

General Georg Meiring 14/04/08
 Officer Commanding SWA
 Chief of Army
 Chief of SANDF
 Missing Voices Project Interviewed by Mike Cadman

	TAPE ONE SIDE A
Interviewer	Tell me a bit about your background, where did you grow up, did you come from a large or small family, things like that.
Meiring	I was born in the Free State in a place called Ladybrand. I went to school there. I was the eldest of 3 children. The only boy. We lived on a farm. Went to two farm schools where my dad was teaching. He was farming as well as being teacher. Then I went to the high school in Ladybrand. I went to university in Bloemfontein. University of the Orange Free State at the time where I did BSc and I ended up by doing MSc in physics. I wanted to enter into a professional academy. It didn't work out. Me and my professor, whom I've got great respect for, didn't see eye to eye in certain aspects, so I decided it would better for both of us if I do something else. In the meantime I'd earned commissioned rank in the Bloemfontein Commando, which I got, I think, in 1961 - what they were called then, a Veld Cornet; It's a second lieutenant at the moment. And then I approached people in the military to find out more about a career. They called me up for an interview, you come before a board of...what do you call it?
Interviewer	An admissions [panel]?
Meiring	Anyhow, so I came up here...a selection board. Then after a while they contacted me, said I was accepted, I can start off in signals and it was at first temporary and then permanent rank as a captain. That's because I had MSc. I ended up in that time, I was an instructor at the school of signals. I went on a long electronic engineering course in the United Kingdom. Came back and was posted then to army headquarters as a signal staff officer grade 2, technical staff. I later became officer commanding of the HQ signals squad, which was a misnomer, because out of that was born 2 Signal Regiment and 5 Signal Regiment. We did all the long distance communications for the army as well as electronic warfare. In fact, we were the first troops really deployed in operations. The others were more for guarding purposes at the time. Started up as a different listening post on the border. Also inside at the time, inside Rhodesia. We had various listing and direction finding stations scattered all over. Which took me away from home quite a lot, so I was involved in the border long before I actually went there. Then later on I became director of signals. To make a long story short, Director of Telecommunications at the Chief of SADF's office. I then

	<p>became director of logistic services. And then from there I went to become Officer Commanding, Witwatersrand Command. I spent two years there and I was posted back to army headquarters as Chief of Army Staff Logistics as the rank of major general. I was then the next year appointed as the first deputy chief of the army under General Jan Geldenhuys, who was then Chief of the Army. I filled that post for one year and then I was sent to South West Africa/Namibia, to become the officer commanding South West Africa Territory Forces.</p>
Interviewer	That was 1983?
Meiring	<p>That was in September 1983. 27th of September I think it was. Then from there on I was transferred there in the middle of a planning phase of Operation Askari. Which I didn't quite agree with, that entire planning but you could do very little about it so you had to go through with it and we made a very good success out of it. That really gave rise to the monitoring services that was through the liaison that General Geldenhuys had with the Americans at the time. We had a group of people, from Angolans and South Africans, that talk about the withdrawal of South Africa under the auspices of the United Nations – they were not there but they were very interested about that, especially because the Americans were also in Windhoek, stationed there, and always wanted to know what was going on. So there were certain conditions to be fulfilled for gradual withdrawal. Now in that time because of this fact we had an increase in terrorist activities when we were nearer our border. Which when we started off again operations, at the back, very clandestine, to prevent SWAPO from using this facility to come into South West Africa. During that time it became apparent that we were for a long time clandestinely assisting UNITA and Jonas Savimbi. That was co-ordinated basically by chief of staff intelligence through liaison officers and things like that.</p>
Interviewer	Liaison officers would actually be on the ground working with UNITA in Angola?
Meiring	<p>Very few. They did training and they were at bases near the border, not inside Angola, where they sort of supplied the logistics support for Angola. That was basically what was going on.</p>
Interviewer	So when you say bases near the border, would they have been in the Caprivi?
Meiring	<p>In the Caprivi and in Rundu. There was also, at one stage, there was an office in Oshakati but that went away. But it became quite clear that an enormous pressure was being built up in the eastern part of Angola, which for a long time was free from any terrorist activity because of UNITA's presence there. There were no more attacks from Zambia, there were no more attacks from Angola into the Caprivi Strip, and very few, very seldom, and very little terrorist activity in the Sector two zero, that is the Rundu area. But it became apparent that the Angolans with the aid of the</p>

	<p>Cubans and the Russians and Eastern Germans, were at that time trying to engulf Savimbi piecemeal. And they were surrounding his forces in the Cazombo bloc area bordering onto Zambia, that area. And during that time there was some liaison officers with Angolan troops: artillery advisors, observers and things like that, to assist them in the technical stuff, but they were being overrun for a time. Which when we found we were always a bit worried about that from our side in South West Africa because it was another force operating almost on our doorstep which we had no control. We couldn't even say things to them, it was very clandestine type of operation.</p>
Interviewer	<p>But this is UNITA and initially UNITA were actually a supporter of SWAPO back in the late sixties.</p>
Meiring	<p>Long, long, long ago, yes, but they fell out with SWAPO along the line – I'm not clear about...they say, I don't remember – and SWAPO was actually assisting us to ensure that no SWAPO attacks could occur via their area. Or out of their area into South West Africa. And then during this time it was decided after a conference at Rundu to assist UNITA physically from our side, to prevent them being overrun. Because what we did in the time, we evacuated all UNITA's troops from Cazombo to Mavinga. This was unique. It was an that consisted of three C130s and two C160s, throughout the night, landing over two fires, taking off over two fires, and in one night we sort of took his entire force of three brigades from Cazombo to Mavinga.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And a brigade is about 2500 men?</p>
Meiring	<p>His brigades weren't exactly in those sizes, it was called a brigade but about a thousand men each. But even so if you think that a C130 can take 90 fully laden paratroopers. We put up to 160 in, without sitting, they were just standing, if the ramp closed they were just going forward, with all their heavy equipment. I think that was a major, major exercise.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And when you say they were taking off over fires, the fires because there were no landing lights, and the fires were your landing lights?</p>
Meiring	<p>One end of the runway lit one fire, over end of the runway another fire, and if you fly over Angola at night there are lots of fires, so it was a hair-raising experience. I accompanied one of these flights and it was terrible, but it worked. also in that time the longest ever casevac operation by helicopter took place. We withdrew those people that were with UNITA in Cazombo. They were sort of apart, they weren't with the main body of people. They were trying to evacuate them by themselves. They were since surrounded by enemy forces, and we flew one night with a Puma helicopter into it, and we got them out. One of the chappies there got a Honoris Crux because he was wounded. He was looking after his people, he was an artillery officer. Theuns was his name, I've forgotten his surname. We were all very relieved early that morning when the chopper landed and these people</p>

	<p>came out. If I remember correctly we used a Dakota to do the navigating for the Puma to go in and airlift these people out. It was a very good operation. And then after a bit of haggling we got the okay to assist UNITA forces north of Mavinga to prevent four brigades of troops from Angola with Cuban and Russian support coming down. And what we actually did, we deployed two troops of 122mm rocket launchers, and we also used almost the entire air force one night to bomb specific areas, which we did. I remember very, very clearly in the meeting before we got the ok, General Viljoen was there, General Gleeson was there, people from CSI was there, Savimbi himself was there, I was there, and a number of other officers, and it was decided that you can't do anything, or you won't get permission. And then someone said to General Viljoen, why don't we ask the minister, perhaps we could get permission. He said, ok, he will do that, and he got into his aircraft and he flew down to Cape Town from Rundu. And what we then did after about two or three days we got permission and we had a lot of aircraft flying off from Grootfontein and some from Rundu itself. And I was sitting five o'clock late that afternoon when we got the authority to do it, sitting there with a beer in my hand, with tears running down my face, seeing all these aircraft taking off to go and stop...and we actually did. And it was the one and only big fling that we could get. We could operate with the Mirages if we were being attacked but we weren't. But we couldn't operate over their fighting lines for a long time because there was no additional air cover. We were, we could, be five minutes over the area and then we'd have to return.</p>
Interviewer	That's because you were so far north?
Meiring	Distance, yes.
Interviewer	Alright, and you were using Impalas, Canberras, Buccaneers...?
Meiring	<p>Impalas, Canberras, Buccaneers and the Mirages. And for our people down there, they were every day subjected to air bombardment because we couldn't have air superiority in there. air. It was frustrating but very interesting this sort of thing. We had observers, liaison officers, call them what you like, with the three Unita brigades. Jan Breytenbach, some other chaps were there, and we had to speak to them and speak to UNITA, because those people didn't want to take orders from them. They only take orders from Savimbi himself. So Thackeray, Brigadier Thackeray, and myself, we flew once or twice a week to wherever Savimbi would be at that point in time, he was never at one spot. Talk to him, one stage we even got him into an aircraft, flew him to Mavinga so that he could speak to the troops on the ground, flew him back and then came back again. That's how we actually fought that time. And in that time we also then later on it evolved to such an extent that we got permission to use a battery of G5s and two troops of rocket launchers and the first bombardment of Cuito Cuanavale took place in that time. We actually fired onto that ammunition dump and it burned for about</p>

