

Helmoed Heitman Military Analyst 13/11/07
 Missing Voices Project Interviewed by Mike Cadman

	TAPE ONE SIDE A
Interviewer	A bit about your background, you're a military historian?
Helmoed	More military analyst or strategist. I haven't got a discipline to be a historian. I blundered into it by accident.
Interviewer	Can you paint a brief picture of what have you done on and off for the last twenty-thirty years in terms of military strategy? For whom?
Helmoed	Ok, taking it all the way back I actually wanted to go Permanent Force but the army and I didn't see eye to eye so I didn't. I then stayed on in the Citizen Force from 1970-1996. Having injured my foot I was of course sent from the Armoured Corps to the Infantry – where else does one send a man with a bad foot? As a Bren gunner and a commando, (<i>inaudible</i>) commando, then I wound up as battery intelligence clerk in an anti-aircraft regiment, CTA. Then intelligence officer at 71 Brigade. Then duty officer at sector 40 in Windhoek. Then I did a bit of working in civilian clothes in the operational area and in the Windhoek area a bit. Then duty officer of Western Province Command. The last six years was planning officer, with the chief of staff planning and defence headquarters. But that was actually post war, it was '90-'96. And then I went out. From '77 on, I've been writing about defence things for various journals since '85 for Jane's. I've been involved off and on as a consultant on defence matters since about 1980. Testifying at the odd Commission in those days. A little more later on, '86, with the Geldenhuys Committee before he became chief of the Defence Force. Drew some papers up for them as threat analysis, things like that. And then from about '91 onwards, I got involved in the integration, amalgamation process of SADF, MK, APLA. And since then defence review, that sort of thing.
Interviewer	Just so you know, we're not touching on the MK, APLA side of things because...
Helmoed	Yes, that comes after.
Interviewer	Also the Mayibuye Museum has done a lot of work on that and there are various programs where their experiences are being examined, so I'm looking primarily at members of the old SADF. Just before we launch into the chat about this beast called the SADF, during the Bush War in Namibia, you had the South West Africa Territorial Force?
Helmoed	Ah, correction. Everybody gets it wrong. It was the South West Africa Territory Force. It sounds like bad English, but what it was, was the South West Africa Territory apostrophe 's' Force. Just with leaving out the apostrophe 's'. So it wasn't the territorial

	force. Because it had both. It had a territorial element, what they called the area force, and it had an active element, which was partly Permanent Force, partly conscript. And in fact partly reserve, the Nine One Brigade, which was a Citizen Force unit.
Interviewer	Did they fall under the direct command of Pretoria?
Helmoed	No, they fell under the JOC South West Africa Command. Who in turn fell partly under the army and partly under the Chief of the Defence Force. The line to SWATF was from the Chief of the Army to JOC South West Africa Command to SWATF. Even later when they had a head commander up there, when that became one squadron, SWA Territory Force, that was a bit fuzzy because it fell under the JOC who's an army man, but it also fell under the airforce. So the lines were a little confused...as they tend to get at that level anyway.
Interviewer	And then Koevoet were responsible to the police? Or were they responsible to Pretoria?
Helmoed	They were originally responsible to Pretoria from about...one would have to check the date...about '81 onwards, somewhere there, they became the South West Africa police COIN unit and they reported to the administrator general in Windhoek.
Interviewer	Would there have been close contact between them and Security Police headquarters Pretoria and so on?
Helmoed	Initially yes. They were started by the Security Police as an intelligence gathering organisation. But in fact also the police structure at the time is a little confused in my mind still, because you had Koevoet – operation K – you had the Security Branch itself operating up there, which ran special investigation teams, and you had the old police COIN unit still. Which later on was phased out. Then of course, even Railways Police were up there. But they weren't doing much, they ran those two armoured trollies they ran on the railway line up to Grootfontein and so. And they did some escort work for railways convoys going up and down, those are the big trucks. So they weren't heavily involved.
Interviewer	Alright, if we can go back to the first sort of real sort of contact/ attack on a SWAPO base which was in '66, and that was conducted by Swanepoel with elements of the police and...
Helmoed	Yes, that was old Operation Blou Wildebeest.
Interviewer	Yes, that's right.
Helmoed	Calling it a base is taking it a bit over the top. It's more like a sort of field camp. It was a couple of rudimentary shelters in the bush. Yes, that was the first real contact. I mean, there'd been clashes in Caprivi, the odd shoot-em-up, the odd clash without shooting. That was the first real clash. Then after that actually not a hell of a lot for quite a while.
Interviewer	And the police were then still in charge of operation?

Helmoed	The police were handling security up there, yes. You must remember the Portuguese were fighting a war on the other side. And we did through the late sixties, the Defence Force had liaison officers with the Portuguese, who were assistant consuls, Geldenhuys was one of them in fact. And others. And for a while there were also South African airforce helicopters working with the Portuguese on the other side of the border. But Caprivi mainly where it was initially was primarily Caprivi, later a bit in Owambo. That was a police function. The army were there from '70 on. Primarily it was army engineers building bases for the police, and some army infantry, basically providing protection for the army engineers. But the police were primarily doing the patrolling. '73 is where it changed.
Interviewer	'73 is when the army officially took over border patrols...
Helmoed	Yes, then there was a whole series of changes, what became number one military area, and then there was a number two military area, number three, it's never entirely clear which was which at the time. Initially it was really just Caprivi, later it became Owambo. And much later then came the sectors from about '79 onwards.
Interviewer	Now, with the military playing more of a role, was that purely a strategic issue or was that because back in South Africa, people like PW Botha as Defence Minister were gaining more and more power within government?
Helmoed	No, it was actually a military thing. What had happened was that SWAPO started off with very low scale, not even terrorism really, more just intimidation and proselytizing, preaching, whatever you want to call it, and the occasional assassination of headmen and so who were not inclined to go the SWAPO way. But then over time they moved into moving in larger groups, carrying heavier weapons, but it became something that was actually a little bit beyond the ability of the police COIN unit to handle. So then '73 they said, ok, it's now an army issue, it's become serious enough that it becomes an army matter and the army took control.
Interviewer	So there's this slow build-up, '73 the army take control, and then the first major sort of operation of the modern bush war, if I can term it that, was Ops Savannah.
Helmoed	Yes, again Ops Savannah really wasn't part of the bush war as such. Ops Savannah was a follow into Angola, funnily enough at the behest primarily of Kaunda, Mobutu and Boigny (Houphouet-Boigny). Zambia, Zaire as it then was, and Ivory Coast. Because what happened, you'll recall, there were three parties - guerrilla groups in Angola, that were fighting a civil war. And the Portuguese sort of copped out, they'd beaten them all...the insurgency against Portugal in Angola had ground to a halt. Partly because the Portuguese counter-insurgency strategy was working and partly because the three groups were fighting each other. Because the MPLA were Soviet funded, the FNLA was

	<p>American funded, and UNITA was Chinese funded. So they were so busy fighting each other that the Portuguese could zap them quite happily. But then the net result was also when the Portuguese went home after the coup in Lisbon there was no one guerrilla group that could actually take over – unlike Mozambique say, or Portuguese Guinea. So they had a thing called the Alvor Agreement, signed in Alvor, between the three groups and the Portuguese, that they would form a government of national unity. And then hold elections on the whatever, 11th of November or whenever it was, which would decide who would rule the country. In one of their meetings in Luanda, the FNLA attempted to decapitate UNITA and the MPLA by assassinating the top dogs. That attempt failed, the MPLA responded in kind. Only with the difference that Admiral Rosa Coutinho from the Portuguese Navy who'd been the senior guy in Angola and later in Lisbon, he had already arranged...he'd actually flew to Moscow and then to Havana...for Cuban support for the MPLA because he wanted the MPLA to win. So there were already Cuban troops on the way. And they then arrived, initially in smallish numbers, and then quite a bit, a flood of them, and that turned the tables and the FNLA had to zip out of the country to Zaire and UNITA was being pushed south. At that time – and Kaunda was the spokesman for those three – he made the point to BJ Vorster that South Africa was the big power in Africa and that nobody in Africa actually wanted Soviet stooges clumping around the region and nobody else could do anything about it, so could South Africa please get off its tuff and do something about it. So it was actually they, not Washington, that persuaded BJ to go in there. It was later convenient for everybody to blame the Americans. So the point of going in...initially it was very small scale: provide some training, weapons for FNLA and UNITA...but then as inevitably happens a good instructor can't retrain people and send them off to go and do or die. He goes along to make sure it's working. And they got involved in a couple of clashes and then it escalated. But much the same as the Americans in Vietnam, just on a smaller scale, and later South Africans went into Angola with too small a force, without a really clear idea of what it was they were trying to achieve, and then after a year and a half got bored and went home basically. That's all it amounts to. But that was focused on what was happening in Angola. And rather than having much to do with SWAPO. Yes, while they were there some units were tracing SWAPO in southern Angola. At that point in fact SWAPO was still operating mainly out of Zambia, not so much out of Angola. In fact there were funny periods when SWAPO elements who were allied with UNITA were fighting together with South Africa and UNITA elements against the MPLA, while other SWAPO elements were being chased by the SADF.</p>
Interviewer	It makes for something of a complex war.
Helmoed	The reality of it, when UNITA was formed, its sort of home base was south eastern Angola when Savimbi broke away from the FNLA. So his access route was through Zambia. And Savimbi

	<p>and two guys, if I recall correctly, actually went to China for advanced training. And when they came back they went in through Zambia – Andreas Shipanga was then the SWAPO chief in Zambia, but later their propaganda chief – he actually took them to the Angolan border, then he gave Jonas Savimbi a pistol which was a personal present from Sam Njoma. That was the first weapon that UNITA actually had technically, was that one pistol. And from those three guys and one pistol, Jonas Savimbi built up UNITA. But there was that allied situation. SWAPO facilitated UNITA sitting at (<i>inaudible</i>) in south eastern Angola. UNITA then facilitated SWAPO getting past Caprivi and Kavango to be able to get into Owambo which was their tribal home base. Because being mainly Ovimbundu they were not popular in Caprivi or in Kavango. So those two were closely allied right through and including much of Savannah. So it was sort of a complicated scenario there. Nobody was always quite sure who was who in the zoo. Were they UNITA? Were they SWAPO? Were they FNLA? It was a little confusing.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And to add to matters Jan Breytenbach was fighting a fairly irregular war, quite often not easily identifiable as being South Africa.</p>
Helmoed	<p>Yes, but he was running at that stage, Bravo Group, which was in fact he had Bravo and Delville Linford had Alpha. And Bravo was mainly ex...no they were all actually, ex FNLA. Except Delville's were mainly Bushmen who had actually...mainly Bushmen who had served as Flechas in the Portuguese army. Whereas Bravo Group, Breytenbach's unit, was mainly FNLA guys. And then there were South African troops added. And then we added armoured cars, then we added some infantry units. A sort of very gradual build-up until they got to...whatever...some river which I forget. By that time there were a lot of Cubans on the scene already. There'd been initially quite a few but a lot more, and they'd blown all the bridges. And there was no bridging equipment, there was no heavy armour, there was very little heavy artillery, no air support. At that point, Brigadier van Heerden, Koppies van Heerden, then still Colonel, he basically said, guys we now have to either fight the war properly, or go home. Because we can't go on like this, this is silly. And then the decision was, no we're not going to get involved in a big fight, let's go home.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Ok, so Pretoria had made the decision that it was time to go home.</p>
Helmoed	<p>Yes. Though what had happened also was in the meantime the organisation of African Unity, headed by the well known democrat Idi Amin <i>laughs</i> had accepted the MPLA, de facto control of Luanda as being the victor of running the country.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So Pretoria decides then that it's not worth fighting this war because they don't want to commit any further...</p>

Helmoed	Yes, the OAU had now definitively turned against them. Zambia and Zaire and also the Ivory Coast had backed off, so Pretoria said ok, well we're not going to do it by ourselves, let's go home. Then they pulled back. And then of course having then pulled back, what had happened now was that with the MPLA in control UNITA now had access to the whole of southern Angola and for the first time had very easy access to Owambo. Which they hadn't had before. Before they had to trek all the way from Zambia. Either through Caprivi and Kavango where they were not popular and used to get trod on the backside by locals, or through south eastern Angola where they were also not terribly popular. Right, then UNITA was helping them but it was still a problem area. And now they it easier because they were based in south western Angola, Lubango, where they had a lot of...they could get weaponry in easily trekked in by sea and railed up to Lubango and could deploy from there into their tribal home base. That's when the war started getting to be a real guerrilla war.
Interviewer	And that's when, as you say, guerrilla war within the boundaries of South West Africa, as it then was, really began.
Helmoed	Yes.
Interviewer	And in the interim Pretoria have looked at what happened in...so they now realise that there are Cubans in southern Angola, that the OAU has recognised the MPLA as de facto rulers, and then they sense that there's trouble brewing in South West Africa.
Helmoed	They went in with a large...relatively large...3000 force, because the Cubans were there, otherwise they would have left it probably just with instructors and specialists. Because you know, UNITA and FNLA with a few instructors and specialists would have been able to deal with the MPLA. But not with regular army Cuban units. So that's why they went in with armoured cars and artillery. They only went in when they discovered the Cubans were there. It was terribly embarrassing. They had nothing - 122mm guns, rocket launchers, etc. So the reason they went in was because the Cubans were there, the reason they went out was primarily because the guys that had asked them to go in had now done an about turn and were now backing the MPLA. So they were out on a limb all on their own.
Interviewer	Ok, so post Savannah we've got an increase in SWAPO activity within South West Africa, they start deploying more and more military units up to Southern West Africa and then the first big operations went cross border again in the late seventies.
Helmoed	'78, which was both Cassinga and Juliet. Juliet I don't think was actually the name of the operation, but it was known as known as Combat Group Juliet. It was simultaneous. Cassinga was the paratroops at...or Reindeer was the one at Cassinga, which was the paratroops. And simultaneously Combat Juliet, which later became Six One Mech, ran a shallow operation, they called it, against forward deployed SWAPO elements. So that was the first

	big one. The whole time there had been smaller ones, even in the early seventies, there were small forays across the border by Security Branch and by the army, but always informed the Portuguese they were doing it. There were even small raids into South West and Zambia in the late sixties. But that was police COIN unit.
Interviewer	In the sixties, as early as that?
Helmoed	Yes.
Interviewer	That's when South Africa had its choppers working with the Portuguese in southern Angola.
Helmoed	Yes, working with the Portuguese there, and police did a small number of raids in south western Zambia against SWAPO there. They were very small, very low profile, nobody ever admitted to anything including the Zambians. Then right through the war, with the exception of Angola, you could almost say the wars in southern Africa were handled in a very civilized manner in a sense that the governments kept talking to each other and the countries kept trading with each other while several layers down they were fighting a war. It meant actually it caused a whole lot less damage than if you'd gone into a real mock-down drag-them-out war.
Interviewer	Yes, so they were almost sort of secret wars.
Helmoed	Well, everyone knew they were happening, but if you look at Mozambique, Mozambique was allowing MK to operate, and APLA to operate into South Africa, and South Africans returned the favour by supporting Renamo which they took over from Rhodesia. That didn't stop South Africa trading with Mozambique. A lot of goods were still coming through Maputo harbour, Mozambique was importing things from South Africa, Cahora Bassa was being re-established. So it just suited everybody not to make it a real war. Which would just cause far more damage and be an all down pain in the backside. The difference was, Angola, that was a more open one...although in fact there is...and I'm not going to name names...but there is information that the Angolan army bought most of its uniforms from a Cape Town company through that period <i>laughs</i> quite openly shipped out of Cape Town harbour, I often wonder.
Interviewer	That emphasises your point about people trading with each other even though you're fighting a war.
Helmoed	So it was a bit of a funny war in that sense. But Reindeer and Juliet were the first two biggies. That quietened things down for quite a while because SWAPO took a big knock in Reindeer. The four bases were knocked hard. It also worried them a bit, it took a while to re-establish them and they were a bit scared of going too close to the border. And the losses at Cassinga, and in fact I've looked at SWAPO's own propaganda photos that they provided to the International Defence and Aid Fund in London for instance,

