them, and that's what we did.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a bit about how the community coped with the military side of things, for example when there were casualties, how did the community react, what was the atmosphere? Can you remember any incidents where there were, Savate (a small town and military base in southern Angola which was the target of a 32 Battalion operation also known as Operation Tiro A Tiro. It took place on 21 May 1980) for example, were you really there? Can you remember Savate when the?

GERT NEL: Ja I was ... very much, involved. But the thing is, you must remember,
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they're Africans ... they take life and death much differently than we do. They saw death nearly every day. Because in those days, they were already at that stage fighting between themselves, that was the FNLA, UNITA, and the MPLA for many, many years, and also Ubuntu(?) was there since '61, and we are now talking of '77/'78, so they were used to not knowing what happens to them, not having enough food to eat, always on the move, being either shot at ... one of the factions making war, and even in South Africa, they have a complete different attitude to life and death than we have. But they were also ... they also loved their children, they loved their husbands ... if you had a funeral, it's a place to stay away from, because they have their women, they lost a child or a husband or a sister or whatever a year ago, but she'll go there, spend about five minutes with the new person being buried, and then go and lie on the grave there and ... performing, like we not it's completely wild. It is ...

INTERVIEWER: Openly grieving ...

GERT NEL: Ja, it's not nice to see it, but then the next day if you tell her, her husband ... and then days later she'll marry another one, so ... it's difficult to explain that one to you. But what we did is, for the first time, they had medicine they didn't have in Angola, they had doctors who could help with childbirth, who could help when they were very ill, who could combat malaria, you know malaria was one of the ... diseases that took most of the people in Angola, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Their teeth could be looked after, and they didn't have to pay a single cent, they got all that free. They had shops, they never in Angola saw a shop, what SAWI gave them there. They had money to buy that, they had a much better standard of living than they ever imagined that they would, they had children's schools ... some of those children became teachers, became nurses, there is even one who became an engineer, started there but then went to Namibia, to Windhoek, those that were very good, we helped them to go to Windhoek and further train them from there ... the soldiers paid for their training in university ... that they would never, never had if they stayed on in Angola ... and they knew that, that's why I say when a

person tells me that we took them there and we're responsible what happened, it's nonsense, those that ... why aren't there still a lot of them in the military?

INTERVIEWER: There are quite a few who stayed on in the military ...

GERT NEL: Some of them is ... they are colonels today ... Sergeant-majors, lieutenant-colonels ... if it's such a bad place, even with the new Government, why would they become lieutenant-colonels? They had a choice.

INTERVIEWER: When did you feel like things were starting to turn, I mean you must have ... when did you start to realise that Buffalo Base wasn't going to carry on indefinitely, I mean eventually ...

GERT NEL: No, ag ... we knew that in '88 when Resolution 435 came about ... we knew it's the end, but we didn't want to lose that expertise. So we gave them a choice, they had a choice, even today ... that's what I also ask them now when they start complaining, I said, why don't you go back to Angola ... there is no war going on there, nobody is going to kill you anymore ... why don't you go back there? Then they just keep quiet, because they know, they've got no future whatsoever going, there are some of them that's gone back, some of them are doing business there ... so there ... you see that's why I say, you must look at this objectively, not ... stories.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, but ... so in 1998, obviously you had to start doing some planning, and what was going to become of this ... this rather unusual battalion ...

GERT NEL: So what we did, we got the place where they could move, it wasn't the right place ...

INTERVIEWER: ... but how did Pomfret got chosen at the end of the day?

GERT NEL: We had that ... the powers-to-be at this stage, being Pretoria, wanted a place where they could be isolated, bringing them back, you know the politics weren't so very good at this stage, in this country as well, we didn't want them to be hurt, to put them in any place you could have had a lot of problems, so you had to put them where they were actually isolated, and not near a place where you could get ... other people getting

there easily and do damage ... find a place big enough of accommodate over five thousand people ... you had to give them a school, had to give them shops, had to give them the medical, so you had to look at something, some or other infrastructure that could do it, so you had to look at places like old schools, military bases, mines and that one was for sale. And it gave most of the answers that we wanted, but what we didn't know was that there wasn't enough water. That we didn't know. That never came ... I don't think our engineers did that study well enough to establish that, but that is where we stayed. As I say, at that stage asbestos wasn't the big problem, we caused that problem ourselves, not the mine ... but the military won't admit that now. If you scrape the top off and you start using it for other things

INTERVIEWER: Well and the vehicles go ... (inaudible) ... so the military wasn't to know that this was going to be a problem area ... What did you think the first time you saw Pomfret?

GERT NEL: Very disgusted ... I had another mine in Namibia which I put a unit in and it ... why do they Sell a Mine?

INTERVIEWER: Because it ...

GERT NEL: Because it worked out. And they build a mine to last a certain number of years, and all their buildings, all their stuff, everything is, you know, at the last. So I was dead against Pomfret myself, I wanted some other place, but okay, I was not in a position to demand, I could just give my opinion. I was disgusted when I saw Pomfret, I wouldn't have moved them there, not at all. If it was me, I would have moved them to Wallmannstal where they, it was near Pretoria but they could have been isolated, could have done everything they did in Pomfret, but there it would have been a much better climate, enough water, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, but in any case ... That's me, that's ...

INTERVIEWER: It was fairly shortly after the move to Pomfret maybe that you handed over to Colonel Delport?

GERT NEL: No, no, no ... I only stayed with ... as unit commander for two years ...

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, sorry ...

GERT NEL: Then I took over 1 Military area, but still being responsible for 32 Battalion, because it was in my area, which became Sector 20, that's why I was ... and then from there, I spent two years in Walvis Bay, that's also another problem, other story, but then I became Second in Command of all troops in Namibia ... and then they still remained my responsibility ...

INTERVIEWER: But you were a little more distanced from them ...

GERT NEL: That right, I was never, never ... I was always ... 32 Battalion as part of my ... when I was, from Windhoek when I was sent to Pretoria, I was Brigadier of the general staff, with General Meiring still making me responsible for the well-being, or the father figure of 32 Battalion.

INTERVIEWER: After you came Deon Ferreira, right?

GERT NEL: Ja ... Deon Ferreira, and I chose him.

INTERVIEWER: So ... you figured ... what was it about him that you thought would make him a good ... unusual group of

GERT NEL: In Savannah when I was SO1 operations, he was one of my Staff Officers operations in Rundu, and he had all the plus points to do that job. So when Viljoen asked me who I think must replace me, I said that young major there, he is the best one of all those I worked with, and then he proved to be one of the best.

INTERVIEWER: And what do you think made him so successful? He was quite successful ... he was very well spoken ...

GERT NEL: Ja, especially ... fighting ... okay he had been at that stage, terrorists have been taught for two years, to be trained soldiers, he had a unit that's been made, he had the weapons and the vehicles and everything, and he was a very, very good soldier .. so he could concentrate on making war ... and he was very successful. I didn't have that, really I did make war, but my responsibility was to make this ... which I tried.

INTERVIEWER: Okay ... is there anything to add ...

GERT NEL: No, I think I spoke too much ...

INTERVIEWER: No definitely not, thank you very much.

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