	three days I think.
Interviewer	What year was this?
Meiring	'85.
Interviewer	And those air strikes that you flew, you say you used just about the whole of the airforce one night, was that the biggest concerted bombing of enemy lines in one evening, or one short period?
Meiring	<p>For the time that I was there, yes. Because we had the location of these new brigades and they were just entering into laagers when we struck them. So UNITA had them boxed down, they just boxed them in, they couldn't do anything with them. They used 120mm mortars and 60mm mortars and 81mm mortars, whatever they could lay their hands on, and these people coming in like a sort of a tank. They had tanks in front, and boxed within the tanks they had infantry and then they had the lighter vehicles at the back and they were coming slightly forward. If the troops in front found any resistance they would just have disappeared, a tank would go through and then the other troops would come again. So it was a slow grinding operation towards Mavinga. And as they were in their different placements we had nice targets, in the end we took them out. During the course of the time, not just that evening but also with the multiple rocket launches, we had strikes about every night, and that was prior to the bombardment of Cuito Cuanavale, until such time as the brigades withdrew north. And they crossed the river and from then onwards we were at a sort of a stalemate because UNITA had no power in themselves to capture Cuito Cuanavale. We could have. We had no authority to use the Three Two Battalion troops as storm troops. We were there in support but we couldn't use them actively. It was different later on. But we were in fact capable at the time of taking Cuito Cuanavale. But politically it was not on.</p>
Interviewer	So cabinet didn't approve of the idea?
Meiring	<p>Well I don't know who didn't approve, but we didn't get authority from chief of the SADF or Chief of the Army, whoever there was. We were in a position to do it, Jan Breytenbach was in Cuito Cuanavale with UNITA troops but they couldn't hold the place. It was a company too that was there but they were repelled back again across the river. We took out again some of the bridges during that time but we were at a stalemate, so we decided that we're going to use the artillery to fire onto Cuito. We did that. And we struck their arms depot which burned for about three days at least. Something also interesting happened during that time. In the withdrawal of the FAPLA brigades, they were surrounded by UNITA then because they were on their way back, but they were supported airlift wise by helicopters. The MI5s. And Dick Lord and Brigadier Thackeray and myself sat down one day and we discussed why can't we take out these helicopters. We only need to take out one or two and they will never come back because they'll be afraid. So we practised with Pumas in the shonas, and</p>

	<p>with the Impalas, to take them out, because we're not allowed to use the Mirage aircraft in an active way if they are not going to protect themselves [<i>at this time HQ would only allow Mirages to be used in a defensive role</i>] or something like that. During that time they had very severe restrictions on the use of aircraft, but we could use the Impalas. So what we did, we had Special Forces people sitting near Menongue telling us when helicopters lifted off towards the area, south of Cuito. They were not at Cuito they were north of Menongue. And we determined how long it took them to reach that area and how long it took them to offload and go back again. And so we devised a plan that if they say they've airlifted now and we scrambled the Impalas it would have been just in time to get them as they take off back again. Get them from the back and you shoot out five...we shot out five of those. And they never came back and those people actually died of hunger. That's what happened to a lot of those troops. They had nothing to eat anymore.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Because the trucks couldn't get through the only way they were being re-supplied was by chopper, and once you'd shot the choppers down that was it.</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes, because it was quite interesting, it's a thing that one of these tricks that we found that we did at the time.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Did that happen any other time in the war in Angola that you shot down enemy choppers using jets?</p>
Meiring	<p>I don't think so, I think it was the first. It could well be but that's the one occasion that I know about.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And when you say you had to use Impalas because you had very strict controls on when you could use the Mirages, what was the purpose behind that? Was that because the Chief of the Defence Force or Minister of the Defence, whoever it was, was concerned about the possibility of losing a Mirage and they wanted to keep them and protect it so that if they needed to take on MiG 23s they had the Mirages?</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes, basically. Look, we where, I was at the tactical headquarters north of Mavinga very near the base where we fired onto Cuito Cuanavale, so it was quite far north, and we were constantly bombarded during the day by MiG23s and MiG21s and SU22s. They used them for bombardment. But because there were reports of Strela [<i>anti aircraft missiles</i>] with Savimbi's troops, they never came lower than ten thousand feet.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So they couldn't bomb accurately.</p>
Meiring	<p>They couldn't bomb accurately. When they saw something glitter in the sunlight down below, and we were just very well camouflaged. I know one night we had...I thought that they might have seen us by late evening photography...they had air photography all the day...and we had to move the tactical headquarters middle of the night. I remember that very, very</p>

	<p>clearly. But that is about the sort of operations. And then you've got to go from there back to Pretoria to report. There were no good communications. To Savimbi, back to Windhoek, it was a very interesting, interesting moving time.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Now as a commander in the field it must be very frustrating for you that you're trying to fight war but you've got all these restrictions. You can't use your best aircraft...when I say your best, I know that they're not always suitable for all applications but nevertheless they were your most advanced aircraft. The people that you're fighting with will only take instruction at a very senior level, Savimbi will talk to you, but the battlefield commanders aren't interested in being addressed by anybody else. And the politicians are also putting restrictions on what you can and can't do. That must have been extremely frustrating?</p>
Meiring	<p>I kept a very...I didn't keep a very good diary, I kept a diary. But I only jotted down ideas. And sometimes I look at this and I can't explain to myself how I actually felt. Because the feeling came back if I read those notes...not everything because there's a lot of things that I jotted down which didn't make any sense to me now but anyhow. But the frustration came back through these pages that it was absolutely frustrating that...and I think it's not just for me, it was all over the show. It was every time that we were in an operation, we had very severe restrictions placed upon us, because you know, this Resolution 435 of the United Nations put a lot of political restrictions on South Africa as such, and we had to manoeuvre inside that, and not always good enough, because the restrictions were such that if you do more, it would be noticed, and if you do less it won't be effective. So it was always a very subtle way of doing things. During in the case of Operation Askari, we sent people right around Cuvelai, to the back of it. And they came from the north from Techamutete and they put a plug in a bottle, so to speak, at Techamutete. And when they attacked Cuvelai, these people just disappeared. But we were there looking like Portuguese because we had green overalls on and that sort of thing, and you know, one night a funny thing happened there. Three people approached the guards at Techamutete, it was the Three Two Battalion people that were there – they spoke Portuguese – so they said they want to speak to the officers, so they sent them up. So Eddie Viljoen and his 2IC, Jan Hougaard and Sergeant Major Koos Krokodil, as we used to call him, and they were sitting there and they were eating out of a bully beef tin and these chaps came and they were all bearded and they had their green stuff on but they were obviously white, and these people say, are you the commanders? He says, are you hungry? They said, yes, so they gave them bully beef. Now they were FAPLA. As they were eating they were looking at the them so Koos Krokodil, who spoke the best Portuguese said to them, who do you think we are? You must be Cubans. No, we're not Cuban. So well then perhaps you are Russians. Said, no we're not Russian. So East Germans perhaps? No, we're the Boere! <i>Laughs</i> And just to see their</p>