	<p>you have the nice photos of mass graves. If you look carefully at the mass graves, I cannot actually see anybody in the mass graves who is not wearing a uniform. I can't make out the colour of the uniform because it's a black and white photo. But they all seem to be wearing combat boots and uniform type trousers and shirts. So...you know, I have some doubts about how many of them were refugees. Consider the guys who were there, yes, there were civilians there. There were women there, some in uniform, some civilians, and yes, some of them got in the way. It happens.</p>
Interviewer	<p>The SADF acknowledged that some women and children were killed. Your sense is that it was more than just a refugee camp, it was actually a forward base.</p>
Helmoed	<p>I think it was, yes, and it also explains why SWAPO's activities actually were curtailed quite drastically for quite a period afterwards. Because they lost a lot of their trained and experienced guerrillas in that op. So they had to train up new guys. And that's always problematic and they took quite a long...when the new guys weren't experienced started coming into Owambo they took lots of casualties too. So it had an impact that lasted quite a while. In fact really, it lasted right through '79, it's really only in '80 that things started ramping up again. And then came the next big one which was Sceptic. Known to the cognoscenti as Septic.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So at this stage, between Cassinga and then the early eighties, the call up had just been increased to two years in '77. They obviously perceived that there was a greater need for manpower. You had National Service being sent off to the border areas of northern Namibia for fairly long periods sometimes. You had Citizen Force units that were being called up for one or three month camps, and then you had your Permanent Force guys who were doing various tasks. How did they manage to sort of try and sort of balance off all these different requirements? I mean, these troops have all got different understandings of why they're fighting, they've all got different levels of experience, and some have got their minds on going home as soon as they can.</p>
Helmoed	<p>Yes. The Permanent Force...if you forget the airforce for the moment which was mostly Permanent Force, and Special Forces were largely Permanent Force and some National Service volunteers and a few Citizen Force guys. For the rest the Permanent Force primarily supplied the command structure and the skeleton. And then you added troops. I mean, if you look at the structure it varied obviously right through the war. But sort of in the key years '79 through '81, '82, you had your three sectors along the border, Seven Zero was Caprivi...One Zero was Owambo, Two Zero was Cubango, Seven Zero was Caprivi, and something else was Kaokoland, although that actually fell under One Zero. It was operational I guess. In each of those you had...well not in each because Cubango...in Cubango you had only one and in Caprivi none. But you had the five series</p>

battalions, Five One through Five Five which was in Cubango. That was later closed down, it wasn't necessary. So you have Five One, Five Two, Five Three, Five Four, in Owambo. Those were so-called Modular Battalions. And what you had was a skeleton of Permanent Force people, and some short service, National Service, and extended service. And to them were added companies of National Servicemen. Or occasionally Citizen Force companies. Their primary function was to provide air coverage. They manned all the company bases, they ran the routine road patrols, they patrolled their immediate areas, and so they didn't actually do much in the way of aggressive work, but they did the protective patrolling. Then you had Six One Mech, which was National Service and Permanent Force. They did the major cross border stuff when it was needed. You had 32 which was ex FNLA Angolans primarily, but also later other Angolans. And a mix of Permanent Force and conscript officers and NCOs. Who gradually got phased out as the black guys got promoted to be corporals and sergeants and lieutenants. So you had fewer and fewer white guys in 32. You had what was 31 Battalion, the Bushmen Battalion, the former Alpha Group – the 32 had been Bravo Group – which later became 201 Battalion. Initially just provided trackers, later it was used as an infantry unit like any other. And Six One, 32 and 31 – later 201 – they operated wherever they were required. 31 primarily initially, as I say, as a tracker unit, later as ordinary infantry. 32 did internal counter guerrilla operations in so-called frozen areas, where they dressed up as SWAPO and patrolled inside Owambo, and the rest of the army stayed out. But they also did guerrilla operations into Angola itself. And primarily in a sense as reconnaissance operations on foot looking for where they were. Then if they found the SWAPO base for instance, they could call up more 32 or 61, or go in on air strike, or occasionally the paras, very occasionally. They were the active units. Then over time from '79 or so on, they built up the local new recruited units, which were 101 Battalion in Owambo – it originally had some other name, also a three Series, 35 I think. But 101 Battalion in Owambo, 102 in Kaokoland, One O something or other in...there was one in Cubango as well...oh, 201 Battalion. 701 in Caprivi. Later on 203 down in Bushmen and Tsumkwe, which was not a full battalion. And 911 Battalion which was a conscript battalion, National Service Battalion in Windhoek. The others, 101, 102, 201, 701, 203, they were all regular army battalions. Recruited locally, they had a mix of Permanent Force National Service staff attached from the SADF, as leader group and admin group and technical mechanics and the like. 911 as I say was a typical National Service battalion except that it recruited in South West and also had some regulars. A bit of a mixed bag. They then draw in those five series battalions and doing the area patrols and stuff, and occasionally all of them were used in the major externals. Now what you had was the bulk of the force consisted of National Servicemen who had just been trained. So they were up to speed. They were fit, they were young, they had just done their

	<p>training so they were really up to speed in how everything worked, they had their tactics, their drills and they understood their equipment. With Permanent Force officers. You had them doing the bulk of the patrolling. They also manned 61 Mech. And together with 32 and 31, and then later 101 and 201, which were all full time battalions, those did more of the mobile aggressive work. Cross border work. Citizen Force guys who went up were used in some of the major externals, but most of the time went with the modular battalions, Five One through Five Four, to do the internal security side of it. So the older guys who were a little less in touch with their training were used where they were less exposed to serious action, by and large.</p>
Interviewer	<p>When you say a modular battalion, can you just define that for me?</p>
Helmoed	<p>In a sense you had your battalion headquarters base and you had anywhere between two and five company bases, and it was established and it drew companies from other battalions. So for instance, Five Three Battalion might have a company from One SAI, a company from Cape Town Highlanders, a company from Rand Light Infantry, a company from Six SAI, and maybe somebody from somebody totally different. And an armoured car squadron brought from the school of armour say. You had that sort of mixed bag. <i>Interruption</i> ...you just added modules as required. Also in the hot season, the infiltration season, they beefed them up, they put additional troops in. In the quieter season, when there wasn't that much happening, then they would run on lean manning, and the company bases weren't fully manned and they maybe didn't have an armoured car squadron and so on. And then there was still an armoured car squadron that operated independently under sector One Zero control. And there were a few bits and pieces around the place. The focus was Owambo. Caprivi, by '80 was extremely quiet. The one battalion there which was never really at full strength. Kavango as well, they had one battalion, 201 and for a while they had a full time National Service Battalion, Five Five, modular battalion. But I think in fact by '80, certainly by '81, Five Five had been closed down, because nothing was happening in Kavango. So the focus was very much on Owambo. Sorry, they had a parachute company group at Ondangwa air base as a reaction force. And then of course the funnies were around, the Special Forces. And on the police side, as we discussed earlier, you had the police COIN unit, still around in '80, '81, but being phased out, the original COIN unit. You had Security Branch special investigation teams that were doing basically intelligence gathering. And you had Koevoet. Koevoet basically doing internally what 101 Battalion and 32 were doing, and Six One doing externally. The more mobile, aggressive patrolling. And then the railway police just doing really road escorts for the railways convoys, not much else.</p>
Interviewer	<p>61 Mech, it's a unit that crops up in a lot of the writing...can you</p>

	sort of paint a picture for me, you say it came out of Juliet which was at the same time as Operation Reindeer Cassinga.
Helmoed	Yes, 61 Mech...before combat group Juliet was formed in '78, the army had only one battalion group, which was 2 SAI. 2 SAI consisted of the infantry battalions and attached armoured cars squadron and artillery battery and some engineers. It existed primarily because they wanted some armour and some engineers in South West Africa. So they attached them. Everything else was pure battalions. Infantry battalions, armoured car regiment, whatever. Juliet was formed primarily to be able to do cross border work where you might bump into some heavy positions that needed artillery rather than just mortars, and you might bump into a few armoured vehicles and some armoured cars. So they formed this sort of de facto thing of some infantry with armoured cars and stuff. I'm not entirely sure where they all got them from. It also presumably I think started out as a Modular and there were a few companies from here and a squadron from there, whatever. But then by '79 they'd actually informally called Six One Mechanised Battalion group, and from then on it stayed a permanent structure right to the end. In fact until fairly recently it was relocated to Army Battle school after the war. It comprised a Mechanised infantry battalion, usually minus one company. So it usually only had two rifle companies. Plus an armoured car squadron artillery battery, and anti-aircraft, and at some points it had a tank squadron attached. And sometimes it had three Mech companies, sometimes only two that varied a bit, and occasionally also it had a motorized company attached from 101 Battalion usually, it was attached to them. So it was also a Modular and the elements were provided from various units in South Africa, but it was a permanent grouping of infantry, armoured cars, and artillery.
Interviewer	Ok, and it had a permanent commanding officer?
Helmoed	It had a permanent commanding officer, it was a permanent structure up there. Every year it got a new bunch of troops. Or every six months, a bit of partial rotation. And it was the Mechanised Reaction Force there that could go across border quickly, or respond if there had been a foray from the other side. Which there never was.
Interviewer	And that was a combination of National Servicemen, Citizen Force, but primarily National Servicemen...
Helmoed	National Service and regulars. Can't be any Citizen Force.
Interviewer	Ok, because the National Service guys were up to speed.
Helmoed	Yes. You would have had the occasional Citizen Force guy being appointed there, and if as an individual he was called up and they didn't know what to do with him and there was a slot at 61 they would send him there for three months or whatever.
Interviewer	So by and large the Citizen Force guys were, where possible, not

	used directly in the cut and thrust of aggressive operations. They were used as backup.
Helmoed	Yes, they provided the basic security structure, together with conscripts. Mainly they used Number Five series battalions. So they manned the company bases and ran those patrols along there. Alternating with National Servicemen. Primarily again called up when the infiltration season was hot, when there was water on the ground, then you needed more troops and they'd move up Citizen Force to beef up the structure. Sometimes Citizen Force companies operated with no fixed base. They moved in and they spent the entire three months or two months, two and a half months they were operational, actually meandering like nomads operating there, and it didn't happen often, it happened sometimes. They were used in some of the externals but not often.
Interviewer	The complex make up of the force, between Permanent Force, National Servicemen and their Citizen Force, I don't know how other armies operate but it strikes me that for a commanding officer he had to pay attention to...he didn't simply look at it and say, well I've got a hundred infantry men, he would have to look and say, well, of those some are young men who are still doing their National Service, some are here on a two or three month camp, so that must have affected some of their decisions. How did they manage to balance that sort of discrepancy?
Helmoed	Look it wasn't that critical because most of the ones they called up for camps were still relatively young. They'd done their National Service a year or three before. So they were still relatively young, relatively up to speed. And because they were used mainly for internal work they weren't by and large in the high threat environments. So it wasn't that much of a problem. And our standing army, our regular army, actually consisted of National Servicemen – they didn't have a regular army in that sense. So it was simpler than it sounds. The other thing, bear in mind, the Citizen Force units that went up all went through the battle orientation centre at Oshivelo. Well not in the early days maybe but later on they went through there. So they were brought up to speed before they actually went on any serious operations. Ok, when smaller elements went up they sometimes didn't, they flew them straight in and deployed them. But then they weren't used in any major operation.
Interviewer	You say Oshivelo used the term Battle Orientation Centre. That was essentially through...
Helmoed	That's where they threw thunder flashes and fired machine guns over your head and made you crawl under barbed wire and things like that. Get used to loud noises. And give you your drills. You get rusty.
Interviewer	In reading about various operations going back from...let's start at Cassinga Reindeer, through right until near Modular, Hooper, Cuito Cuanavale...I'm a little mystified about the role of the

	parachute brigades. You say they were based...they always had a reaction unit based at Ondangwa. Were they in many instances used as specialised infantry rather than as paratroopers?
Helmoed	Most of the time. The Parachute Brigade as such had one full time battalion. For a while it had two. 1 Para and Two. Most of the time only one. And then it had two Citizen Force Battalions. Now Cassinga was a mix of 1 Para with conscripts and 2 Para and 3 Para reservists. But mainly conscripts, but there were reservists involved there too. The Reaction Force Company at Ondangwa air base was mainly conscripts, occasionally there's a company or reserve platoon attached to that company. They were used mainly in the heliborne role. I am told...I believe, there was some fire course type paradox but I never came across one, I've never actually heard of one. I'm just told there were a couple. But most of the time they reacted by helicopter. They were the fire force but heliborne.
Interviewer	And they would be cross border or internal depending on requirements?
Helmoed	Mainly internal but they could go across border if the situation required. Their ops were almost entirely internal. If you're out on patrol and hit a contact then you get on the air and they could respond quickly. If they chose to respond. They weren't very popular with the infantry battalions. Because they were a little selective in what they did.
Interviewer	That's an interesting...you mentioned they weren't very popular with some infantry battalions. How much rivalry was there between Special Forces and the Parachute Battalion? I know that their jobs are very different, but I understand that at one stage when the Special Forces were undergoing their parachute training, there was some resentment from the old school parachute guys who were at one stage asked to train them. They felt that these guys were know-it-alls.
Helmoed	Look, yes, there was a bit of a clash for a while, but they grew out of that fairly quickly. And Special Forces learned to basically ignore the paras and not take them all that seriously. They provided the parachute training. But then later on you found some form of Special Forces people winding up back in the parachute world, and also as instructors. So it smoothed itself out. The main rivalry really, or dislike, was...actually units like Five Three Battalions for instance, who at one stage found they'd call a parachute Reaction Force, or one of their patrols would have a contact, call Para Reaction Force, they would arrive and say, where's the enemy? And the guy would say, they're bomb shelled but I think they've gone that way. And the paras would say, oh we don't do follow up, cheers. Get in the helicopters and fly home again. Which did not impress the troops on the ground.
Interviewer	I should imagine not.
Helmoed	So there were incidents like that where in fact one commander of

	<p>Five Three Battalion actually gave instructions to his company commanders never to call the Para Reaction Force. Not to bother. And there was a period when the rest of the army regarded the Parachute Battalion as a sports club that occasionally sent a few people to Owambo to take a break from playing rugby and things like that. So there were sort of...it was a brief period but there was a period where 1 Para was seriously unpopular.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And then you got either these National Servicemen, some of whom had undergone pretty intensive training – the infantrymen in particular – they know what they're doing, they come up and then they run into Three Two Battalion. What was the relationship between Three Two who were primarily black Portuguese speaking soldiers, and a National Serviceman who could just as easily have come from...eight months previously be living in Potchefstroom and the only black person he ever saw was the man working in the garden?</p>
Helmoed	<p><i>Laughs</i> Initially they kept them apart. The Three Two were sort of semi secret. Later they operated cheek by jowl. By the time they operated alongside each other, 32's reputation had spread through the army. And everybody was very happy to have them there, because they were seriously good. So it wasn't a problem. In fact a side line I was going to mention to you, you've now triggered my memory on it. We had a half generation of young white South Africans go and play soldiers in Owambo, where they relied on black trackers to keep them out of trouble, where at various stages they fought alongside black troops of 101 or 102 Battalions or one of the others. There were companies of 101 sometimes formed part of one of the modular battalions as well. And sometimes they fought with 32 Battalion. And increasingly they came to rely on each other. And you had white National Service corporals and medics and signallers attached to a unit like 101 where all the troops were black. Towards the end of the war you'd have a 101 company with a black company commander, black platoon leaders, black platoon sergeants as section leaders...maybe the CSM was still white, and a couple of the signallers and the medic. The rest were all black. So what you actually had over that period of war an entire half generation of young white South Africa males was desensitized, for want of a better word, to the race issue. They lived in the same camps, they ate in the same mess halls, they showered in the same showers, they sat on the same thunder boxes, they took the same chances in the bush. And I actually sometimes wonder if we hadn't had 15 years of that war, whether what was done in 1994 could actually have been done, or as painlessly, from the white side.</p>
Interviewer	<p>That's an interesting point, this integration of the army. Three Two Battalion was purely practical, those guys were good soldiers and they needed them to fight. Did it start happening, do you think, almost incrementally without the political leaders being</p>

	fully aware of what they were doing?
Helmoed	<p>I wonder if they were aware or not? It depends a little bit on what you think Vorster and Botha thought the future really held. If you take the American example, the American military led the way into integration in the United States. And in many ways the South African military led the way. if you go back '76 or '77, around there, they commissioned the first coloured officers in the South African army. I knew some of the guys. And at the time there were letters to the editor in Die Burger saying, well maybe he's a lieutenant but my son is white so he won't have to obey his orders. And Malan was then Chief of the Army or the Defence Force, I'm not quite sure which to be honest. Not that I hold anything much for Malan but anyway. Botha was Minister of Defence. Vorster was PM. And Malan went to Botha and went to Vorster, and Vorster then issued at the request of Malan and Botha, a flat edict saying if an officer is commissioned, he carries the State President's commission and he will be obeyed regardless of his race. A commissioned officer is a commissioned officer. That was as early as '76! Everybody now chooses to forget that part of it. So I wonder whether they didn't in fact at some level understand that, where they were going. Chris Bennet would be able to tell you about that, because he was involved from the navy side, when in the seventies too...they had a fight to...because they had coloured seamen and some specialists, and there was, yes, they can't go to sea, only on certain ships and whatever. And the navy finally said to the Defence Department, either we're allowed to take them to sea in the other ships or we can't go to sea because we don't have enough seamen. So that was waived. So in many ways the military actually led the way. The military led the way because the military needed the bodies...or in the case of the seamen, the experienced seamen that they had...and militaries generally are fairly pragmatic creatures. You do the course, you pass the course, you get the rank, you get obeyed. And in due course you get promoted. You happen to have three legs and drink nitrogen and have a purple skin with yellow candy stripes, this is your problem, it's got nothing to do with me. Sure, there were people in the army who were deeply racist. And there were others who really didn't care. But the army as a whole...or the Defence Force as a whole, was fairly pragmatic and these guys (inaudible) and whether it was by design or whether it was purely accidental, whether it was accidental and they realised it was going to happen or they didn't even realise it, in fact it led the way for a lot that happened afterwards. Because it was very difficult to spend a year and a half in Owambo...say an extreme case, as an ops medic working with a platoon 101 Battalion where there were no whites, everybody else in that platoon is black. And then to come home here and be a racist again. It's not that easy.</p>
	END OF SIDE A <i>(counter at 484)</i>
	SIDE B <i>(counter at 6)</i>

Interviewer	...the way that, whether it was by design or chance, white South Africans ended up fighting cheek by jowl with black guys, was there not a chance that that could have...had the end result of black guys saying, well listen, we're fighting next to each other, we're eating the same food, we're travelling in the same uncomfortable vehicles, and we're going to the same funerals, but when we go home to Windhoek or Pretoria, we've actually got to eat in different restaurants?
Helmoed	You see Windhoek, certainly by '80, that didn't apply. By '79 when I was there. Down here it might have applied still but in Windhoek it didn't.
Interviewer	And the majority of black guys were actually from that region.
Helmoed	Yes. But there were problems here, for instance in '77, '78, you could as a black officer, you'd been on course in an army college, eating in the mess with everybody else, but you might have found it difficult to go to a restaurant in Cape Town. That was an issue, same as the American military had exactly that same experience. Except of course then the ratios were the opposite. So it took time to get around that. I don't know how they handled quite honestly. Within the military it worked fairly painlessly. There were problems with pay. For a long time the black guys weren't on the same pay scale as the whites.
Interviewer	I didn't realise that.
Helmoed	That took time to adjust. That was not the military, the military wanted to make that adjustment but the Public Service Commission got in the act.
Interviewer	So they wouldn't allow it.
Helmoed	Yes. And they said, no, no, separate pay scales. As to this day the public service commission undermines the military by not allowing it to pay people what they should be getting paid for what they're doing. Which is why they over promote to be able to pay the guys a reasonable rate.
Interviewer	That's useful to understand, because I often wonder why we've got so many seemingly high ranking people in ratio to sort of...
Helmoed	That goes back a long way. In fact the Brit army had that problem. That's why the Brit army and the offshoots like the South African army have majors as company commanders when every army in the world has captains as company commanders. Because the Brit army couldn't afford to pay captains a decent salary, they had to make them majors. We inherited that. Ok, we now have other rank problems as well that came with the integration process after the war. But back to the racial thing, it was nicely illustrated once outside the immediate conflicts now, but in the internal conflict, the anti-terrorist conflict, whatever you want to call it, in South Africa. A friend of mine was a bomb disposal member who also worked in the C squad of the Security

	<p>Branch, terrorist hunting, and he once took an American journalist around, a lady journalist around, showed her what they were doing whatever. And she said to him then at one point over dinner, you know, Mr X as a racist, isn't it difficult working in this environment? And he said, Madame you must understand, I work with a group of 36 people. 35 of them are black. We all work in the townships all the time. If I was racist I would have died of paranoia years ago.</p>
Interviewer	Roughly what year would that have been?
Helmoed	That would have been about '85, '86.
Interviewer	So at the peak of the township...
Helmoed	<p>Yes. There was a protest march, UDF thing, and another team...whether MK or somebody else, had positioned a man, in a building, in a roof, to if the police weren't willing to oblige by shooting anybody he was going to shoot somebody. So they could kick start it into a proper riot. Except the Security Branch had been told about this and this particular guy was on the roof waiting for him when he'd settled in. And when he had nicely settled, our hero very quietly oozed up next to him, stuck a pistol barrel in his ear and uttered the immortal words, "Darkness, will you be my friend" <i>laughs</i> Darkness let go of the rifle. I went down to the Security Branch offices at Culemborg once because I needed to be fingerprinted for my security clearance, and the Camps Bay police station couldn't do it, so I phoned the Security Branch can you do it and it's quicker and less messy than trying to go to Caledon Square. Sure come down. And of course as an army man I wasn't allowed in there except escorted. But I'm standing outside waiting for the escort to take me in to fingerprint me, when out comes a guy I know, so we talk a bit. Then out comes in fact Jeff Benzine – the much maligned Jeff Benzine – with one of the guys of Tony Yengeni's group clanking in his irons, and this weird conversation ensues. This guy turns to the man I'm talking to and says (<i>inaudible</i>) says to him, <i>kom Bongani</i>...I forget what his name was...Bongani, you're getting fat. To which the reply was, yes, the food here is much better than what it was in the training camps in Zambia and Tanzania. He says, I'm going to have to start exercising, or words to this effect. And there's a bit more chit chat with Jeff and all, and then the MK guy says to my acquaintance in the Branch, Warren what is this nonsense I hear of you leaving the police? Yes, he says, I think I'm packing it in and go and get a civilian job. No, you mustn't do that, he says. When we come to power we're going to need decent coppers and security people, like you, you must stay, you and Jeff. We can't have people like you resigning. And I'm standing there having bad cognitive dissonance. <i>Laughs</i> This was there in the open air car park. It was not a forced thing, an act put on for my benefit. It was quite weird.</p>
Interviewer	Absolutely...so they all knew each other and were seemingly interacting as friends even though they were deadly enemies at

	that stage? Speaking of...you're talking about MK and things here...back in Namibia, the role of pseudo forces, in other words you mentioned earlier on that Three Two would dress up as SWAPO and patrol and the army would...
Helmoed	Well actually they tended to wear more Angolan uniforms than SWAPO but same difference.
Interviewer	And the army would have instructions to stay out of that region for X numbers of days, hours, weeks, whatever it might be. How extensively was that system used?
Helmoed	Look initially a lot along the border, along the cutline, they kept ordinary patrols out and 32 operated. It wasn't even so much at that stage that they were wearing SWAPO uniforms, it's just the troops were all black. And they were afraid if a white unit bumped into a bunch of armed blacks who were armed with AKs, because that was a weapon they were familiar with, that they would automatically start shooting at them. But that actually probably triggered the thought that, hang on, we can actually do this more extensively. 32 ran a few pseudo ops, not a hell of a lot, it was more that issue that they were wearing funny uniforms, they were carrying funny rifles, they spoke a different language and they were all black and the rest of the army was white. So you kept them separate in the operational areas. Later on Koevoet started as a pseudo operation, scouts type operation, but quickly metamorphosed. It kept that side of it as well, their special investigation team did run pseudo ops right till the end. And then Special Forces ran pseudo operations. They actually then formally properly dressed up as SWAPO, pretended to be SWAPO and wandered around in so-called frozen areas.
Interviewer	And Koevoet did their own thing.
Helmoed	Yes, as I say, they started off as a pseudo op, just intelligence gathering, then they developed their own...they formed their own follow up unit because it was the only way they could actually exploit the intelligence quickly. And that gradually then grew into this whole mechanized tracking concept, which then really changed them. They moved almost entirely out of the pseudo game. They still used the special investigation team but that was more conventional investigation side. What was unique about them, and it's funny, there's Koevoet was probably the first example in the world of what today we call net-centric operations. Because when a group went out, or the groups when they were out, they were permanently on the radar saying where they were, what they were doing, they were chatting to each other. So if somebody hit a contact he'd just get on the air, and say Zulu Golf contact hit, and everybody in the vicinity knew roughly where they were. And the nearest group would start converging. Little while later get back on the air and say, Zulu Golf, contact, <i>beweeg noord wes</i> , whatever. And then somebody who was north east would say, hang on, I can maybe cut off. Head in the direction, get on the air and say, listen, I'm here. So they could then co-

	<p>ordinate and do it. The other thing that was unique, what made them successful...well there were four things...that was one. Another was that they were not stuck with boundaries the way the army was. They could actually rove as much as they needed, they just had to tell people where they were. The third was that their information intelligence action cycle was at platoon level. They gathered information, reported back to somebody who analyses it, who tells somebody else, who turned it into intel, tells somebody else to follow up, six weeks later by which time it's too late. So they did at that level. And the final one was that they initially were all detectives. Later they used ordinary policemen as well. Initially they were all trained detectives. So they approached it effectively as a police detective team would, a three or four man detective team. And the buddies, as they called them, the special constables, they were effectively body guards. And they ran it the way a detective team would, so over time they got to know their areas, they cultivated informers, they know who's who in the zoo, and why isn't her boyfriend here today? Where's he? And people would tell them things, and that gave them a hell of an edge. The army didn't do that. The army tried to do a more conventional military approach. They did the police approach and it actually worked like a dream.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Did they need to notify...you say that they would tell units ok we're here. Would the army clear out of an area and say Koevoet are operating here, let's let them be?</p>
Helmoed	<p>Not necessarily, no. In fact there were some near squeaks probably in there, and there was a lot of resentment against Koevoet. The army was bitter and twisted that Koevoet got all the kills. But Koevoet got the kills because they were operating...they were doing internally what 32 and Six One were doing externally. And 101. So they were mobile, they could follow where the contacts were, do their thing. Whereas the company was based in its company area and it was restricted to its company area. You need those elements but the bottom line is the guy who's doing the static boring stuff got bitter and twisted about the guys who have the exciting stuff and drive around in vehicles. Not to mention of course in your vehicle you carry a cool box with cold coke and cold beer whereas if you're walking patrol you can't. <i>laughs</i> It's that fundamental too. A lot of the anti-Koevoet propaganda actually originated with the army. Because the army was so bitter and twisted about them that they, yes, they just shoot anybody and pretend they were terrs. But in fact, I worked a little bit with them, and I got a totally different impression of Koevoet from that. Also the SWAPO allegations of torture and killing. Because what I noticed was if an army patrol stopped, the kids would all come over for sweets and condensed milk and processed cheese and things like that. And the adults, some would be friendly, most would just ignore us. They weren't hostile, they weren't particularly friendly, the army was part of the furniture. If a Koevoet fighting group stopped somewhere almost everybody came over to say hi. So they weren't scared of</p>