	<p>faces was something spectacular I believe. But that is the sort of thing happened and that is how we sort of conducted our operations. And to go to visit those people where they were, when they approached Techemutete, all along the Kavango River up north, we had to fly in early morning in a radar window at tree top level with two helicopters. We couldn't lift off during the day, we had to come back at dusk again. And this is the way that we sort of went there and came back and that sort of thing.</p>
Interviewer	<p>When you talk about the first rounds from the 155mm guns being fired at Cuito, how many guns did you have in the field then?</p>
Meiring	<p>A battery.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And a battery is what, eight guns?</p>
Meiring	<p>Basically eight, yes.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And how did you get those guns in, did you drive them in on trucks?</p>
Meiring	<p>We towed them. Behind gun tractors.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And then the ammunition, was that flown in or also driven in?</p>
Meiring	<p>It was flown in up to Mavinga and from there it was taken by truck. During that time, prior to the 155s being used, we shot as many 122 projectiles that the factory could manufacture. As they manufactured them, they'd load them on the aircraft, took them to Mavinga, offloaded them, and we took them by truck further on.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And just for the record, those rocket launchers are copies of the old Stalin Organ.</p>
Meiring	<p>No, no, it is much better. It was made because of the Stalin Organ but it was a much better copy. It used 122mm, it had a proximity fuse where the others were direct fuses – the old Stalin Organ was a direct fuse. So these things exploded above ground, and it was a terrible experience, because we watched the early morning photographs which we took after the night's bombardment. You could see in the bush white – on the black and white photographs – white patches where we struck with these things, because they just obliterated everything, and if FAPLA stopped, they were just digging in as deep as they could because they were normally sitting in the open having dinner whatever. So we fired two salvos, go back to another place, and fire from there.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So you had your 155mm guns, you had the rocket launchers. On the other side they were bombing you with MiGs and Sukkoi's but because of the fear of the Strella missiles they couldn't bomb accurately. It's something that's always interested me in the casualty figures that I've seen, that I've read about, the Angolan/SWAPO/Cuban casualty figures are always very high, yet on the South African/UNITA side they were much lower. You also struggled to fly, you had no air superiority once the MiG23s</p>

	were there, so you had to utilise techniques like toss bombing and things like that so how come their casualties were so much higher than on the South African side?
Meiring	I think, you know, our main instruction always was, to have as little casualties as possible, so we had to plan everything in such a way as to have the least amount of exposure, the least amount of daring, if I can call it that, to effect the operation successfully, But to limit casualties severely. This is also a very big restriction. If you read the reports of other wars, the people calculated how many casualties they're going to take, and they took those risks because they want the objective. Our main objective was as little risk as possible to our people. We couldn't afford to lose people, because we used conscripts, and the people in South Africa, their whole feeling towards the war could change if the casualty rate was too high. And it was very low. In our entire casualty rate due to operations was extremely low. So yes, I can't tell you why but I think it's very good planning, very good commanders, very good training, because we trained very hard during those times, and then also I think good intelligence. Because if you have surprise – if you have good intelligence you can have good surprise – you have good equipment, good soldiers, and we could fight at night. Which we found that FAPLA couldn't. I think they were night blind due to lack of vitamins or whatever the case may be – I think some of the doctors said something like that once – but if we did operations during night time, we were very successful and they were not. They were not able to stand up during the dark. So we used to conduct a lot of operations at night time, or early morning or late evening that was the sort of thing that we actually did. It also restricted casualties to a large degree. And then what we normally found is that they were dug in, in specific areas which we attacked. So we were in a mobile operation and they were static. And it is easy, easier, to affect casualties on a static target than on a mobile target, so that is basically also I think what could have given rise to this.
Interviewer	When you say you figured that they were night blind to a degree, did you make any attacks at night or did you really merely use that to manoeuvre your troops to new positions?
Meiring	We didn't do a lot of attacks at night but we manoeuvred a lot during the evening. We actually did all our logistics support during night time. Everything.
Interviewer	And you say that in some of these big operations, you had your core of Three Two and then, I know they were small numbers, but the Recces, and units like that, but you also bolstered them with National Servicemen...
Meiring	Yes.
Interviewer	Did what was happening back in South Africa in the eighties in the townships – more and more people were being called up to the townships – did that effect your effectiveness in Angola or

	South West Africa?
Meiring	<p>We always wanted more troops, and I think we always got more troops if we really wanted them for an operation, but we really operated on a shoestring. If you look at the deployment of the troops along the entire border – I'm not just talking about this specific operation, I'm talking about the whole operation, because this took place just north of the sector 20 area, that was in the south east of Angola. Most of our other operations took part in the Kunene district, which was just opposite Oshakati, and from the west to the far east was almost 1800kms long. And we had odd companies placed around the entire area. Basically company bases, with very little additional support. We supported them from the main bases like Oshakati, like Rundu, with sub bases at certain areas, Etale, that sort of thing with a little bit more than a company. But rarely would you have found a battalion deployed in a tactical role. It was always companies. And a little bit more than the company groups which we would take a company, we would reinforce them with armoured cars, whatever the case might be. So what we found that we had always a mobile type of operation, making use of good intelligence as far as humanly possible, to a large degree trying to get the local population on our side, which towards the end we were very lucky – it's not just luck, but we were succeeding in that, and the terrorist were sort of outcasts during the later days of our operations – in fact we had cleared, before the time that we were into this operation with UNITA, we cleared the area around Rundu, sector 20 area, we cleared them of all terrorists. There were none left. The only terrorists there were was in the sector 10...</p>
Interviewer	That was Ovamboland.
Meiring	<p>And they came and go because what happened there, they would come during the rainy time, the rainy season, and they would go in because there's lots of water, and there's lots of food and things like that, melt in with the local population, now you'd try to hit them hard during the rest of the year, and at the time, the ones that were left over the would just vlentergat, they were just running around and if you see them they were on the run, put a mine here and a thing there, but they were not effective towards the end of the war.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So effectively your major tactic, was within the borders of Namibia, or South West Africa as it was that time, you had some troops but they were highly mobile, you'd tried to win over the local population to support your viewpoint, and then also simultaneously, in Angola, you kept SWAPO further and further back, or further and further north into Angola.</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes, that was what we tried to do. And we had...what supplemented our troops from back home was 101 Battalion, which was an Ovambo Battalion, 201, which was the Bushmen at Omega, 202 which was at Rundu. These battalions were very good troops. Three Two Battalion, very good troops. So what we</p>

	actually did, we had good leaders with these troops and they were very, very effective. So this is what actually helped us a lot in stabilizing the area with local people.
Interviewer	The Ovambo 101 Battalion was, I think, 3000 men, or at least 3000 men.
Meiring	Yes.
Interviewer	So they were all from there, they've got relatives there so not only do you have soldiers but you've got people who've got family within the community. That's an interesting aspect and this is more of a political question than a military one, but the South West Africa Territory Force at its peak was what about twenty thousand men that you could draw on all and all.
Meiring	Well I think if you take it all and all, there were never more than twenty four thousand people deployed in the total of South West Africa and north of the border.
Interviewer	Ok, so in no time never more than twenty four thousand.
Meiring	I'm not exactly sure of the figures now but as far as my recollection goes it was never more than that.
Interviewer	You see the political question I was getting to, for many people it seems strange that you had these elite fighting units who were all black men fighting on behalf of South Africa. That seemed to have been poorly known to many people.
Meiring	Yes. You see, what happened actually is that we in fact fought the war for South West Africa, not for South Africa...ok, indirectly we fought for South Africa because the further we could keep the insurgency away from our own physical borders, the better it would be for us. It's a cheaper war. To make a pro-active war is much cheaper than to make a reactive war. Much, much, much, much cheaper. Whatever anyone says. So if we could keep the fighting outside our borders we could kill two flies with one swat. Because what happened now is that you are looking after the indigenous population of South West Africa, you get your troops out of them, they feel they're fighting for something. You get your troops there, they know they're fighting for something because they are keeping the wolf at bay, so to speak, and it is a very advantageous situation for each and every one.
Interviewer	And this was all within the context of the Cold War. Did you see it as being an aspect of the Cold War?
Meiring	Well we saw it like that, I'm sure the troops didn't see it like that. But there was one of the...I think Brezhnev said at one stage, that the major confrontation in the world is against the two power houses. The power house of the oil in the Middle East and the power house of the mineral wealth in southern Africa. Now if you could control the two power houses you could control the world. And we felt that the reason why the Russians were so committed into Angola was actually to be able to get the power house of