Koevoet, they came to say hi. And they were (*inaudible*) of course the reason they came to say hi was all the buddies were local. Some in fact, towards the end, probably half of every group was former SWAPO. So they were all related to somebody there. And if you go further you found the buddies they do a ten day patrol and then they'd get a three or four day pass, they went home and most of them left their rifles at the base. Nobody attacked them, nobody bothered them, and they'd come back with a lot of intelligence. Now a couple of reasons nobody attacked them: locals didn't attack them because they were the relatives of friends. SWAPO didn't attack them because the classic police thing – you kill a policeman, the entire police department gets on your back. And you kill a Koevoet guy on pass the entire organisation will be chasing that group for the next rest of history. The other one that I discovered that really rattled me because it was totally weird, I went to see them one day about something...I can't remember why I went to see them at the Oshikati fort. And the first thing I had to sort of pull a cow bell, and a little peephole opened, and a bright yellow eye looked at me and said, yeah? And a very mean looking guy came out and watched me while somebody else went to see if I was genuine. Then they let me in, two mean looking guys, they took me through, beautiful, lush, peacocks and goldfish and grass and flowerbeds and everything in the middle of Owambo, it was quite weird. And I was served tea by Lucky the steward. And the guy briefing me said, you know why we call him Lucky? And I said, no. He said, he survived, he was run over by a Casspir on a contact and survived it. I said, gee, what was he doing on the ground? He says, he was a terr. Oh, I say, when was that? That was last week. So I start looking for ground glass in my sugar. Then I spoke to him and I discovered how their prisoner handling system. Normally...Lucky was a different case for whatever reason...for about a month they kept them in a solitary cell at Oshikati fort, where they were debriefed, interrogated, or whatever you want to call it. Then the second month they were allowed to wander around inside the fort a bit and could get evening passes into Oshikati town to go and have a drink. As long as they reported back by nine o'clock or whatever it was. The third month of the debrief period they could get overnight passes, so if they found a girlfriend or a professional lady in Oshikati they could do that. The fourth month of the debrief period they got weekend passes to go home to mommy or girlfriend in whatever kraal as long as they came back. And at the end of the four months they were given a choice, they could join Koevoet the fighting group, as a buddy, they could join the construction group maintaining the bases, they could go down to the training farm at Tsumeb and be taught either cattle farming or mahungu farming whatever, or they could take either I think it was a five hundred or seven hundred rand bounty or something like that and bugger off. Now I come from an army background, prisoners are people you stick in a POW cage till the war ends. Or in a counter-insurgency scenario you hand them over to the

	<p>police for trial. You don't give them weekend passes. <i>Laughs</i> It was totally weird. Some of them they actually recruited on the scene. The one chap, called Ben Vermaak, he ran down a SWAPO mortar team, 82 mm mortar and six or seven guys and three of them survived the contact. And he stood in front of him and said right, which one of you is the boss of the mortar team? He doesn't want to say anything but the other two sort of nudge and looked at him. So he said, fine, you guys also work on the mortar? They said, yes. He called his special warrant over, he says go to the Blesbok, which was an armoured truck, fetch three uniforms and boots for these people, they now work for us. That was that. They instantly became Koevoet. When they got back to the fort a week or so later they were given numbers and (<i>inaudible</i>). It was a very strange way of doing things, but it worked.</p>
Interviewer	<p>If I said to most people out in the street, or people who knew about it because not everybody knows who you're even talking about any longer...Koevoet! The general perception is: feared unit, torture, brutality, murderers.</p>
Helmoed	<p>Look obviously there were bad apples in Koevoet. They were extremely effective, so they were like 32 Battalion a key target for SWAPO propaganda and sadly that propaganda was aided and abetted to an extent by some army officers who really didn't like Koevoet. And anyway they all regarded, as soldiers often do, all policemen as stupid and probably brutal. That's how I started, I mean, I went up there when I heard of Koevoet, and I was saying, bloody dumb flatfoots what do they know? Until I saw, when they stop, everybody goes over to say hello, so hang on, what are they doing right that we're doing wrong? Why is everybody so friendly? And again, the Koevoet fighting group typically four cars, so it's forty to forty-eight guys, depending how many they have, plus two guys driving the Blesbok, sometimes another couple on the back, sometimes diesel guys as well. Normally had sort of 40-50 guys in the group, of whom four were white. The rest were Owambos. And several of them, towards the end about half of each group, were actually former SWAPO.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So were they doing it because it was a job that was fun or because in the instances of some of the SWAPO guys they were turned and they had no real option but... <i>phone interruption</i></p>
Helmoed	<p>Look initially some joined because it was a job. There was a lot of unemployment in Owambo. Some joined because they really didn't like SWAPO. SWAPO were pretty mean to people they didn't agree with. The captured ones joined...that's a very good question, they didn't have to. Some may have joined in the initial fear of things like saying, oh shit, let's join rather than get (<i>inaudible</i>). In a sense that sort of propaganda against Koevoet of course also worked against SWAPO, because the guys thought they were going to get tortured, they might as well talk immediately. Some may have joined simply out of fear and then realised ok, they're part of the family they might as well stay in.</p>

	Probably some of the captured SWAPO guerrillas had themselves been abducted by SWAPO as school children, had been guerrillas, they weren't really politically active animals, they didn't really care who ran the country, leave me alone. Ok, now they've been captured. They're afraid maybe if they just returned to civilian life after the police has finished with them, SWAPO will think they deserted and will come after them, and also what job are they going to get so they might as well stay with Koevoet, and they stayed.
Interviewer	It's interesting because you're an expert on these subjects, (<i>inaudible</i>), many South Africans, if you say, well what role did the SADF play... <i>phone interruption</i> The perception of the SADF is this big well oiled machinery that supported apartheid and could have run from Cape Town to Cairo, but the reality is that much of the day to day fighting and much of the serious fighting was actually done by black people.
Helmoed	Yes, in the operational areas for instance in Namibia, it was probably about fifty-fifty. If you look at the battalions up there that were there, at some times probably more than half the force there was black. And local. Locally recruited. The thing is also the SADF was never properly funded. Now people, including SADF guys, think those were the days when there was always money available. In fact, money was always tight and it only in '81 did they spend more than five percent on GDP. That was developing a defence industry, re-equipping the defence force, expanding the defence force and fighting a small war. Oh, and developing nuclear weapons satellites on the side. And they did all that on an average of probably just over four percent of GDP, four and a half percent of GDP, over the years. Which was actually an amazing achievement. And some economist or accountant should do a PhD on how the hell they achieved it.
Interviewer	So essentially as much as it became a part of life for white South African men that at some time you're going to have make a decision about the army or the military, you would go off and do your service, or you could leave, or you could become a conscientious objector and go to prison. Nevertheless the state did not pour vast quantities of money into it.
Helmoed	No. That was an era when most countries had conscription. UK was one of the few exceptions. The only difference was here there was actually some operational service involved. Whereas most others at that point didn't. You just trained for when the big bad Bear came across the European front here, or whichever part of the world you were in. It's only really since the Cold War that most countries have stopped conscription. Which is now turning around and biting a lot of them on the nose because now they don't have the bodies for low intensity wars, they need lots of troops.
Interviewer	That relatively limited amount of finance that was put the way of the armed forces, did that have a direct impact on the way they

	were fighting their limited excursions into Angola and then their counter-insurgency war inside Namibia?
Helmoed	Look, not really. It would have been a factor if the conventional side had ever gotten more serious. Then it would become a problem. Because the conventional forces was badly under equipped. When the National Party came to power in '48, they basically decided, in their inevitable wisdom, that South Africa was never going to go and fight a war for the Brits, although briefly they did have an armoured division for deployment in the Middle East, but otherwise never again. Two: they were too far away from anywhere to ever face a threat so why have all this stuff? The only reason they funded the navy, all the frigates and so at the time, was because the only way they could lever the Royal Navy out of Simon's Town was to promise the Brits that they would take over security in the Cape sea, which meant buying frigates, minesweepers, patrol aircraft, maritime strike aircraft, etc, which the Brits provided at good prices. Relatively good prices. The only reason they re-equipped the airforce was because if you are still flying Sopworth Pups when everybody else is flying Starfighters, ten year old boys write embarrassing letters to the editor. The army was basically left alone. They bought tanks and personnel carriers for the bit that was going to go to the Middle East if it needed to, and then decided they weren't going to do that so they sold half the tanks to Switzerland.
Interviewer	When you're saying "go to the Middle East", what years are you talking about?
Helmoed	Early fifties.
Interviewer	That was the Aden Crisis.
Helmoed	Well, generally if World War Three broke out then we would provide a division for the Commonwealth in the Middle East. But then in '61 or so they sold half the tanks to Switzerland because we'll never need tanks. So it had all been run badly down. To the point when the army ran Op Savannah its tanks were still the (<i>inaudible</i>) Centurion Mark Fives. Ok they were still relatively modern then. No, they weren't, they were over 20 years old. And they hadn't been maintained and they were unmaintainable here because the British engines didn't work and the Brits have never built a decent tank anyway. The artillery was World War Two artillery, not just by type but by serial number. Those were the guns issued in World War Two. The anti-aircraft had 35 mm guns, they were new but that's about it. The infantry at that point had no armoured personnel carriers. They were driving around in lorries. And because the Saracens had been phased out and nothing had replaced them. And the Ratel was coming slowly but surely. So it was a very run down army. And was then gradually built up. The one reason it was possible to do all that of course was because a National Servicemen was a whole lot cheaper than a career soldier. And a career soldier gets a salary and a

	pension and long term family housing and all that stuff. <i>Interruption</i>
Interviewer	...were saying how the army at one stage, or their defence force in general was badly equipped. And then by the late seventies they'd realised that they had to get moving.
Helmoed	Actually there was a defence review in '66 which frightened them a little bit. And they started some work. But the real fright now came when the Cubans arrived in Angola in '75. Because up to that point nobody believed we'd ever face a conventional force in southern Africa of any size. In fact Magnus Malan said to the then just retired chief of the German army, who was a friend of my dad's, that it was...and I quote him more or less verbatim...it was logistically impossible for any outside power to deploy and support a division sized or larger force south of the Sahara. And the Cubans haven't read that book. It took them a few months to put a reinforced division into Angola, albeit with Soviet shipping. They then built it up. And what people don't realize, it wasn't just Angola, in '77 they put two divisions into Ethiopia, which helped them beat up the Somalis. So that was a bit of a frightener. And then came...ok, Ratel was already in hand at that point. But then came the artillery projects and the Rooikat armoured car and the tank upgrade, and smart weapons for the airforce and all sorts of things like that. Those projects then started. And the army would have been fully equipped by about '95, '96, if the war hadn't actually ended in '89. So then of course everything stopped again. Because the Nats, just as they did in '48, said, ok well that war is over and there'll never be another war and we're too far away from anywhere so we don't need any of this stuff. And then tried to actually buy the coming election by throwing money at other things.
Interviewer	To what degree did the politicians hinder some of the military operations - purely from a military point of view?
Helmoed	Ok, that's a question...you say 'hinder', there's an issue...even the conduct of war has to be carried out within broad parameters set by policy, otherwise you're going to get a scenario like the Germans in World War One, when the switch to unrestricted submarine warfare was militarily perfectly logical and rational, but gave the guys in the United States who wanted to go to war against Germany the excuse to go to war against Germany. Which cost them the war. So 'hinder', not a hell of a lot. There were restrictions. For instance, much of the time in the latter part of the war and like in fact during Modular, Packer, there were very firm restrictions that the South African army was not going to take an Angolan town. If the Angolans just walked out of one they could walk in there and just secure it briefly so it wasn't robbed to hell and gone by bandits until UNITA could take over. But they weren't allowed to attack and take a town. But before that in the late seventies there was a line north of the border, I don't know how far north of the border. Helicopters weren't allowed to fly across that line. So if you were operating north there, you got

	<p>wounded, you had a bit of a problem. Helicopter pilots tended to ignore that one and just had radio problems and go and fetch the guys anyway. So look there were those restrictions. And you couldn't just go and launch a major external into Angola if you felt like it. That had to go up to Cabinet level. Special Forces operations had to go up to, at least ministerial level to be approved. So there were controls but not a real hindrance to operations as such. What was the hindrance was there wasn't enough money often for the major ops...well, it wasn't even the money, it was actually the army's own logistics system was up to maggots, which is why, Modular, Hooper, Packer they could only fund a battalion operation every other month because nobody thought to stockpile supplies. Because we were amateurs.</p>
Interviewer	<p>That's interesting you say, 'because we were amateurs'. There's a general perception that the SADF was well trained, well equipped.</p>
Helmoed	<p>I think by the eighties the SADF was probably the best army in the world at handling and running independent battalion group operations. I don't think there was another army like it in the world. There weren't Special Forces in the world as good as South African Special Forces, but then in fact there probably aren't today. They are still top line, they really are. We had some outstanding equipment. The G5, later G6, were then the best in the world, arguably still are. The Rooikat which came too late for the war was the best in the world. Ok, the Casspir was for a long time the best mine protected personnel carrier in the world. So yes, other stuff, well we had no real anti-tank weapons except for a few Milans that we'd managed to buy. Until the ZT3 came in right at the end in '87. Anti-aircraft was very limited. There was none really apart from the twin 35 mm guns. The communications was good, that was world class, that was top line. But the tank was old. It was a clunky old Centurion that they tried to soup up a little bit. So there were lots of gaps. And what we didn't have, we weren't really properly trained – a lot of people get irritated when I say it – we weren't really properly trained beyond brigade level or higher operations because that wasn't what we were doing. When we ran a brigade level operation it was actually a series of battalion operations that was sort of co-ordinated. I remember when I was on the brigade staff. Nobody really ever analysed how well our brigade admin and structure would function on our road net, let alone in another part of Africa where there are no roads or very few roads. And little issues like road space. If you don't have any roads you take up lots of road. You're stretched out over 500 kilometres of road, how do you re-organise that? You need to re-organise. So we took over a lot of NATO concepts, like grouping for battle and then regrouping for phase two, and re-regrouping for phase three, but with no lateral roads for instance and a much wider sector than you'd have in NATO. The 71 Brigade for instance, one of its war zones was a big border. Where the brigade of three infantry battalions and armoured car regiment, had a 350, I think, kilometre wide long</p>

	<p>stretch of border, which had two east west roads and one connecting north south road. That would have been a nightmare. And we sort of blindly assumed that NATO doctrines would work. Well they wouldn't have worked. Fortunately the real thing...there were two things that I think...the training of the ordinary soldier and the junior leaders. That was outstanding. In the eighties I did a bit of an audit and our ordinary infantry private soldier was better trained than your average NATO platoon leader second lieutenant, first lieutenant. Better at map reading, better at communications, better at calling down mortar fire, better at everything. That was one side of it. And of course the guys built experience. They had a lot of practical experience of what they were doing. So they were very good at that sort of thing. And you see that at last fighting in Modular, Hooper, Packer, where often mechanised unit fighting in dense bush with ten, twelve metre visibility, so your battalion commander no longer has any control over what's happening. Your company commander has only very limited control. But it worked and the other guys suffered catastrophic casualties and we didn't. And the difference was that our men were extremely well trained and experienced and theirs weren't. I mean, they were plain bad. And so they got slaughtered. The airforce was different. The airforce was very professional. The navy as well when they were doing their particular game, which was insurgence extraction. And the army...as I said, probably the best in the world at battalion group level operations. Probably could run a brigade operation...yes, a division operation would have been a nightmare, we would have fallen on our nose.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Would they have been able to run a division operation elsewhere besides the thick soft sand of southern Angola? Had their been conflict in the Highlands of Zimbabwe for example?</p>
Helmoed	<p>Look, there we would actually probably have been a little bit better off because at least there the road network would have allowed us to use the tactics we'd learned, which were not really suited to places where there weren't any roads. I mean, we did silly things. We did clever things like go with Operation Askari, go into a wet part of southern Angola in the middle of the rainy season with a mechanised force because nobody really expected it. And then forget to take bridging equipment. So when the rains came and the one river flooded the one battalion group was cut off. Fortunately by sheer fluke that was the only Citizen Force battalion group that was involved in that campaign, and it had a dozen or so civil engineers among as Citizen Force, so they could build a homemade bridge out of logs and stuff strong enough to take Ratels and gun tractors with G5s. And they got themselves out of there. If it had been a Permanent Force battalion they might have been in the dwang.</p>
Interviewer	<p>What operation was that?</p>
Helmoed	<p>That was Askari, '83 I think Askari. So, as I say, '87, '88 they never forward deployed enough ammunition and fuel and spare</p>

	parts to actually run continuous operations, otherwise that campaign would have been over much quicker, with even more catastrophic losses for the Angolans than there were.
Interviewer	Was that through lack of foresight? Lack of funding?
Helmoed	<p>No, more lack of foresight, lack of really grasping the importance of logistics. Also, the campaign changed nature halfway through. Initially it was just, let's stop them the way we did in '85 and before. Stop the FAPLA offensive, protect UNITA's base area, because that meant the Caprivi, Kavango border was immune to SWAPO. It halved the border we had to watch. And then when they inflicted the catastrophic defeat on the Angolan army at the Lomba River, then General Geldenhuys talking with his tame Sovietologist whose name escapes me, who very fittingly had red hair, but anyway, they decided, ok, what happens if we actually inflicted an even bigger defeat? Because they knew from intelligence that both the Cubans and the Soviets basically wanted to go home, they'd had it with Angola. And the concept was, if we destroy everything that they put east of the Cuito and the Cuanavale rivers, what we are saying to them that with one of our brigades and about a third of our air power, we have done that. Now we know you can defeat us if you really put in forces, but imagine what you're going to need to deal with the army if we fully mobilize all ten brigades and use all of our combat aircraft? The idea being, guys this isn't worth it, let's leave it. And in fact although the campaign didn't quite work as advertised, it did actually have that effect on both Soviet and Cuban thinking. It only worked of course because the Soviet empire was already crumbling. Another time it might have picked up the challenge. They might not. Joe Modise several times talked with his Soviet advisors to take a more active military posture against South Africa. And they always said to him, no, on three grounds. The first was that the South African army is too strong. We'd have to move three or four divisions there, which is a logistic nightmare and embarrassing if it doesn't produce an immediate result. Secondly, the airforce is too strong. A hundred odd fighter aircraft means we've got to put three hundred odd fighters in the region, which means building air bases, bomb dumps, fuel dumps, pipe lines, railway lines, mess halls, hospitals, blah blah, expensive, messy. Thirdly, what happens if one of those damn submarines sinks three of our ships? We do nothing, our sailors refuse to sail there. If we want to count on the submarines we've got to put out at least three or four frigates, half a dozen Corvettes, half a dozen Bear patrol aircraft. And A: we haven't got them to spare, and B: if we do that what will the Americans do? So go away. So in fact, interestingly, the conventional capability of the South African Defence Force had a...for want of a better word...a deterrent effect on the Soviet Union. Not deterrent in the sense of, if you attack us we'll destroy you. But it's a threshold that they didn't think was worth stepping over.</p>
Interviewer	Did the SA Navy ever sink any vessels by use of submarines or

	any other way?
Helmoed	No. Submarines never fired a torpedo. The strike craft may have done some shelling, they may have fired a couple of missiles, it's not entirely clear, but certainly they inserted Special Forces who sank two or three ships in Namibe in '86. Most of the insertions were purely reconnaissance insertions. The odd sabotage act. That one was actually the one that sank ships in Namibe harbour. And that's the only one I know of.
Interviewer	There were a couple of those navy based operations where they did oil installations. Beira was one, Luanda was another.
Helmoed	Yes, then they did the one up in Cabinda.
Interviewer	Cabinda which went wrong.
Helmoed	That was stupid. Cabinet decided to do that one. Fine, they said send in the Special Forces to see if they can do it. Special Forces said, you're cuckoo. If we go there we do the job. No, no, you must first see if you can do it. So they went up there, they did it, they actually...there are photographs of the people standing inside the installation. They photographed themselves cutting the pumps and the tanks on...then they had to go home. And then they were sent to do it again, and then things went wrong. A whole range of things went wrong and they got caught.
Interviewer	But to me that sounds just downright...stupid is a polite word.
Helmoed	Yes, it was unfortunately at Cabinet level and Defence HQ level, they didn't quite understand what Special Forces was all about. So they did some dumb things like that.
Interviewer	Did the SADF high command understand what the use of Special Forces was when they were created...initially in the seventies, towards the end I think they might have had a better grasp?
Helmoed	Look, initially they probably had a pretty clear grasp, then they lost it a little bit. And then they had a better view again. I mean, that Cabinda adventure was silly. Let's not argue whether they should have gone for an American owned tank installation or not. That's another issue altogether. Just the way it was done was bloody stupid. And in fact also there Special Forces by that time unfortunately had a cowboy element in them, and they fell down themselves. If you look at armies worldwide, the safest place to be in a war is actually Special Forces. Of all the combat arms. Because Special Forces have a very simple rule, if it's not going according to the time line you go home to mommy and you try another day. If at all possible. And there, on several counts, they should have called that operation off at various stages, and gone home to mommy and tried another day. But they donnered on. We'll make a plan, we're the big brave Special Forces guys, and they were caught. Also we misused Special Forces in the eighties often. They used them as sort of super troopers. Storm troopers. Which was dumb. They spent lots of money training sneaky-peeky Special Forces operators, then you send a bunch of them

	in pretending to be infantry and they get shot dead, all by a dummy with an AK.
Interviewer	Hence the debacle at Eheke.
Helmoed	Yes. But that was insane. You don't do that with Special Forces. Ordinary infantry do that. And probably in fact, ordinary infantry wouldn't have made the same mistakes because they were cautious. <i>Laughs</i> So there were problems. Special Forces were misused, and for a while they had a glitch with their recruiting, they got a distinct cowboy element in for a while. Which is out of them again now. It's a whole different ball game now. Fortunately.
Interviewer	Many of the Special Forces who worked for the old SADF are still advising the modern SANDF.
Helmoed	Look, some are still in there, some are advising now from outside, getting called in now and then. And of course a lot are now working for private security companies around the world.
Interviewer	Yes, in places like Iraq.
Helmoed	Yes. And the interesting thing is, you're now getting the sons of former operators joining the new Special Forces.
Interviewer	That's very interesting. So they feel it's in their genes that this is what they should do with their lives.
Helmoed	Yes, Les Rudman had this type of thing, he's had a retired general who was himself once a Special Forces guy, phone him and say listen his son seems interested, so what does he think? He said, yes, so he did. Interestingly in Special Forces a few years back there were some...because we were so messy with our admin, because the army could never administer itself. There were still outstanding gallantry decorations from the war that had been processed but not ever awarded. So they thought about this and thought well, we'd better get around to awarding them, so some of the guys still in service, some out of service were asked to come in for their award. They had this little medal parade at Special Forces. This one don't maybe necessarily write about it without asking them – I know it's on tape but still. I don't know if it's a secret. And they actually phoned Lekota, said, this is what we're doing – they had approval to do this, because the guys got a medal. And Lekota said, no, he will be there. He'll award the medals. And they said to him, you're aware that these were the operations against SWAPO? So he said, yes, but they are members of my army now. That was then what they were doing quite legally and they were brave and they deserve the decoration and I don't have a problem with that. So he came and he shook them by the hand and pinned the medal on. Which says a lot for Lekota too.
Interviewer	Talking about Lekota and the ANC, in your experience, the ANC had camps in various parts of Angola, and many of their recruits were drawn into fighting against, amongst others, UNITA. But

	there were internal incursion as well. How many, to your knowledge, ANC recruits came face to face with an SADF soldier in conflict?
Helmoed	I would have thought almost none. Certainly in Angola I would think none unless they bumped into the odd Special Forces guy by accident. They did a bit of work against UNITA, they were responsible for securing a couple of areas operating against UNITA. The only contact really between SADF and MK would have been in Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and that was Special Forces.
Interviewer	Sure. I was thinking specifically of Angola...
Helmoed	Angola, none as far as I know. There may have been the odd MK guy working with a SWAPO unit for some reason, that's possible.
Interviewer	Sure. Or who may have been in the base when it got bombed by Impalas or whatever.
Helmoed	Yes, but as far as I know they were all much further north. And in fact they did have a base in Cabinda. So there was no real contact there. I think one reason possibly also that the integration went as smoothly as it did is that MK and the SADF never actually fought each other.
Interviewer	You had MK operatives in South Africa but...
Helmoed	Special Branch went after them. In so far as SADF was involved it was keeping UDF from burning things down. And the funny thing is I still remember having a bit of a moment of cognitive dissonance, having lunch with Clive Keegan on the day that the second State of Emergency was declared. And Clive saying, 'Helmoed, as much as I hate to say this, a lot of the people I know in the townships went on their knees last night and thanked God and PW Botha for the State of Emergency. An interesting aspect there...the ANC or MK specifically never got out of the first terrorism stage of insurgency. They never really got on the guerrilla warfare stage. And the primary focus seems to have been actually to kill black people who weren't on side. And if you go back to their TRC submission, it actually says that one of their roles was...and I'm quoting from memory now...was to eliminate irredeemable stooges of the state. I actually asked a couple of the guys once, was this the same as permanently removed from society? And they said, no, no, no, it's something...no, we don't mean that at all? So, what actually did you mean? <i>Laughs</i> So they were stuck down in that stage. The army really only got involved when the internal revolt became a problem, to damper that down because the police didn't have enough people, the police was far too small. And of course we didn't have proper riot police the way they do in many other countries, in fact, most other countries.
Interviewer	Ok that takes me to two aspects. I want to revisit just now if we can, Cuito and how that battle went. But now that we're talking

	about the ANC and the internal stuff, and (<i>Inaudible</i>) what in your understanding was the feeling of the army about being called in to do a policeman's job?
Helmoed	<p>Didn't much enjoy it but it was sort of inevitable. If rape is inevitable, lie down and enjoy it. They didn't really see it as their role. They weren't keen on it, but somebody had to do it. So they went and did it. The general impression I got from people...actually Willem [Steenkamp – an author] would be able to tell you more about that because he was involved in some of that...the general impression I got at the time from troops that were involved was that they by and large felt welcome in the townships. Because the average township resident did not really like having his mother forced to drink cooking oil because she'd broken a shopping embargo, or getting his sister necklaced because her boyfriend had once been a policeman or something like that. And the average township dweller like the average anybody wanted a nice peaceful life and please leave me alone to get on with things. They didn't enjoy the riots. (<i>inaudible</i>) make the townships ungovernable but the burning down the schools, burning down the clinics, killing of councillors, whatever. So a lot of them...I would hesitate to say it's the majority, I wouldn't know...but a lot of them actually privately welcomed the troops when they came in. Also the troops that went in were not people that had ever been involved in Group Areas shit or forced removals or so, which had been dumped on the police, a dirty job to do. So they came in pretty neutral. And the really funny one, unfortunately Ian Phillips went and died...Dr Ian Phillips who ran one of the MK cells in Natal...he had to admit, much against his will, but he had to admit it, he did so fairly cheerfully, that when 32 Battalion deployed in KwaZulu-Natal, they were cordially welcomed by the people, including ANC supporters. Because they took no shit from anybody. And they didn't care if you were ANC or IFP. They were Angolans. They didn't care. They came in and...went into the one area and they drove through the area where there'd be a lot of mutual killing, with loudspeakers on land rovers, and said, right, we are 32 Battalion, we are here now, we are going to keep the peace, as of today there is a curfew from six o'clock in the evening till six o'clock in the morning. Anybody who is on the street after six will be shot. And they did. They shot a couple. And boof, there was no more violence, no more houses being burned, no more people being killed by either side. And actually everybody was deeply pleased, they much preferred that. Of course, neither the IFP, wild eyed guys, nor the ANC wild eyed guys were happy.</p>
Interviewer	How did it affect the SADF's deployment of troops or availability of troops for what was happening in Namibia and Angola, because by mid 1980s there was widespread, as you earlier spoke about the widespread insurrection in the townships. By that stage Angola was also ratcheting up a couple of levels.
Helmoed	Didn't really...remember the troop levels in South West Africa,