	<p>mineral wealth out of South Africa. Not just for them but to deny it to the West. So one of the reasons why they wanted Mavinga so badly was, it had the one spot if they could put their radar station there they could cover the whole approach air-wise. And that was one of the reasons why they put so much effort into that into Angola. But you must now remember every year almost, one or two brigades equipment was being totally destroyed or captured, or whatever the case may be, in Angola.</p>
Interviewer	That's the Angolan and Cuban...
Meiring	<p>Angolan, Cuban, Russian, but it's Russian equipment. And they were brought in again. We had fairly new equipment. We had the SAM 9s there, the SAM 6s there, which was the first ever outside the Eastern Bloc that were ever deployed. We had MiG 23s, MiG 21s, we had Sukkoi 22s. It was a reasonable first fighting line soldiers that were there. We had a Russian General inside the area. We had at one stage in a march towards Mavinga in the beginning there were reports that there were Russians at troop level...as troop commanders, additional troop commanders with their armoured cars coming down. Ok, they only had T54s but even so it was...it against nothing on the other side it's a formidable effort. So yes, they used a lot of their equipment from them and I think Afghanistan and Angola, blunted the Soviet effort, or helped to blunt the Soviet effort and could have been possible assisting in the downfall of the economy of Russia over a long time. It couldn't continue with that .I know the Cubans couldn't continue because they specifically requested through intermediaries that the United States got us out of the area, because they couldn't continue anymore. They were beating themselves to death.</p>
Interviewer	Well you were supplying and controlling things essentially from Pretoria, but they were doing it from Havana which was 9000 kilometres across the sea.
Meiring	Yes.
Interviewer	At that stage you used 155mm artillery which [for the time] was the most sophisticated in the world, I understand, at the time. Were you, sitting as a commander, were you looking at the situation and worrying about your weaponry, your aircraft, by comparison to what the Russians and the Cubans were bringing in? About the standard?
Meiring	<p>Not really. We took note of it but we were not really terrified about it. It was a planning aspect and we planned around it. I mean if you know that a specific place in Angola was heavily guarded by anti-aircraft you would fly accordingly. You would use your equipment in such a way as to maximise your effort and minimise the results that they could have had on you. We used to have, in the beginning of the eighties, we used to have Mirages at Ondangwa, because we were in striking distance at the time. Air strike, from Angolan soil, and we used them just to patrol. And that was quite enough. You must remember that the South</p>

	<p>Africans have the name of good fighters. People believe that we are good fighters. It was proven to them that we were because we had good success. I think we trained better. I think...I'm not talking about training of conscripts, or National Servicemen, I'm talking about training of our leader group people who were very good. And I think we used what we got out of the war back into the war again, tactically, operationally, etc. We developed equipment as the need arose on the border and we were the fastest in the world, I think, of getting the new stuff into operations. It just worried me that we couldn't get Rooikat and the Rooivalk in there when I was still there (<i>inaudible</i>), but It's the sort of thing that we were very proactive always in our communications, in our use of our troops, in our equipment. The only thing where I think we were lacking was in the total political...I'm talking political in the major sense of the word...political achievement that we, I think were lacking there because, its not just our fault, the whole situation was like that because the whole world was against us at the time.</p>
	<p>END OF SIDE A (<i>counter at 554</i>)</p>
	<p>SIDE B</p>
Meiring	<p>It was always difficult to speak to the Crockers to speak to whoever, to try and devise ways and means within the political and the diplomatic environment to enable you to be successful also in the military.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Did the arms embargo have an impact on you? Did that actually drive development of the weapons?</p>
Meiring	<p>Oh yes, oh yes. I mean, at the time when it actually happened one of the things we found that it had the most impact at the time was in telecommunications, and we were the first to develop the telecommunications aspect...I was still in signals then...was the first to get some of the newest equipment on the market developed and built locally. We sort of used some of the French equipment which we sort of rebuilt, and we used in certain cases we used German equipment, but we built a lot of own equipment, that was unique to South Africa. It was the same with the artillery. When we were outgunned in Savannah our 140mm guns at the time, the Five-Fives that we used to call them, they just could not reach. They couldn't do that and we had to devise plans and towing them forward as far as possible, shoot a few rounds and go back again to get out of range because that's the only way that we could do that. We had outdated equipment. We had the Five-Fives, the 25-pounder, it was really not enough. And then at the time we had to do it quickly. The first thing that was put into the field was the multiple rocket launchers, the 122mms. Which we built on Unimog tracks in the beginning, it was even just later that they came in nicer forms and so on. Then there was the G5, which we tried to build as quickly as possible. It took time, because everything to make a good gun takes time. It was our telecommunication equipment, it was...we made plans, we had</p>

	<p>the Ratel, which we used very well, and we put 90mm turrets on to enable us to have a little bit of fire power. They were never tanks but we had a little bit of fire power. Incidentally they were very interesting. The Russian tanks are very flat, they're built flat, the T54. And if you're on a Ratel you could see through the bush because you're higher than the bush. A tank can't it's blind. You could follow behind him and shoot the hell out of him.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So he couldn't see you.</p>
Meiring	<p>He just couldn't see you. Which is just one of the incidents that also happened. So we had those things. Then we had the Casspir vehicle, which we also had to devise very quickly because we had mines. When we started off with mining everyone was as scared as shit for mines but eventually we were not afraid of mines. Which was something that was a very good psychological factor. Troops believed that if they get into a Buffel they were not going to die. They might get a headache or something but they'll not die if they struck a mine. If they go into a Casspir they will not die. This is the sort of thing that they believed in. And that did a lot to morale. And then our medical service was excellent. There was not one instance that I know of where someone was wounded in combat, was casevaced up, that died. He was either dead there or something else happened later on, a complication, but we were very good at getting people out immediately. Stuck an intravenous thing into his arm and fly him back and stabilize him as soon as possible. We had to stabilize people on the ground as far forward as possible. And we did that. So there's also things like that that we had to develop to make our morale better, make our fighting force better. But yes, it did assist us to think very quickly.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And the Angolans didn't necessarily have that capacity to casevac their wounded, or have doctors in the front lines and things like that.</p>
Meiring	<p>No.</p>
Interviewer	<p>With your experience in signals...I've spoken to a couple of people who worked for BRUSH, the Bush Reconnaissance Regiment and things like that...and they said to me that there was a huge amount of advantage in the South Africans monitoring the Angolan radio communications, the Cuban radio communications, and so on. Because you could then use...I don't know if you used them in '85 but certainly around the Lomba River and things like that...the ground shout Casspirs, you would relay the information back to the Angolan troops about what was happening, what their commanders were saying about them, or that the food wasn't arriving, or whatever the case was. Was that a massive advantage?</p>
Meiring	<p>It was. Look electronic warfare was one of the major sources where we got our information from. And the listing posts, the static and mobile ones – most of them I started when I was still at DHQ signals squadron and then we made them mobile and they</p>

	<p>were with our troops in the front line as well. And the monitoring of communications was a major effort and we had intelligence officers deployed with the signal officer in the front line to do the first interpretation as soon as possible of the raw material, to enable it to be used as quickly as possible. There were all these sort of things that we used that assisted us a lot.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And then going back to the first shots from the 155mm guns being fired, then you came to a kind of stalemate, Pretoria wasn't particularly interested in you taking Cuito, so you had these men in the front lines and then what happened? Did they withdraw?</p>
Meiring	<p>We withdrew them all, and then towards the end of '86 a build-up started again. And we planned an operation, Operation Asterix this thing was called then, to again either stop or just assist or actually take Cuito. Those, we could never get authority for them, I still don't know why, but anyhow it was political I think, because most of the times that we made presentations to the chief of the army or the chief of the SADF at the time, it was agreed in principle, go ahead with your planning whatever, but we never got the green light for that, and this then happened in '87 when the build-up was like a dam bursting, when the whole thing at Ilomba started again. So they redid the '85 scenario with better troops and bigger forces from the Angolan side, and then we got authority to use tanks, to use Six One Mechanised Battalion and those sort of people, and we called up people and we then had a proper war, which is the thing that General Geldenhuys is now writing about. But those others they were built up and we were lucky enough to stop them, to draw the line at Cuito, to prevent them from coming across, to get UNITA enough breathing space to allow them to recuperate, to allow them to regroup, and also to allow them to better their morale and things because we were seeing that the build-up is coming along. And then the '87 thing started.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Now Southern Cross and Asterix, were those operations, did they involve artillery and things like that, or was that a more guerrilla type harassment of...?</p>
Meiring	<p>Look, I can't remember exactly, I know there were the ones that we were actually Weldmesh and Wallpaper was the two that we used to stop the FAPLA forces. The Southern Cross and Asterix was planned but not executed and they were different forms. One of the alternatives could have been to put more troops in there. We had the Six One Mechanized Battalion, and the full Three Two Battalion which supplemented with additional armoured cars and things like that in there. So those things was on the drawing board but it didn't happen during that time, it happened in '87.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Ok. Then much further north there's a place called Lucusse. Was that part of this era or was that part of the earlier fighting?</p>
Meiring	<p>Part of the earlier fighting.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Around about the time you created the air bridge or...?</p>

Meiring	No, before that time.
Interviewer	Before that. And that was essentially UNITA fighting against FAPLA and Cubans?
Meiring	Yes.
Interviewer	All this time, to what degree were the Cubans involved? Were they involved as advisors and pilots only or did they also have people on the ground fighting in the front lines?
Meiring	Oh, they had people on the ground itself. In the early parts they had lots of people on the ground. They got a bloody nose in the beginning, in '81.
Interviewer	In Askari.
Meiring	In Askari. There were lots of Cubans. Then they did not so much use them as front line troops. They used them in armoured vehicles, armoured cars, they used them as pilots, they used them as officers and advisors, but even so the casualty tally went up with them. that's one of the things that the Cubans didn't like about the whole thing. And then later on they used a lot of Cubans during the actions there on the Lomba.
Interviewer	Now all this time you've got men in and out, the issue of the MiG23s versus the Mirages, MiG23s I think had forward looking radar, and their missiles were radar controlled, whereas the Mirages still were equipped with heat seeking missiles at the time.
Meiring	Yes.
Interviewer	How much did that hamper your operations? The fact that you couldn't rely on the Mirages, and also the further north you got, the more difficult it was to have your aircraft over the battlefield.
Meiring	In the beginning we used to have air superiority. Not so much in fighting for it, but in being there. We were not confronting so much the airforce of the Angolans and the Cubans than the anti-aircraft actions, their missiles and their guns and things like that. that was a major issue. the aircraft never really was a major issue. The only time that they really used their aircraft was against Savimbi, then in bombing them. Then later on, during the later part of those operations, there was actually fighting between the two. But in the beginning, I think, it put a hamper on it, because we could not use the Mirages freely. I mean, the pilots were raring to go, they were sitting there and waiting, please, please, please let something happen. There was a bloke that was sitting with me, he was really raring to go but just couldn't. There was no target or anything like that. So he couldn't go and look for targets. But you must remember that in things like manpower, in things like very sophisticated equipment like the Mirage, we couldn't replace them easily. If a Mirage is gone, it's gone. There was no ways we were getting more. So that was one of the actions that we were very afraid to use them just offhand. We

	used them when it's necessary but not just like that. If an air threat was coming against Rundu, we would have used them for sure. But not...
Interviewer	Alright, so then you got the build-up towards '87, now early '87 you were transferred to far north command, but obviously you would have still been very well informed about what happened around the....
Meiring	Yes, but I was not involved. There's a big difference. Informed and involved, there's a big difference. Because you have your own things that you've got to look after and to do and things, and yes, I know what was going on but I was not involved so I didn't have detail in my mind about that.
Interviewer	Then at Far North for example, by that stage Zimbabwe was an independent country but I don't think there was much infiltration from Zimbabwe....?
Meiring	No.
Interviewer	Mozambique we had the issue of Renamo and Frelimo fighting the civil war there. What would your duties have been there? They brought you out of fairly intense, a combination of conventional and insurgency war, and in northern Transvaal you must have been primarily concerned with guerrilla warfare insurgency?
Meiring	Basically yes, because we looked after the border, the odd insurgence took place, but not many, not nearly the same as we did. We used a lot in training. It was a theatre of operations and it had to look after any threat from the north from that side. Botswana and Zimbabwe, the areas from all through which they could operate against us. So you had to prepare command and control, training and that sort of thing for that purpose and then in the meantime you had give assistance to the police, because that was during the time of the emergency situation, things like that. So we had to give a lot of assistance to the police and try and create a favourable atmosphere in which to operate in, to get as many people possible not to favour the terrorists or the potential terrorists that there were. And it was at the time of the homelands and we had to train homeland armies, and we did that. We had Venda and we had Gazankulu and we had...
Interviewer	Lebowa?
Meiring	Lebowa around us and that was quite...also one of the major things to do during that time.
Interviewer	As a man who'd spent a lot of time in South West Africa and Angola fighting that kind of war, how much of a shift in attitude or strategy did it take for you to get used to a far less conventional style war?
Meiring	You know...I think it's very easy to fight a warm [hot] war. Easy in the sense you know where the enemy is or you should know or

	<p>you try to know. And you know what you must do to get him to neutralise. And I remember one day in Oshakati when the late Joop Joubert and myself sat around a fire one evening discussing, and we said we have now won the shooting war, but what the hell about a non-shooting war. That was where this phrase was actually coined, 'the non-shooting war'. And I think that was a major aspect in our future deliberations from then onwards. Because that happened about the beginning of '85 before those other things started. And the operations were very stable at that point in time. They were being conducted, we killed, I think, in the year of '85 over 800 terrorists, infiltrations, and otherwise. And we were very active against them. if they were spotted they were taken out very, very, very quickly. But we were not always sure about the local population. That was what worried us. So we tried to really give big thought and big deliberations towards the non aggression type of operations. Getting the hearts and minds of people on your side. And this is a thing which I took back to Far North Command. And I tried to induce people here into this thought pattern that goes around that. Because this is major, if you can win that war you'll never have another one. You'll never have a hot war. You can win beforehand. And just to show you something, when I was chief of the army, one of the officers who served with me in South West Africa command was Des Rudmore. Des is a South West African, he came from there and he stayed on and he served in the SWAPO army or the South West African army later, but they were together with SWAPO. And he came into my office one day and he knocked at the door, and the people in the front office weren't there and he poked his head around and I said, hi Des come in. He said, I want to bring someone with me, and he came in, there was a black bloke coming in with him, and I forgot his name but he was one of the commandos in the Kunene province of SWAPO. And I said, how are you? He said, you know what this one wants to do? He wants to meet the man who gave them hell because of the non-shooting war. He said, we were going on very happily when you bloody well came along with your non-shooting war and then we had trouble. So it worked. From the point where I didn't expect it to come from. So yes, it took me some time to get settled but I saw immediately when I got to the area of far north command is that this is what we'll have to do in this area to make people aware of the non-shooting war, if I can coin the phrase again, to help, to assist them to win the hearts and minds of people, because that is the major issue of any warfare.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Was there a time when you felt, I'm here supporting the police, and actually winning the hearts and minds is really the job of the politicians, did you ever feel that you were doing the politician's work or the police's work for them?</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes. We didn't like the work. A soldier doesn't like to work like this. It is not our job. The whole purpose of a military is to train and prepare, and if necessary, to fight and win your country's</p>

	<p>wars. This is what a military is there for, no other reasons. So we found ourselves doing actually other department's work, not just the police and the politicians, but we found that the department of water affairs didn't do well enough, the department of this and that didn't do, medicine was up to it, and we had to supply additional National Servicemen to look after the medicine, to look after the health of the surrounding people, to look after the water and boreholes and things like that, which wasn't our job. But we did that because in doing that we created a favourable impression about the military. And then they come and tell us things. So yes, it was creating a purpose but we never liked it. I never liked to work with the police because they were trained differently. I can't solve a murder or a theft or something like that, and they can't fight a war. It's as simple as that, we're trained differently. So in this sort of operation we had to overlap, which I didn't personally like. But yes, that is a thing that one must live with.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Sure, you were tasked with that and so you had to fulfil it. It just strikes me that, I certainly know that some National Servicemen who I've spoken to, were quite prepared to serve in South West Africa or in Angola, but when they were asked to go to serve down the road in the township just around the corner from the house, they were very unhappy about that. Did you perceive that as an issue within the military?</p>
Meiring	<p>Not so much of an issue but something that has to be taken note of. It was more difficult to work with troops here than it was to work with troops in the border area, or in Angola. Because they had so many restrictions placed around them, and they were in a supportive role, not in an active role, that it was very difficult to maintain a high moral in this area. One of these things. There's nothing that picks up morale than a soldier killing 20 other soldiers. I've done this. I've shot out a tank. I've done this, I've prevented this to happen, or that sort of thing, or I won this war. These things he can see. This he can't see.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Isn't that exactly what the issue was. You say, I've won this war, whereas here internally it was far more complicated and it wasn't clear cut.</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Thinking about National Servicemen and Citizen Force soldiers, with the war in Namibia and Angola you had your Three Two Battalion and 101 Battalion guys, who were full time soldiers. You had some pilots who were full time and so on and so forth. But then you had cycles of National Servicemen, call ups of Citizen Force guys who'd be in for one month or three months or whatever it was, how difficult was it to fight a war when you were continually changing your troops as it were?</p>
Meiring	<p>It is not easy, it is always difficult if you change troops. In my time we did not have so many Citizen Force troops deployed in the area. It was the beginning of the operations inside South Africa</p>