	Angola were always very low. Your average deployment was probably about ten thousand, peaking at maybe fifteen in the hot season...in the rainy season when it was militarily hot. That's now a thumb suck figure really...
Interviewer	Sure I'm just writing it down as a note to myself.
Helmoed	But a large chunk of that force was actually Namibians, or South West African troops. So having to deploy troops here too at that point, didn't really make a hell of a difference. The funny thing is then when the war in South West ended, and they brought the army back, they then found in the early nineties, they were deploying more troops inside South Africa than they'd ever deployed in the operational area. So if the war had then still been going on it might have been a problem. But in fact through the late eighties it didn't put much stress on the manpower side. A little bit but not insurmountable. I mean, even the call ups weren't nearly as rigorous as they had been for a while.
Interviewer	That's correct. I think by 1990 a lot of guys were deciding not to go to the army any longer. At that stage Mandela had just come out of prison and [many] already figured that the war was over.
	END OF SIDE B (<i>counter at 558</i>)
	TAPE TWO SIDE A
Interviewer	Those that were sent to the townships as soldiers, were they properly equipped for crowd control? Were they given proper training?
Helmoed	They were given the training. Properly equipped depends how you define 'properly equipped'? Most of them did not have riot shields and helmets and stuff like that. They didn't have the quick deployment razor wire barriers. They didn't have proper riot control vehicles. Water cannon and the like. They simply didn't have that. So they went in there, it was primarily show of force, here we are and we might shoot you if you get really naughty. They rarely actually shot at anybody. The presence was enough to cool things down. But in fact even the so-called riot police, if you compare it to riot police in other countries, were only towards the end properly equipped. But then of course you get other problems. Riots in most cities in other countries happen in heavily built up areas, i.e. vertical built up areas. Which is fairly easy. You have them in the street in front of you and they can't easily get around you. Riots in South Africa, by and large, happen in townships which are built around single family units, or sometimes semis, which were low, people could stand on a roof or get over it, people could move between houses. Put your classic D formation into the street, or they just go around, they come from behind you, now what? So that was always a problem. So your typical European riot control drills, etc, just didn't work.
Interviewer	When the army were working in the townships, who had control?

	Who gave the ultimate orders? Was it the police or the military?
Helmoed	Troops were under command of their own officers but acting in the direction of the police. So it was a little wishy-washy. But essentially the police would say, listen we have a bad area, go and patrol, then they would patrol. But they couldn't shoot anybody unless essentially they got shot at or physically saw somebody killing somebody else.
Interviewer	With the joint management systems and the area controls, how much of a role did military play in dictating what actions they'd be taking in an area?
Helmoed	I don't think as much as other people think. I suspect rather less. The main reason the military dominated that National Security Management System, was because the police didn't know how to do planning. Their idea of planning was, we're opening a new police station next week where the hell are we going to get constables? Oh yes, let's take three from there, and two from the other place and so on. Secondly they didn't have the communications network. The military had a Coms network. That was primarily why the military dominated it. The actual planning of what to do in the townships...look I was never involved. I was a conventional figure but from what I heard and what I saw at the time I think it was still primarily police handled, because the army didn't provide any support. There may have been times when the army took a more active...in the really hot places like Phola Park and so in the East Rand, there at times probably the army took a more active kind of option, still working in support of the police but actually saying ok, we're in support of you but what we intend to do is the following.
Interviewer	So they still remained their autonomy to a large degree.
Helmoed	Yes.
Interviewer	You say the police didn't have a communications method. Surely they had a nationwide radio network?
Helmoed	Nowhere near the capacity of the military one.
Interviewer	How good was South Africa's military communications network?
Helmoed	Pretty good, pretty good. Then it was actually better than it is now, funnily enough. You'd get on the air and...then it was actually better than it is now, funnily enough. We've now moved on to another generation of technology and we can't even talk to each other anymore the way we used to. <i>Laughs</i> It's funny, in the eighties, the South African army infantry company commander could talk to a Mirage overhead and say, listen fuckwit you've just dropped your bomb on my people instead of the other people, whatever. Today he can't anymore. Because the army and the airforce went off in different directions with their radios. In the eighties when NATO officers were visiting – who officially weren't here, so here's Mr Smith from Swaziland, or Mr somebody from Lichtenstein or whatever. And I accompanied a

	<p>couple of them. They were astonished to find that all the platoon leaders could talk to aircraft on our standard man-pack radios. Channel 24 or whatever, which I forget. Which most NATO armies couldn't do. They had to have a forward air controller. Now comes a new generation radios and suddenly we can't do it anymore.</p>
Interviewer	<p>That's quite remarkable. I mean, the advantages of your platoon commander speaking to a pilot is that you had up to the second information going back and forth between people who were doing the fighting.</p>
Helmoed	<p>Yes, I had a friend of mine who was a company commander, he had no forward air control, he was in deep trouble, really pressed hard by FAPLA, and he got on the radio and asked for help and they said, tough it's too late, we'll send you some aircraft at first light, it's almost dark. He said, well by first light I'm deep in trouble. And that was the first night strike by an Impala. There was a chap, in the air, in an Impala Mark 2, a single seater, had gone on an armed reconnaissance, and not found anything to bomb or rocket or shoot up. He was a reservist, a Citizen Force pilot, who by trade was an airline pilot. He was 53 or 54, or even older actually, might have been 56, 57. He had flown in Korea. And he was flying home. And he got on the radio and said to Ondangwa air base, listen I can help them, I'm in the area, and I've still got my full weapons load. And they said, no, no, you're flying an Impala, you haven't got the avionics to do night ground attack so you won't do that, just come home. So he developed a communications problem. And then he spoke to my friend on the ground and they set up a thing with white phosphorous flares and strobes, and he went around and spent half an hour or so dropping his bombs, firing his rockets and cannon ammo, bought them time to break contact and bugger off. Got an HC for it, as well as a deep <i>uitkak</i> for doing what he was told not to do.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Yes, I'm sure. I think that must have happened quite often with the airforce saying well, as you mentioned earlier on with the helicopter pilots, you've got to casevac you forget some of the rules from the guy who's back at headquarters.</p>
Helmoed	<p>It's classic for airforce (<i>inaudible</i>) you have communications problems. You find you can't speak, oh gee I can't hear you, sorry. Your transmission breaking up.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Getting back to the air war, you were talking about the Hooper, Modular, Packer, was there a situation there where the MiG23s had owned the air rather than the South African airforce?</p>
Helmoed	<p>Yes, but not because they were utterly sort of outclassed the F1 Mirage. What happened, essentially was the army went further north than the airforce could provide air cover. Flying over the Chaminga Highlands, the Mirage F1, if it got involved in combat, had maybe five minutes time, and then it would have to turn around and go home. Because the tankers were not yet in service. If they'd had a heavier weight fighter it would have been</p>

	<p>a different ballgame but they had draw backs (<i>inaudible</i>). So in fact they flew a couple of times and there were a couple of clashes with MiGs, and they fired missiles at each other. And the one, Arthur Piercy's plane got damaged. And then it crashed when he landed. The aircraft was repaired, of course he wound up in a wheelchair. And after that incident actually said, this is ridiculous, all we're doing is burning up engine hours and fuel and risking getting an aircraft damaged, we can't do anything about it, because we can pop off two missiles and we've got to turn and fly for home because we've got no fuel. They also had no radar cover, the Angolans were operating under radar cover. So at that point they stopped flying a combat air patrol. The airforce continued flying air strikes and as far as I know, every planned air strike was flown. The only ones where a couple were called off when MiGs were in the air, were the first couple of attempts to use the smart bombs against the bridge at Cuito. And that was because they were flying a special profile and they weren't used to it yet and...said let's do it on a clear day. But what got the airforce a bad press was that the troops on the ground, if they looked up, all they saw was MiGs. They saw 23s cruising up there. They didn't see Mirages. Nobody registered the air strikes. Some more bangs in the night, well could have been artillery, could have been MiGs bombing UNITA, could have been Mirages bombing the Angolans. When they got into the air with the Angolans being bombed, well how do you tell the difference between an air strike and artillery if you're an ordinary soldier? You can't really. In fact I suspect that air strikes did kill more than half of the Angolan troops that were killed in that series of fights. They did the bulk of the killing. They did a lot of damage. Special Forces were key players, a couple of cases they leopard crawled into FAPLA positions at night and parked the target marking beacon in the centre of the position, which made it easy to toss bomb. So there the airforce got a bit of a bum rap.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Ok, so it wasn't so much that the Mirages and their pilots were inferior to the MiG23s and their pilots, it's that the front line was the limit of their operation range.</p>
Helmoed	<p>The critical factor was that the army had gone further north than the airforce could actually support them. Unless we'd built another air base for them into Angola. Look the Mirage F1C did have a problem, vis-à-vis the MiG23. The MiG23 was more powerful, had a more powerful radar and much more important it had a head on engagement capability with a radar guided missile. Because a Mirage had to basically get behind in to fire an infra red missile. They didn't have a radar guided missile at that point. They got around it in the couple of clashes they had. And in fact, it's not entirely clear whether they didn't in fact shoot down one or maybe two MiGs in that fight. But then the one where Arthur Piercy was shot down. It's not entirely clear whether Gaggiano, the current chief of our airforce, whether he didn't in fact hit the one MiG with the missile he fired. But there was cloud. He fired his missiles, he saw the missile guide or track, and then</p>

	<p>he turned to escort Arthur Piercy home, because they were both now short of fuel. Arthur's aircraft was dribbling fuel on top of it. So he had no way to follow up to see if he hit that aircraft. So I think the quality of the South African pilots was a hell of a lot better than the Cuban pilots being employed then in the MiG23s. And if they had fought I suspect they would have won the fights. But they couldn't.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Sure. And by that stage of the war, at Lomba River and then the final stages before withdrawing, most of the air strikes would have been flown by Mirages, not Impalas?</p>
Helmoed	<p>Yes. But they didn't use Impalas at all in Modular, Hooper, Packer. Because by Protea really and certainly by Askari where air defence system was such that they could no longer use the Impala, it was too slow. Mirages (<i>inaudible</i>) not so much the fighters, the Mirages could have bounced the fighters but against the more modern missiles like the SA8 and even SA13, the Impala was just too slow, it was too easy a target. So they used Mirage and Buccaneer. Same reason also they stopped using a Canberra, it was too much of a target. (<i>inaudible</i>)</p>
Interviewer	<p>Which leads me to the question, this battle, [the battles around Cuito Cuanavale] I know lots has been written about it and you're something of an authority on this battle. I read articles that claim it was the battle that finally made the SADF turn tail and it was defeat for the SADF, it sort of heralded the end of apartheid. Was it a defeat for the SADF?</p>
Helmoed	<p>I don't see it as so. I may be wrong. It started as a campaign to stop FAPLA gaining control of south eastern Angola. It grew into a campaign intended to destroy all the forces that FAPLA deployed east of the Cuito and the Cuanavale rivers, to send that political message. Those were the two key objectives. There are some SADF officers who believe that actually there was no intention to take Cuito Cuanavale itself. From the documents I read...unfortunately when I wrote the book, the documents were all still classified. I was given them but wasn't allowed to reference to them. So there's no referencing at all. Which is a pity. And I wasn't allowed to take notes home. I could type up my stuff but not take notes of reference to anything. But it's normal (<i>inaudible</i>) that was a pity because now I can't go back and say go to that file. My memory isn't that good. But I remember there was discussion of taking Cuito Cuanavale and other towns but in fact there was a Cabinet decision...Jannie Geldenhuys would tell you more about that, he was (<i>inaudible</i>)...a Cabinet decision that the South African army would not take or occupy any Angolan town. Also if you look at the geography of it, if you want to take Cuito Cuanavale you take it from the west not the east. From the west basically you drive downhill into town. From the east you drive into a funnel between high ground on soft boggy and sandy ground towards the river that you have to cross, and on the other side of which is high ground, and his artillery observers sit on the high ground, his artillery is secure behind the high ground. It's</p>

	<p>insane, nobody does that. And on top of that, right through the fighting east of Cuito, there were South African army units operating west of Cuito. They rocketed Menongue air base, they rocketed and mortared some of the logistic bases, they were chasing SWAPO west of that. So at any time if they'd wanted to take Cuito they would have driven into it from the west and taken it. The problem of that was they would have probably had to destroy a Cuban regiment further west to prevent it counter attacking. And no ways did Geldenhuys want to get involved in a fight with the Cubans because he felt sure we can destroy one of the regiments, but then what? Will they go home? The whole idea was to try and persuade them to go home. Not to give them a bloody nose which would force them to stay.</p>
Interviewer	And send in reinforcements.
Helmoed	<p>Yes. As it is they did send in reinforcements, that's 50th armoured division, but they deployed them in the far west, which is as far away from the fighting as you could be and still be in southern Angola. But the other side of the Cunene River where we couldn't easily get at them and they couldn't easily get at us. So from that angle, if I look at the Angolan mission for operation whatever the hell it was called, was to take Mavinga airfield, use it as an airfield, and then exploit and take Jamba, the main logistic and command base of UNITA, and destroy UNITA's base structure in south eastern Angola.</p>
Interviewer	And Jamba was pretty much down the...
Helmoed	The far south eastern corner.
Interviewer	Stuck between Zambia and the Caprivi Strip.
Helmoed	<p>Yes. I think it changed location several times. And they clearly failed in that mission. In fact they never got into south eastern Angola until the war ended, by negotiation after Savimbi was killed. The South African mission started off as just stopping them, was then escalated to destroy everything east of the river, which didn't quite succeed. I'll come back to that. It almost succeeded. In fact there was a little sort of four kilometre by one kilometre box that they still held east of the river, at Tumpo. That was it. The rest was cleared out of the way. The mission then changed, and they said, ok create a condition that FAPLA will not be able to conduct another offensive east of the rivers in 1989. And they put in a mine barrier, an obstacle barrier, whatever, and in fact FAPLA didn't even try again until '92. So the South African mission was achieved. They stopped the offensive, they destroyed most of the force that was involved, and they prevented an offensive for the next three years, instead of just the one year. Then if you look at the disparity in casualties, the SADF lost if I recall correctly about, I think it was about 43 killed or 73 killed...I forget. I would have to look it up. I think it was 43. Ok, there were some lost to illness, which is another factor.</p>
Interviewer	It's fewer than a hundred.