	<p>itself, and they were very busy in the area here. So we seldom had a lot of Citizen Force soldiers working up there. They came in ones and twos and threes. We at times had a company of soldiers, but then they come in an existing area where we could slowly induce them into action. We never really put them into a very hot spot area in the beginning because it would have been unkind to them and it would be not good to the total morale of the area and the effectiveness of our operations. So if we had companies we would insert them into the operational picture, so as to make the least amount of problems. We never deployed, in my time, a whole regiment of soldiers there. But what we found is that they were very good. Even though they came in afterwards and they were not fresh as to the operations that were going on, they were very good and they very quickly adapted. And the quality of the people in the Citizen Force, specifically the leader group, they were all volunteers. And they'd finished their time that they must do, must be there, and they'd signed on voluntarily, and you'd find that those, the officers commanding, the company commanders, the captains, that sort of rank, the sergeant majors, they were excellent. And we never had complaints of them.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And they were also a bit older than your average conscript who was 17 or 18.</p>
Meiring	<p>Of course. For sure.</p>
Interviewer	<p>With the conscripts, I mean, I know the infantry guys went through very serious training, the armour and so on and so forth. What was the standard as soldiers? They were conscripts so many of the guys would not have wanted to be there, and a soldier who doesn't want to be there can't be a good soldier?</p>
Meiring	<p>We never really had problems. I mean, people would say now this, that and the other, but I know for a fact that people are a very adaptive sort of being, and I found that if you give them good training and you expose them gradually to what they are going to find in the area, you'll find that most of them adapted quickly and were actually very good soldiers. I mean, we had...gee whiz...we couldn't fight that war without them. Absolutely not. And we had excellent people. And the standard of our boys were very good. They were superior to many of other armed forces people that were more permanent. So I was always very happy to have them there. We tried to look after them well but it's not always possible. But we tried to look after them as well as we actually could and we supplied them with (<i>inaudible</i>) You'll find that where it didn't have them performing well was where they didn't have a job to do. What they perceived to be a job to do. If they were idle and that sort of thing. Then perhaps you could find problems. But in the area what can you do? You can only be there. You can't AWOL. It's too bloody far away.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And in the townships, how did the youngsters handle that?</p>
Meiring	<p>Amazingly well in fact. I admired them at times because I wouldn't have been able to do it, I think, so well. But again our</p>

	<p>lieutenants, our captains, our majors, were excellent. Even the National Service leader group were very good. We basically trained them for a year and then we put them in charge of people not much younger than they are, and we had very good results from that. They may not have liked it but they performed well.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Thinking back to Namibia, I know you weren't there during the fighting around Cuito and then the big Cuban advance down the western side down towards Techipa, but it strikes me that those battles, certainly around Cuito, are being contested now by argument, by historians, by politicians and so on. Why do you think it's so important now, particularly, the SADF claim that certainly in terms of manpower their losses were much smaller than those of the Cuban/Angolans/SWAPO, yet as you know, recently up at Cuito there was a big ceremony organised by some members of the current government to celebrate a great victory, why do you think it's still being disputed? Why is it so important?</p>
Meiring	<p>I don't know. I think that is a question you should ask Jannie Geldenhuys because he knows more about that sort of reasoning than I did, I'm just a simple soldier. But what I think is that you know, Castro is on his last days, and I don't think that he would like to go down as a failure. That is one thing. When Castro – he killed one of his officers himself because of the failure in this area – but now he wanted to proclaim to the people that he wasn't so bad at all. And I think because of his longstanding association with some of our present day government people, in the time when they were trained and fighting on the side of good against evil as they called it, they are supportive in the sense that we who were so good also had failures. We're not that good. It's to paint a picture that they were good, but we were not that good, so we could also have lost. And I think a major aspect of this comes from the fact that we never, ever was in battle with the ANC, with MK. They don't know what we were like as soldiers. SWAPO knows. SWAPO knows what we were. And they've got the highest respect for us, you can talk to anyone of them there now...of their soldiers. The SWAPO soldiers, you can talk to them. But in this case MK, the people of Umkhonto weSizwe, they didn't really fight a battle. They did the odd thing. Plant a bomb here, threw a grenade there and that sort of thing. They organised a lot and they talked a lot but they really never fought the South African troops. And now I think they want to sort of show that they were actually good, and we were not so good as we thought we were. But if they were fighting against us they would have a complete another frame of mind I think, about this thing. I'm not sure that might be part of it, but the other thing, I think the main thing is that Castro wants to go down into history as to being sort of a success.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Getting back to the MK thing, at no time in all of those operations, whether it be Askari or one of the other ones, were you aware that there might have been MK people around?</p>

Meiring	No.
Interviewer	If there were it was not in any great numbers and probably by chance?
Meiring	Yes.
Interviewer	And then when you were based in far north, people were coming up I believe some from across the borders from Botswana and there might have been some infiltration from Zimbabwe, I'm unaware of it...
Meiring	There was one or two yes.
Interviewer	Was it ever much of an issue to you? Were you concerned about it at all?
Meiring	No, no. We actually wanted it to happen but it didn't. We were very well prepared for that if it happened to try and do something about it, but it actually didn't. And coming from South West Africa I was hoping that something like that would have happened just to be back in the sort of environment where you did this sort of thing, but no.
Interviewer	Was the strategy in South Africa, once it was clear that Angola 435 was having an effect, Chester Crocker was talking, South Africa was talking with the Cubans and Angolans, there were individual operations and battles taking place, was your strategy that you'd just fight each battle as you came to it? You didn't have a ten year plan or anything like that? You couldn't think too far in the future?
Meiring	That was one of the aspects yes, but what we wanted to do is to...our main objective was to create space for the politicians to do their talking in. And that space was supposed to give them enough environment to move around in without being obstructed by the fear of a military disaster. So if we could keep the fear of the politicians away from the military, we could give them the assurance that military wise this is going well, you just do your thing. If we give them more freedom of movement than when they were threatened by a military disaster or something like that. And I think we succeeded well in that because we know that we couldn't continue to fight in Angola. I think it was on the books. But we know that we could fight as long as it was necessary to do it. And when actually 435 eventually came to its fulfilment and we had to withdraw, yes, there was the old, hell it was a nice time at the border war and that sort of thing, but we were relieved that we did our thing. Namibia got its independence without a major military coup or operation whatever, and that we were happy to leave behind a peaceful environment. And if it were not for that it wouldn't have been. If it were not for us it wouldn't have been. So this is I think our aim and our goals in that.
Interviewer	I think Ongulumbashe was the first fight. That was '66 I think. So as things were developing from them, the initial, enemy I

	suppose, would have been SWAPO and PLAN. But then as things went on you encountered more and more Angolans and then Cubans.
Meiring	Yes.
Interviewer	Did that sort of perhaps skew your perception of what was going to happen in Namibia? Were you concerned that they would actually try and invade?
Meiring	Look they were trying to invade up to the last minute. This last incursion that Sam wanted to take over by force...
Interviewer	On April 1.
Meiring	That was an April's Fool, I mean for him. But point of fact is...I was away by then at the time...but point of fact is that there was always the threat that SWAPO wants to take over Namibia by force. If not directly then indirectly. But they wanted to create an atmosphere whereby either we would go back by force of the outside world, or they would really have a major operational success. And what we really did was to prevent them ever from reaching a point where they could do it. By being in the southern part of Angola, we prevented them from mustering enough force to enable them to do any major military action. And they used the Angolans and they used the Cubans as a shield for them. This is basically what happened. And because of these facts we sometimes had to take out the shield to negate the effect that they could have on us if the shield was still there. So this is basically what we did.
Interviewer	And that was in northern Namibia, Angola. Back in South Africa was it your sense that MK ever had a similar capability to SWAPO?
Meiring	No, never. No, they couldn't do it. Well, they could perhaps do it later but at that point up to '94 they never had the real ability to do anything like that.
Interviewer	And with Renamo being, not an equivalent of UNITA, but it was a force that was opposed to the Marxist government of the day, which was Frelimo, how come a similar situation never developed in Mozambique?
Meiring	I don't know. I don't know. I think because there was no really threat in the same sense as in South West Africa, a threat against South Africa from Mozambique. I mean, we know that there were people there, we know they had tanks, we know they had this and we planned also accordingly in our theatre of preparation planning and that sort of thing. We know that. And we planned for things like that, but it never materialised because either there wasn't enough ANC members to do the same sort of actions from another country into ours, or they were prevented by Frelimo to do this, I don't know. Frankly I'm not sure, I was away most of the time so I don't really know what happened in that area. But what I do know is that if they did, we could have done