Helmoed	Yes. UNITA lost about 200 combat casualties that I know of. It might have been as high as 400. By the end of February '88, according to signals intercepts, FAPLA had lost over 4700. Soldiers killed. And at least double that number wounded. So it was actually for the Angolan army catastrophic indeed. They failed in their mission, they took massive casualties, the South Africans succeeded in their mission, almost. Certainly the first one. And in the third one. Almost succeeded in the interim one. And took miniscule casualties. And on the air side too. The figures are actually all in that Angola book. The Angolan airforce flew something like 2200 ground attack sorties and they killed 5 South African soldiers, destroyed one Ratel. Damaged a couple of trucks. They killed probably a couple of dozen Angolans in the process and they lost 7 or 8 fighter aircraft. It was actually a fiasco.
Interviewer	Reading your book, it strikes me that while they had MiGs up, they had no idea where to drop their bombs because they couldn't find the South African forces, they knew the area they were in...
Helmoed	Yes, sort of somewhere there. <i>Laughs</i>
Interviewer	But they were bombing kilometres of bush.
Helmoed	They were using old Soviet doctrine of, you fly to a particular point and you drop your bombs and you sort of hope the enemy is where he's supposed to be. And if he isn't, well tough. Later they were flying against marked targets, but because we had better signals intelligence our guys were tending to drop white phos grenades and mortar bombs on Angolan positions. As soon as a MiG came in and said, right I'm in the area, please mark your target. They would mark an Angolan position, the first smoke he sees, he bombs.
Interviewer	Were the South Africans monitoring all the radio coms between the Cuban pilots or the MiG pilots and...?
Helmoed	Yes. They monitored the whole thing. They had Chilean officers help translate the Spanish. We had Portuguese speakers but not Spanish speakers, so they had some Chilean officers they borrowed as translators. And that's where in fact the casualty figures came from that I used in the book. They were all from signals intercepted, because they weren't bodies counted afterwards. They were what the Angolan units actually reported back to the headquarters as, we lost, so many people killed.
Interviewer	And that 43 dead on the SADF side, that includes Three Two Battalion, Bushmen Battalion, anybody else who was there?
Helmoed	Yes. It doesn't include UNITA. It does not include guys who... I don't think it includes the ones that died of disease...there were a dozen or so that got meningitis or something like that.
Interviewer	Meningitis I think there was, yes.

Helmoed	It doesn't include them. Here it is: 43 killed and 90 wounded. UNITA there were 270 killed that I could document. And by 25 February FAPLA had lost 4768 killed. And probably about another 1000 later on. Now the total, if I recall correctly, the total number of troops that FAPLA deployed in the area over a period was about 24000. So of those 24000 they lost about 6000 something killed. Which is catastrophic by anybody's standards.
Interviewer	Massive. What was the total deployment of South African forces and then UNITA...?
Helmoed	UNITA I don't know. The South Africans had at peak...what did they have? They had maybe a total of four battalions in the area, so three and a half thousand, four thousand troops if that. And UNITA probably had a little bit more than that but not much. I would think the South African peak was probably closer to three, three and a half, than to four.
Interviewer	And what was the total number of tanks they deployed?
Helmoed	I think the peak was two squadrons. I don't think they ever had the full regiment up there. They might have had a full regiment at the end, I'd have to think about that, whether Citizen Force unit went up from 82 Brigade. Which would be 3 squadrons, which would be 36, 40 odd tanks. But I think, certainly the rest of the campaign, the most they ever had was two squadrons. Which would be 24 tanks.
Interviewer	And the Angolans and the Cubans were deploying, initially it took them a while to get their tanks down there, there were T54 and T55.
Helmoed	Yes. I don't remember how many they had. They lost a hundred and something I think. Tanks. Quite a few captured that UNITA then took over. They had six or seven, what they called brigades, engaged there. Their brigade was actually not far different to our battalion group. A little bit stronger. So what we had essentially was two or three battalion groups versus six or seven battalion groups. Plus we had UNITA infantry with us.
Interviewer	Most of those casualties you say were huge losses inflicted by the airforce and then the rest by...
Helmoed	There were lots by artillery. <i>Phone interruption</i>
Interviewer	The MiGs flew lots of sorties against the SADF but they didn't seem to hit too much. Did the Angolan forces and the Cubans not use Special Forces to mark targets the same way as the South Africans?
Helmoed	No. They used Special Forces, their Special Forces were quite good. But they tried to find them, they never really marked targets. They tried to use artillery to mark targets once they'd found them and that doesn't seem to have worked for them somehow. But their guys were quite good. At one stage they even managed to plant a booby trapped water bottle inside the

	lines of one of the South African units. One guy got hurt when he picked up the water bottle. It was a captured water bottle that they booby trapped and then planted. So they were quite good, but not good at that level. They were good at the sneaky-peeky but not at the coms and directing air strikes.
Interviewer	And the South African guys, the Special Forces guys or the guys who were directing the artillery fire, they were using radios to communicate back?
Helmoed	Yes.
Interviewer	And those were your high frequency radios?
Helmoed	Or VHF, sometimes HF depending where they were and what they were doing? Long range HF , if they had line of sight they'd use VHF.
Interviewer	And then would the Cubans be monitoring those or did they not have...were they scrambled?
Helmoed	Difficult because we had the encryption and we had the frequency hopping, so they would have found it very difficult to intercept them at all let alone to monitor. They did manage at one stage to work out who, right at the end, when we were on the Chaminga Highlands, they for a little while they managed to work out when the OPs were talking. Couldn't work out what they were saying. They worked it out I think by, a shell would fall and then there would be a squawk on the radio and then that fire would be corrected. And then they got quite sneaky. Some of their guys planted explosive charges in the area, and a shell would fall and they'd hear the squawk and they'd time it and then they'd detonate one of the charges to make it look as if the next shell had fallen there. And the OP would correct on that not realising it was a charge. And that for about half a day, then the OPs got clever and realised what was going on. But they couldn't actually, as far as I know, listen to the conversations.
Interviewer	Then after the battles the South Africans withdrew, that was pretty much on the orders of Pretoria. I mean, that was a political decision rather than a military decision.
Helmoed	Yes, what had happened essentially, for some reason they tried three times to take Tumpo, which was actually a waste of time because that was silly, that was in fact almost as dumb as trying to take Cuito from the east, so it wasn't...tracking through soft sand into a position with artillery that's shielded behind high ground shelling and you can't shell them back because you don't know where they are, so that was dumb. And they failed each time. And it was at the last of those attacks that they lost the three Olifants that lost tracks in a mine field and they couldn't recover them. And the officer in charge wanted to destroy them. And General Liebenberg happened to be there unfortunately, and he thought he knew better and said, leave them we'll recover them tomorrow. But of course tomorrow was another day, by that

	<p>time FAPLA had dug in around them, you couldn't recover them. Then they decided ok, this isn't working, we clearly aren't going to actually achieve the second mission which was to clear them totally off the east bank. So then (<i>inaudible</i>) said ok, we'll build, create a barrier that they can't do an offensive next year and then go home. And that became Operation Displace. We scaled down from what was a brigade to basically one battalion. It was an infantry battalion with one artillery battery. Which basically protected engineers blowing the minefields and the artillery battery shelled the other guys a little bit. And then UNITA took over and they packed up and went home. And meanwhile of course there'd been a bit of a shoot them up over in the west with one of their mixed Cuban Angolan regiment. Around Techipa. That was actually provoked. They literally, they ran a thing called Operation Excite. <i>Laughs</i> They weren't...the Cuban 50th division arrived and deployed. And it wasn't entirely clear whether they wanted to launch an offensive operations into South West Africa or not. To take pressure off the eastern front. The assumption I think, from most of our parts, was that they didn't want to, because otherwise why were they in the far south west? Not either directly opposite Owambo where they could trundle across the border, or in the east where the fighting was. Here they had to cross the Cunene River. But of course they could threaten Calueque, the dam. So they then, what the South African army did, they shelled Techipa. They did several things. They flew a dummy strike with Impalas and released met balloons at the same time when the wind was right. So they fired off all sorts of surface to air missiles at balloons and then they shelled the SAMS, and then they shelled Techipa town. And then the Cuban commander got the hell in and he sortied with the mixed regiment. And for his pains he had his regiment shot to hell and gone by 61 Mech that was deployed there. And the same day or the next day, MiG23s bombed Calueque. The one bomb landed next to a Buffel and killed ten guys. The one MiG23 piloted his...typical stupid fighter pilot thing, he came flying back over the site inverted, and by that time of course the entire battery of 21 guns was ready for him, they all shot at him, and one of the Bushmen, 201 Battalion, outposts two armed battalion outposts in Angola, they later reported a guy ejecting and an aircraft crashing. So that was probably him. And that essentially was...by then the negotiations were already running. That was sort of honour satisfied. Claim a great victory and...</p>
Interviewer	<p>So it wasn't as I've read in some claims that as soon after the South Africans were withdrawing from the Cuito Cuanavale region there was this major push down to Namibia and effectively there were Cuban armies ready to sweep to Windhoek.</p>
Helmoed	<p>Look no, what did happen was that while the negotiations were going on, the Cubans started facilitating the Angolan army moving further south in central Owambo. Was backing them. which made it easier for SWAPO to get back across the border. So you had a couple of incidents where 101 Battalion, Romeo</p>

	<p>Mike teams and some companies operating north of the border, clashed with the Angolan army. Once or twice possibly even with Cubans, it's not quite clear, which units. But they were relatively minor clashes. They just made it very difficult to do hot pursuit operations. And would conceivably difficult in the long run. Would have had to say like how are we going to do this? Do we now fortify the border, put up a real fence and secure it or do we run a major operation and destroy the Cuban forces in central southern Angola? But by that time in fact the negotiations were already well under way and it all stopped. There's one classic where 101 Battalion company actually clashed with a tank force and they lost two Casspirs that were shot out. Nobody killed or hurt but they lost two Casspirs. And they got deeply irritated – the story has it, I wasn't there – they drove back to their base at Oshikati and drew a couple of 106 recoilless rifles, lashed them to the top of their Casspirs, drove back across the border, shot out a couple of tanks and then went home, duly satisfied and had a party.</p>
Interviewer	That's not apocryphal?
Helmoed	I don't know. I've been told a couple of different ones. Knowing the 101 Battalion guys it might well be true. They were wild eyed enough some of them.
Interviewer	And speaking of that era... <i>interruption (counter at 327)</i>
	END OF TAPE 2
	TAPE THREE SIDE A
Interviewer	After Cuito, the wind down, the Cubans move down towards Caleuque Dam then Namibia is heading towards its independence in 1990. Just prior to that there was a major SWAPO incursion, which resulted in some serious fighting in northern Namibia. That was left to Koevoet and the police to handle initially.
Helmoed	Yes, look, some other elements were involved. I think Six One Mech deployed. And they did fly a Para Battalion in to Kaokoland. I'm not sure to what extent they were then actually needed. In fact I'm not even sure how many of them they flew in. They prepared to fly them in, they created the landing zone, they had them stood to, but I'm not sure if they actually deployed. <i>Tape turned off</i>
Interviewer	So that was the police, that was Koevoet and local units.
Helmoed	Then of course it was SWAPOL COIN unit. It was no longer called Koevoet.
Interviewer	It was called SWAPOL...
Helmoed	South West Africa Police Counter Insurgency...
Interviewer	Police Counter Insurgency.
Helmoed	That happened somewhere in '81 or '82, they changed the name.

Interviewer	And that incursion SWAPO took major losses, they lost six or seven hundred people apparently.
Helmoed	It might have even been more. I have a vague feeling it was something like fourteen hundred, but whatever, it was a lot.
Interviewer	And your understanding of that, that was just SWAPO high command misreading the situation in...
Helmoed	Yes, I think what they wanted to do was create bases inside South West Africa, which would have allowed them to have armed people inside Owambo certainly, so come election hearing and so they could more credibly say, guys if we don't win the election the war starts again, here we are. They assumed that they would get away with it. They assumed wrong.
Interviewer	Yes, they did. Because even though at that stage Six One Mech were still there but many other units had been withdrawn...
Helmoed	Most had already left.
Interviewer	And the infrastructure was being, if not being broken down...
Helmoed	It was being handed over to...
Interviewer	Handed over. In the general discussions that we've been having about the nature of this beast called the SADF, the composition of units, the one thing I haven't touched on is the English, Afrikaans thing. Was that an issue in terms of training? Did the English guys get treated in a different way to the Afrikaans guys at basics level?
Helmoed	Look, I think yes. Certainly in the early seventies. I did my basic training in 1970 and yes, then there was. Bloody Rooinek, or Rock Spider as the case may be. I think by the eighties that had pretty much evaporated. And again in fact, much as the fifteen years of operating together with black troops desensitized young whites to the race issue, two decades of National Service actually made the Afrikaner and the Engelsman speak to each other because they had the enemy in common known as the corporal. <i>Laughs</i> There's nothing like a common enemy to focus the mind. So it was still there but it was a lot less of an issue than it had been, say in the late sixties, early seventies. But it was more by then a joking thing. My experience in the army, apart a little bit from basics, but even only a little bit, my experience was that the Afrikaans speaking Permanent Force guys, bent themselves into backward pretzel shapes to treat me decently. They noticed my Afrikaans was bad and they would instantly switch to English. Which is one reason my Afrikaans stayed bad because I never got the answers, they always switched to English. So I never really had a problem. I had one clash with a guy who told me...funny enough in 1980 when I was duty officer at sector 40 and I was also the security officer, and we had a captain posted in, a CF guy, and we got talking, I took him out for a drink. We did a week at a time duty officer and I was still duty officer that week,