	the same as we did in Angola to prevent those attacks against them, but they were never in such major proportions deployed that it manifested as a threat towards us.
Interviewer	Just a technical question, in the operational area and in southern Angola as well, you're a signals expert amongst other things, all communications on the battlefields, South African communications, were they in English or Afrikaans or both?
Meiring	Basically Afrikaans. To a large degree. Airforce wise it was basically English. But the troops on the ground used Afrikaans to a larger degree. Even among the blacks. In Three Two Battalion it was Portuguese and Afrikaans. In eastern Caprivi it was English because the people there spoke English. But people in South West Africa spoke Afrikaans. I mean it was their lingua franca. There were so many different languages and tribal that they spoke Afrikaans among themselves. So we actually spoke in Afrikaans to most of the people.
Interviewer	And how difficult would it have been for, be it SWAPO, FAPLA, or the Cubans to have monitored your radio traffic, could they have done that?
Meiring	They could. What we used, we used Hopper radios most of that time, which made it a little bit more difficult. We used very good radio discipline over the air. We learned and we could see what the effect was on them if they did not use the discipline correctly and that sort of thing. So we know what we had to expect and we acted accordingly. But they could have listened, I mean, Afrikaans is not such a difficult language so, and there are people in Angola, PLAN people that spoke Afrikaans well. Some of the people that was apprehended, we found that they could speak Afrikaans. But it wasn't an issue really.
	END OF SIDE B <i>(counter at 467)</i>
	TAPE TWO SIDE A
Interviewer	You became chief of the army in 1990 is that correct?
Meiring	No. '91. I was again Deputy Chief of the Army. I went to Far North Command from the beginning of '87 to March '90. I came back here and from March '90 to round about...for about a year I was then Deputy Chief of the Army again and then Kat Liebenberg. Then he moved to chief of staff operations and I became chief of the army then, it was in '91.
Interviewer	The reason I asked is, because that time South Africa had withdrawn from Namibia, Angola was even before that, yet here at home some areas were fairly wild from a sort of conflict point of view, I think, particularly of Katlehong, Thokoza, that region, parts of KwaZulu-Natal. How difficult was it to shift, I mean, the army were playing more and more of a role in supporting the police – once again how difficult was it to shift? You had a lot of experienced soldiers who'd spent a lot of time in Namibia, and bring them back and say, well now you're going to work in the

	townships, I'm thinking particularly of Three Two Battalion?
Meiring	<p>It was not always easy to do it, you know, we also had a very severe political environment in which to work in. Because you must remember that during 1991 was the famous speech of FW and then the Nationalist Service was relinquished. We had to live in an environment of non trust, I can say, from our government. The president himself didn't like us because we were, I think, relics in his mind from the previous era. My thoughts, maybe he's not correct. The police didn't really like us because we pointed out flaws in the way that they were acting. The other departments didn't like us because we showed them up previously to FW de Klerk's...when he became president, during the operations that we had. We were sort of the kingpin in all the areas because we had officers commanding commands, and that were the more senior bloke in the area (<i>inaudible</i>) at the time. So yes, it was not an easy way to operate in. We did a lot of training, we had to do a lot of new equipment that we had to want to get in because we didn't know where we were going. We did not know if we were in a similar threat environment than we would have been in Namibia and South West Africa. So we had to develop new equipment, it was the time of the new tank, was the time of the new armoured car, it was the time of the Rooivalk chopper and that sort of thing. We spent a lot of time in trying to talk to other people in areas where we could now start talking to people slowly, before '94, the world was opening up towards us. They were not so crucial about our existence at the point in time. People could start talking to us. But then you had to take your troops that were seasoned troops and you had to deploy them inside here. Now among others, Three Two Battalion was disbanded. We brought them back here and they stayed at Pomfret. And then because of things that were more propaganda than actions, against Three Two Battalion it was decided by the State President to disband Three Two Battalion. Then we had to assimilate them into the rest of the armed forces. And some of them got very well trained, hey were well trained, they were very well versed and they were very useful in operating in the townships. They were not like the local soldiers or the local policemen and had families in the townships. They couldn't be bribed, they couldn't be coerced, they couldn't be threatened, but they were black and they were feared. And we had a lot of success with them. But there was a lot of actions that was through ANC, whatever, had a very good machine as far as propaganda was concerned, which we never seemed to copy, and we had to fight a backlash of that propaganda all the time, anything that went wrong in the area was thrown back at us. At the time it was the beginning of the negotiation period in which we were negotiating at an early stage already with the ANC at various levels and various areas. They were no longer enemy, they were the Communist party and the ANC and so on that were disbanded were now reinstated. So we had a very woolly enemy to box. There wasn't really anything. And you must always be very careful about not using your military machine against your local population because this is the worst thing that any country</p>

	<p>could do is to use his military power against his local population. This is what Mugabe is trying to do now at the moment, which is completely out. We never tried to do that. We always tried to do it at the utmost discretion in assisting the police in certain operations. We would surround an area, we would enforce a curfew, we would give the police freedom of action to move inside by actually guarding them or giving them protection. This is the sort of thing. We operated very well in the rural areas, in the commandoes and doing roadblocks and doing follow ups in that area, if there was a farm attack, anything like that, that we did very well. And the commandoes really came into their own at that time. That was why I think they also disbanded at one stage because I think they were showing the police up for what they actually could not do. And it wasn't really the correct way of doing it because that was why we talked about the Third Force at the time, not so much a Third Force in the perception, but like the Cabanari in Italy and things like that, where you have somebody that is not a policeman or a soldier that is looking after the more heavy sort of crime area. So yes, it was not easy. Took a lot of effort.</p>
Interviewer	<p>You speak of saying it's not wise for a military to utilise its men against the local population. Much of the sort of criticism of the SADF in those years was saying that, well the SADF is suppressing political opposition to the state. Was that all part of a sort of a propaganda arm wrestling match?</p>
Meiring	<p>For sure. We really tried our utmost to be there but not to be seen politically. It's definitely not possible but that's what we tried to do.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And in your mind, throughout the eighties there were troops in and out of the townships and things like that, in your mind was the military's task the same as the way you described South West Africa, to prevent a military situation arising, to allow the politicians to do their work?</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes. Our entire operations throughout the confrontational years, if I can call it that, was always that. I used to tell people that if you have a pot on the fire and it starts boiling over, you could put as many stones on top of the lid as you can but it will never stop boiling over. You must take the fire away. So what we tried to do is to take the fire away. This is basically what we...</p>
Interviewer	<p>And in South West Africa, SWAPO itself was never banned.</p>
Meiring	<p>No, never.</p>
Interviewer	<p>But PLAN, the armed wing of SWAPO was.</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So it would be illegal to carry weapons of war and stuff like that.</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes. And for a long time we were actually also in South Africa in the beginning stages saying that we are not acting as the ANC but we will act against MK if they do anything untoward.</p>

Interviewer	But that distinction was lost over the years, certainly in the eyes of the general public.
Meiring	Yes.
Interviewer	Looking back at the role of the police versus the army, in South West Africa you had Koevoet which has a reputation of being extremely tough, and some would say, brutal unit. What was your relationship, you were the commanding officer from the military side, how would you have related to Koevoet? Did you liaise with them on a day to day basis?
Meiring	Koevoet was deployed in Sector one zero and Joop Joubert was the officer commanding there and the officer commanding of Koevoet at the time there. They liaised on a daily basis. They sat in in one another's order groups and things like that. And Koevoet did a very good job as far as additional troops were concerned. They did a terrible job as far as hearts and minds were concerned because they were not interested in that. They used ex terrorists to fight terrorists and those people were scared of being recaptured again by their terrorist friends and things like that, so they were very brutal in the way that they were doing things. Their way of acting in this war lost us lots of points at the time. And the more I thought of what they were doing the more I came to the conclusion that we could have done better without them. But at the time we needed more troops deployed from South Africa to be able to do that and we didn't have them. So yes, they were a benefit to us but they were also a nuisance to us.
Interviewer	Was there ever a time when you sat down and said...the commander was Hans Dreyer I think...did you ever say to them, well listen, we respect what you're doing from a military point of view, but please we've got a hearts and minds program and...
Meiring	Many times.
Interviewer	And the response was that they would do what they had to do?
Meiring	Sometimes there was no response. Said, yes, ok, we take note of what you're saying, but they never...sometimes they tried to do better. But it's a different type of people.
Interviewer	So that was yet another frustration. You had the frustration of having to conduct clandestine operations inside Angola, you needed permission from Pretoria for certain things, you couldn't use Mirages for example at other times, and your strategy, winning hearts and minds was occasionally being...well, straightforwardly, being sabotaged by Koevoet at times.
Meiring	I don't think they tried to sabotage it but their actions actually indirectly did it. Yes, many times, and this was always a bone of contention, between the two ministers basically. You see, they were not even under the South West African police force. They were directly administered from Pretoria. Which is another point