	<p>but I was coming off duty at the end of the evening so I just took him out for a drink, and by the time the beer hit me I was going to be off duty anyway. So, we got talking and then he asked me, did I consider myself a good Afrikaner? I said, I can't really, I'm English speaking, not Afrikaans. So, what did I think I was? I said, well I hope I'm a good South African. He said, ah yes, a sort of white kaffir yes. Then he got a bit excitable about this and finally I said to him listen, cease and desist now, particularly kaffir talk, we've got black troops – in fact all our troops in sector 40 were black. He went on. Finally I said, ok, you've had too much to drink, go away, go to your room in the Safari Motel. I'm a Captain, you can't speak to me like that. I said, you don't understand. I'm A: the duty officer still and B: I'm the security officer, now you do as you're told, or you're getting a very, very bad report. So he slunk off. And then I looked up and on the corner of the bar was General Geldenhuys and I thought, oh, oh! And I walked over and he said, Helmoed, <i>ek het dit gehoor, dit was welgedaan, wat drink jy?</i> So that took care of that problem. So yes, some people experienced problems. I think particularly in basics...I think that was more...ok some instructors used it, because the instructor is always looking for an angle to break you down. But then we had the problem our instructors were too young. They (<i>inaudible</i>) to that approach. And then also obviously you've got a bunch of high testosterone 18 year olds playing soldiers, and they are going to be posturing against each other, so they do it.</p>
Interviewer	<p>You say the instructors were too young. Generally in the army or throughout the sort of...?</p>
Helmoed	<p>Well primarily in the army. Because remember in '77 when we doubled National Service from one year to two, they took almost every sergeant, a staff sergeant who could sign his name with not more than two spelling mistakes and made him a captain. Now one or two made outstanding officers, some made good officers, some made average officers, some made bad officers. That's not the point. What it did was destroy the senior NCO corps. So we went from having the real platoon sergeants...when I had my basic training in '70, my platoon sergeant had, at that stage, been in the army for ten years or so. And he'd actually taken a sabbatical of a year and served with the police anti-terrorist unit in Rhodesia. There was another platoon sergeant there who'd served as a mercenary in the Congo. And they had been there, done that, they had actually been shot at. So if they said, this is what you do, and you do it for these reasons, you took them seriously. By the time, after '77, the average instructor was no longer a sergeant or platoon sergeant like that, he was now a 19 year old corporal. He was maybe six months older than the people he was instructing, he had never been there, done it, or if, very briefly. Because remember, the guys who were trained as instructors, did a very short tour on the border and then came and instructed for a year. So they had a maximum of four months or so operational experience. And they were the same age, and</p>

	<p>they knew the troops they were training didn't take them all that seriously, because they didn't have the age gap or the experience gap, or maturity gap. So the only way they thought they could enforce discipline was by scaring the troops, and then that's where the whole period of harassing National Servicemen came. And you had problems with that. Previously instructors were loud, and there were exceptions, there were people who were brutal (<i>inaudible</i>) troops. But they were few and far between. If you're dealing with a bunch of 18 year old recruits, and you are 26, 27, and you've been in the bush a couple of times, you don't have to hit them or even swear at them very much because you've got that authority, it's there, they see it, they recognise it, they obey. A 19 year old corporal doesn't have the maturity or the inbred authority and that's where it slipped. That's also where discipline started slipping in the army. We no longer had platoon sergeants. We had one 19 year old masquerading as a platoon leader, another one masquerading as a platoon sergeant and three of them serving as section leaders. And there was nothing there. A real army you have a platoon sergeant in the second half of his twenties, then he's actually mentoring the officer and controlling the three section leaders. We didn't have that.</p>
Interviewer	<p>When you say discipline started slipping, was that in terms of guys just disappearing, going AWOL, or...?</p>
Helmoed	<p>Not that so much, just generally getting a little bit, to use that army term, <i>slapgat</i>. And that carried on and then of course became worse after integration where nobody was prepared to say to a black soldier, you're not doing the job, because you'd be accused of being racist. But the foundation was that issue, when the senior NCO corps was disrupted.</p>
Interviewer	<p>As a thumbnail picture of this SADF that we're talking about, and we've spoken about over the last couple of hours, is there any other point that you'd like to point out, anything major that we've missed or not covered? I know that it's a thumbnail, we could sit down and talk for ten days about this but...</p>
Helmoed	<p>I think probably the one thing that stands out the most to me, and maybe not relevant to what you're researching, is the speed and efficiency with which, the SADF went...specifically the army...went from a very basic rather backward army in 1970, which was sort of Bedfords and just changing over from .303 to the FN rifle and still using World War Two Bren & Vickers and 25 pound or whatever. From the seventies to say '87 that last campaign, when it had the Ratel and the G6 and the G5 and an anti-tank missile and was operating in battalion groups and actually knew how to do it and had secure (<i>inaudible</i>) radio coms, and had exceptionally well trained junior soldiers, junior leaders, and beginning to move up into a company commander or tank commander, guys with a lot of experience, really good officers. If you actually think about it, it was a very steep learning curve and a very steep development. And that's the thing that stands out in</p>

	my mind. The other one of course is in the first two years the SADF was very lucky that the enemy was so damn inept.
Interviewer	When you say the first two years, that's back in the early seventies?
Helmoed	Yes, early and late seventies. Even early eighties, they were not very bright. In fact they were never. Even Modular Hooper Packer the Angolan army was terrible. And the Cuban ground force we hardly...there were really no Cubans involved in the fighting. There was one mixed Angolan Cuban company in the east, which lasted about 30 seconds. Which is not trying to disparage them, they just got it wrong. They got into a V between two South African battalion groups and one company of ten tanks. Well boof, they were gone. The Cuban regiment in the west was nightmarishly stupidly handled by its commander. The Cuban senior officers at Cuito Cuanavale took control from the Angolans – they weren't troops but senior officers – they were good. But we didn't actually have to fight them so it wasn't an issue. So that right through it actually the Angolan army was pretty bad. South African army learned the hard way, got good, suffered military arrogance the way the Israelis do too.
Interviewer	And that was a product of the more senior officers?
Helmoed	Well, yes, every operation they launched, they succeeded. They always drove over the other guys, with minimal hassle. So assumed they always would. Which is probably one reason why they kept trying to take Tumpo. Hey, we've never been stopped before. To me the other thing that stands out, the biggest failing was, there was no really, for most of the time, no really structured formal system of recording lessons learned. And feeding them back. At times there were. And individuals learned from experience and passed it on to others. But the formal recording and dissemination process was almost non-existent.
Interviewer	And that's probably part of it, because it had been, (<i>inaudible</i>) previously.
Helmoed	Yes. So that's a pity, so very little of it is actually recorded. There are concepts like Butterfly Operations are hardly known. Nobody remembers now the Romeo Mike teams or even what they were. How they operated. Or for that matter how Koevoet operated. We remember the propaganda or if you were part of Koevoet or worked with them you think they were great guys and that was all lies whatever. But nobody actually remembers how they worked and why they were successful.
Interviewer	Briefly tell me what a Butterfly Operation is.
Helmoed	That was combination of heliborne infantry and Allo gunships. And what they did was, Special Forces identified several SWAPO targets in an area. And then at first light fighters would strike one, immediately afterwards gunships and heliborne infantry would go and deal with it while the fighters struck the next one and then

	<p>they would uplift go there and the fighters struck the third one, they'd go there and then maybe a fourth then go home. So as in butterfly, go to one flower, go to the next flower, and the next flower. Which worked very well. And other things, using motorcycles, using mounted infantry, all those sort of things. Little things, sidelines that came out. When they discovered that the Bushmen actually weren't such great trackers.</p>
Interviewer	<p>That's interesting. Everybody claims that they're the best trackers on the planet.</p>
Helmoed	<p>Well the first thing they discovered was, yes, they can track, but they track you right into an ambush because they had no military tactical sense. They're used to tracking an animal and the killing it. Not soldiers that double back and on their own trail, that sort of thing. That they had to learn. And a friend of mine commanded the Bushmen Battalion and he had the weird experience, he had three soldiers that he wanted to promote to corporal because they had immense experience. But to be promotable they had to pass a course. But they were Angolan Bushmen, they'd never learned to read or write, so had minimal literacy. So they couldn't pass a course. Then he got clever, he phoned the tracking school at Oshivelo and said, listen, can't I SWA Specialist battalion - tracking, mounted, motorcycle - can I send these three guys down to you? If they do your tracking course then I can actually promote them to corporal. It's not a section leader course but it's a course. They said, sure. Given that they're yours, we won't bother with a course, we'll just lay on the final exam and then they do the exam, we give them a ticket and send them back. The three arrived, had dinner, the next morning went out on the field and they'd laid on three trial spoor for them, and not one of the three could find the spoor let alone follow it. They couldn't do counter tracking so they actually had to do the course. And the experience was that the best trackers were the white Permanent Force soldiers but they did a long, which was an 8 month or 9 month tracking course, and they could follow almost anybody anywhere. And for the rest the Bushmen were not that much better than the ordinary old Owambo.</p>
Interviewer	<p>That's very interesting because they're spoken of in some awe in some circles.</p>
Helmoed	<p>Clearly in the beginning we went up there as a bunch of city slickers and there weren't any Owambos in the army, so the only people who were in the army...the FNLA were also city slickers. The only rural soldiers that the army had were the Bushmen, and they knew how to track, so they tracked. So everybody thought, gee, this is great. And only afterwards when the thing became a lot more professional, hang on, actually they're not all that great.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Operation Sceptic, commonly known as Septic, why?</p>
Helmoed	<p>Because nothing worked quite as it was supposed to. It worked, but nothing worked quite as it was planned. The same reason Daisy is known as Oopsa-daisy. Because when they got to the</p>

	objective SWAPO had left. <i>Laughs</i>
Interviewer	And then Magnus Malan, as the general, as the Head of Defence Force, was he good?
Helmoed	<p>Wing nut. Big ears nothing between. Look he was extremely intelligent, he had a real grasp of what the nature of the war was. Everybody now...so by the way did General Coetzee of the Security Police, and later van der Merwe...everybody now forgets that the Defence Force and the Security Police, right through the seventies and eighties, repeatedly told Cabinet, we can hold the perimeter for ever but we can't win the war, it's not a military war. It's a political issue, you have to find a political solution. Nobody likes to remember that now. In fact, Neil Barnard pretends it was all National Intelligence Service that did that and the army police said they could win the war. Simply not true, they didn't. Malan kept wittering on about the 80/20 and it's only 20 percent military, 80 percent political. Coetzee from Security Police did the same thing. So Malan had a very good grip on that. Malan's problem was that he wasn't nearly as good an officer as he thought he was. And then later when he became Minister...it was Chief of Defence Force and as minister...he lacked the ability to let go, he thought he was still in direct charge of everything. That was primarily his problem. Very intelligent but not quite as good as he thought he was. But very definitely he had an outstanding grasp of the nature of the conflict. He understood. Geldenhuys too. And Meiring for that matter. Geldenhuys probably had the most nuanced understanding of it. Witness his ability to deal happily with SWAPO (<i>inaudible</i>). When he goes up to Windhoek he's an honours guest in army headquarters. He had that understanding. Where he was running civic action operations for instance in Caprivi, there was one major thing, and I asked whether I could write something about it, at the time I was editing the <i>Allgemeine Zeitung</i> in Windhoek. And I put in a request and I got a phone call saying, listen would I come and join the general for tea in his office sometime when it suited me. So I said, well what about now? They said, sure. So I went over, sat and had tea and cookies in his office, and he said, listen, this is what we're doing, doof, doof, doof. I can't stop you writing about it because you obviously already know about it. But I would prefer if you didn't write about it. I said, why? It means you're doing something good. He says, yes, but what happened was I went up there and I asked them can we help you in some way and they said, this is the sort of stuff we need. And I said, right we'll do it. You see, when we now have a big newspaper story about it, it looks as if I'm doing it just for political purpose. Because actually we're doing it because they asked and because they need the help, and I don't want to spoil what I'm doing and politicize it. So I pondered a bit and I didn't write the story. But that was his take. A really different take. Of course the other thing that we forget is that SWAPO was never banned. It was an active political party in South West Africa right through the war, including the operational area. There were people walking around with SWAPO party</p>

	cards.
Interviewer	Were they allowed to campaign?
Helmoed	Yes. I went to SWAPO rallies as a journalist when I was a journalist. And I went to SWAPO rallies as an army officer later on when I wanted to see what the hell they were doing. And I even got a discount on a SWAPO party badge. One of their security minders, who knew who I was even though I was in civvies, felt it was deeply wrong that SWAPO would try to overcharge an army officer for a SWAPO badge when he was trying to buy one. So I got it at cost.
Interviewer	Do you still have the badge?
Helmoed	Yes, somewhere at home. I used to sit...because that time most of them were SWAPO or DTA again, they'd all left SWAPO somehow...I used to sit sometimes in uniform having coffee with Andreas Shipanga and Solomon Mifima in a coffee bar in the whatever something arcade. It was all rather perverse. And my happiest weird memory was, as editor of the Allgemeine Zeitung before I played soldiers up there, of attending the Untag meetings...I was brand new, this was late '79. So I knew nobody. I took lots of photos and I was sitting in my office trying to work out who the hell was going to help me identify these people, because they all looked the same to me, I'd never seen any of them before. When the secretary walks in and says there's two people here from SWAPO who want to see you. I said, ok, bring them in. Sit them down, tea and cookies, what can I do for you? And they would like to know who all was at the meeting, can I tell them? And I thought about it, ok it was an open series of meetings, anybody could be there, the press was there, so there was no secret. I said, I'll make you a deal. It was open, I took lots of photos, I can't identify the people I don't know. So I will show you the photos, you help me identify people and you'll know who was there. They said, fine. So over tea and cookies we did this. So half an hour, forty minutes later, the secretary calls me outside. There are two guys there from the Security Branch. So I go and see them in the other office, and they'd like to know who all was at the meeting, could I help them? I said, I'll make you a deal. So five of us sat at my desk. Two Security Branch guys, two SWAPO guys and me. The photos, the tea and the cookies and we identified who'd been at the meeting. <i>Laughs</i> There was no secret. It was an open meeting. And then I could actually identify almost everybody then afterwards because almost everybody had a mug shot. <i>laughs</i>
Interviewer	And you knew you were right because it had been confirmed by the police and by SWAPO. <i>Laughs</i> Strange moments.
Helmoed	It was slightly strange, yes.
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