	because the local police were South West African police. And General Gous was the officer commanding there, and me and him met like almost on a daily basis and we were very good friends. But Hans Dreyer's command came from Compol [police headquarters] in Pretoria.
Interviewer	The South West Africa police, their unit was TIN or TUIN?
Meiring	They had a TIN unit, yes.
Interviewer	What was that unit?
Meiring	Phew...I forget now.
Interviewer	Were they also counter insurgency?
Meiring	They were counter insurgency but they were never really...they were undermanned, under staffed and they didn't really do a lot of things.
Interviewer	Thinking back on the war, if I can call it that...I don't know if you prefer to call it the Bush War or the Border War, it's got so many different names...do you feel that the time and effort and the amount of life lost, even though on the South African side it was relatively small, do you think it was a worthwhile exercise?
Meiring	Of course. Now we wouldn't have done it any other way. I mean, if you think...if you can just imagine that, say we withdrew in the early stages, after Ongulumbashe and the...as you know at that point in time we were actually not fighting – during the whole course of time – not fighting insurgents, we were actually really fighting Russian expansionism. This is what...Russian Imperialist expansionism, this is what we actually were fighting. And if we had a foreign enemy power on the borders of the Orange River, and through Botswana, because they wouldn't have been stable for a long time if South West Africa fell, Angola was down and Zambia and Zimbabwe was not really favourable towards us, I mean, Botswana wouldn't have remained neutral at all. And then we had a whole new blinking long border where we were fighting from our side, an enemy which any step across the border would have been in our country, we would have fought the battles here. No, I think we did a marvellous job. And we kept them away until such time as the Russian expansionism died down and that other conditions existed in which we could conduct the necessary talks politically. So I think we did a very good job.
Interviewer	And was there a stage when...ok, that was slightly more towards the end of the Cuito fighting, with the big advance to Techipa...was there a time when you thought that the Cubans would actually seriously mount an attack on the South West Africa border?
Meiring	They could have. There were thoughts that it could happen but never really... <i>interruption</i> It was a fear but I don't think it was a major fear. You have to plan for it but...

Interviewer	Are there any aspects of the sort of operations in Angola, in the period that you were up there that you want to add to what we've discussed?
Meiring	I can sit back and I can think a lot, but I don't think so. I think what I tried to give to you today is not actual detailed facts but more impressions based on fact, and the odd fact about what I think happened, and to give you a better understanding of what it was like there. I think the main thing that we have to keep in mind is, that we were actually fighting a very protracted war in a devious way so as to be successful under the major limitations that were imposed on us. Those limitations were distance, they were manpower, they were political, they were whatever. But we...it was not just an enemy country and you're in an enemy country but two were against one another. The Americans were involved, the British were involved, the Russians were involved, the Cubans were involved, Angola was involved, we were involved, South West Africa was involved. Then we had incursions against us from the freedom movements around the area. SWAPO was involved, the ANC was involved in another area, and the whole conglomeration was extremely volatile and difficult to imagine sitting back now and looking at that now at that point in time. It seemed to be overwhelming the odds against us. And that we as soldiers, as an army, as a Defence Force, could successfully handle all this that was thrown against us, I think this is the major aspect of what came out of this. This is what gave me a lot of happiness if I think back again, that against all odds we were successful. We never had a failure. Never, never, never. We lost the odd troop but we never had a failure.
Interviewer	For example, in your strategy of crossing the Angolan border to keep SWAPO north, I'm sure that your average PLAN fighter would never have penetrated very far south across the cutline at all. What was the...?
Meiring	Well in the beginning they came as far south as Outjo That's the furthest that they came, Outjo and Grootfontein. And that were two incursions, before Operation Protea. And after Protea they never got as far down the line as that. So we could...we were able to prevent them from really on a major scale going into South West Africa and Namibia and creating havoc. So we saved a lot of lives in doing that. We saved a lot of misery to a lot of people.
Interviewer	That big operation down towards Outjo. Was that the unit called Typhoon? Did they go down towards...?
Meiring	I can't remember the name...I think it was Typhoon.
Interviewer	And in terms of the cost of the war...Cuba's cost must have been greater than South Africa's in term of finance because they're much further away. Was that ever a consideration? Were you ever under pressure to save budget?

Meiring	<p>Always, always. We were on a restricted budget and that was one of the things that was also one of our limitations, not enough equipment, not enough whatever. I mean, the war cost us roughly a million rand a day. Averaged over the time that I was there. Because it's about three hundred million rand over a year, that was what the day to day costs were. That did not include new equipment or things like that. That actually was the cost of operations, that's the daily cost. So...but I think if you look at what the training gave us, you look at what lives I think we actually saved in that time, the effect of the political stability that we helped to create in southern Africa area, the small bit we did in the downfall of the Russian empire and the fall of the Berlin Wall, I think we contributed towards that as well, because we contributed to the political, and actually the economical and then political downfall of the Soviet empire at the time. I think really it's a small price to pay. If I remember correctly, I think, the fatalities in war was about 264 over the time of the Bush War. I'm not talking about accidents and things like that, I'm talking about actual casualties in operations, against overwhelming casualties on the other side. In that one operation in 1985, we together with UNITA was responsible, according to intercepts, of almost 3000 soldiers. And three brigades that were wiped out, that were gone. So it is overwhelming odds against which we actually fought, and with such small losses. It's unbelievable I think. It's the sort of thing historians can look back to as a major military success.</p>
Interviewer	<p>As I mentioned earlier, that always surprised me at the sheer discrepancy in the numbers, and that's why I asked you about their bombing operations and so on, because some people might say, well it's got to be propaganda, you can't only lose 260 in 14 years of fighting to the many thousands that FAPLA and the Cubans lost. But you believe it's for the reasons you've described.</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes, for sure.</p>
Interviewer	<p>How good were the UNITA guys as soldiers?</p>
Meiring	<p>Some of them were very good, but you know, the one thing that amazed me is that they lied to their superiors. It's not just UNITA, everybody does that in Africa, I think. We would sit down with Savimbi and Chipendo, he would give him a picture, and we know it's false because Thackeray and myself were sitting there, we're now trying to brief him. When it's finished we ask to see him by himself alone. And we would tell him that this is not correct! But they were afraid to give him a picture whereby to present to the boss something that is not acceptable to him.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So in other words you didn't want to offend the big man, he didn't want to offend his boss.</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes. And this was extremely difficult. Ok, the other thing is they're not good at direct fighting. They were never good at that. And I think in certain cases FAPLA was a better fighter, because we</p>

	<p>trained FAPLA in the sense that we fought against them for a number of years and every time they got better. They learned from their mistakes. Whereby UNITA and FAPLA was always at a long distance war when they threw mortars at one another and they fired over long distances, but when it comes to grips they were not there. We could never use them, that's why when they were in Cuito Cuanavale they could not take it. I'm sure if we had two companies of Three Two Battalion troops they would have captured the place. But I mean, this is the sort of thing, yes, they were tenacious, they were ingenious, they think well, they devised things for keeping their equipment running and that sort of thing, but they were not good front line soldiers, if I can call it that.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Their equipment, there was much talk about how the US was supporting UNITA, but to my knowledge it was primarily some Stinger missiles and not much else. Much else of what they fought with was AK47s and captured equipment and things like that?</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes, and we also supplied them a lot. not major equipment but we supplied them with vehicles, we supplied them with ammunition, we supplied them with sometimes rifles. What we did is we captured equipment from FAPLA or from wherever and we would re-supply them to UNITA. That was the sort of thing that also happened at the time.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So you were simply using FAPLA and the Cubans as a supply route towards UNITA.</p>
Meiring	<p>Yes, well that's part of it.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And with regard to Renamo, how much of a role...I mean, you're in what was the northern Transvaal in those years...did that enter your day to day responsibility?</p>
Meiring	<p>No. Nothing. I was never responsible for them, they were supplied directly...or they were liaised with directly from Pretoria.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Anything else you'd like to add about the Angolan phase.</p>
Meiring	<p>No thanks, I think that's about it.</p>
	<p>END OF INTERVIEW (<i>counter at 274</i>)</p>

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