

**Representing history through film with reference to the
documentary film *Captor and Captive*:
Perspectives on a 1978 Border War incident.**

by
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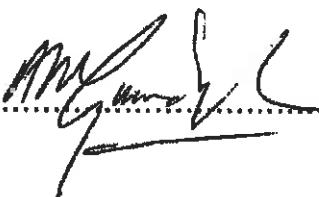
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Abstract

This dissertation is supplementing a documentary film entitled *Captor and Captive – the story of Danger Ashipala and Johan van der Mescht* (2010), referred to as *Captor and Captive*, with a duration of 52-minutes. The film follows the story of two soldiers caught up in the disorganized machine of war. Johan van der Mescht, a South African Defence Force (SADF) soldier was captured in 1978 by Danger Ashipala, a South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) guerilla fighting for Namibian independence. Van der Mescht was held as a prisoner of war (POW) in Angola before being exchanged for a Russian spy, Aleksei Koslov, at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin in 1982.

The main focus of the dissertation is to provide an analysis of representing history through film, with reference to *Captor and Captive*. It explores the manner in which history can be represented through the medium of film and add value to historical text, as well as historical text adding value to film, and how the two mediums can supplement each other. In this instance, *Captor and Captive* was produced first and the research conducted was used to inform the dissertation. It briefly discusses the history of documentary film within South Africa; the reality of producing documentary films reflecting on *Captor and Captive* and the theoretical principles involved in the craft of documentary filmmaking.

The dissertation further provides details of the capture of Van der Mescht and his experience as a POW in Angola, against the backdrop of the Border War that waged between 1966 and 1989 in South West Africa (SWA) and Angola. The political landscape and various forces at work within southern Africa during the period of Van der Mescht's capture are discussed. It also provides detail of the role of Van der Mescht's captor Ashipala, and the liberation movement SWAPO. With independence in 1990, South West Africa became Namibia and will be referred to as such for the purpose of the dissertation. Mention will be made of other POWs during the Border War, providing a brief comparative analysis of their respective experiences.

Opsomming

Die verhandeling is aanvullend tot die dokumentêre rolprent *Captor and Captive – the story of Danger Ashipala and Johan van der Mescht* (2010). Die rolprent het 'n 52-minute speelyd, en daar word daarna verwys as *Captor and Captive*. Dit handel oor twee soldate wat vasgevang is in die chaos van oorlog. Johan van der Mescht, lid van die Suid Afrikaanse Weermag, is in 1978 gevange geneem deur Danger Ashipala, lid van die Namibiese bevrydingsorganisasie SWAPO. Van der Mescht is as 'n krygsgevangene in Angola aangehou, en 1982 uitgeruil vir 'n Russiese spioen, Aleksei Koslov. Die uitruiling het by Checkpoint Charlie in Berlyn plaasgevind.

Die verhandeling gee hoofsaaklik 'n uiteensetting van die manier waarop geskiedenis aangebied word deur die visuele rolprentmedium, met verwysing na *Captor and Captive*. Die wyse waarop 'n rolprent waarde kan toevoeg tot historiese teks, en hoe historiese teks op sy beurt weer waarde kan toevoeg tot 'n rolprent word ondersoek, asook die wyse waarop die twee mediums mekaar kan aanvul. *Captor and Captive* is vervaardig voor die verhandeling aangepak is, en die navorsing is gebruik ter aanvulling van die verhandeling. Verder word die agtergrond en geskiedenis van dokumentêre rolprente in Suid Afrika kortliks bespreek; die realiteite rondom die vervaardiging van dokumentêre rolprente, met verwysing na *Captor and Captive*, en teoretiese aspekte betrokke by die vervaardiging daarvan.

Die verhandeling verskaf inligting omtrent die gevangene van Van der Mescht en sy ondervinding as 'n krygsgevangene in Angola. Dit word geskets teen die agtergrond van die Grensoorlog (1966 tot 1989) in Suidwes Afrika en Angola. Die politieke omgewing en groeperinge binne Suider Afrika gedurende Van der Mescht se gevangenisskap word bespreek. Verder word inligting oor Ashipala, wat verantwoordelik was vir Van der Mescht se gevangene bespreek. Die bevrydingsorganisasie SWAPO, waarvan hy 'n lid was, word ook bespreek. Suidwes Afrika verander sy naam met onafhanklikheidswording in 1990 na Namibië, en vir die doel van die verhandeling word daar na Namibië verwys. Daar word melding gemaak van ander krygsgevangenes gedurende die tydperk van die Grensoorlog, en 'n vergelyking tussen die ondervindinge van die onderskeie krygsgevangenes word kortliks ondersoek.

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Abbreviations

2 SAI:	2 South African Infantry
Agri SA:	South African Agricultural Union
AFDA:	African Film and Drama Academy
BOSS:	Bureau for State Security
CIA:	Central Intelligence Agency
COSATU:	Congress of South African Trade Union
ECC:	End Conscription Campaign
FAPLA:	People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola
FAWO:	Film and Allied Workers' Organisation
FBF:	Film and Broadcasting Forum
FNLA:	National Front for the Liberation of Angola
FRELIMO:	Mozambique Liberation Front
ICRC:	International Committee of the Red Cross
KGB:	Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti or Committee of State Security
MK:	Umkhonto we Sizwe
MPLA:	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola
NBC:	Namibian Broadcasting Corporation
NFVF:	National Film and Video Foundation
NFVSA:	National Film Video and Sound Archive
NIS:	South African National Intelligence Service
NP:	National Party
OAU:	Organization for African Unity
PAIA:	Promotion of Access to Information Act
PF:	Permanent Force
PLAN:	People's Liberation Army of Namibia
POW:	Prisoner of War
PTSD:	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
SAP:	South African Police
SAAF:	South African Air Force

SAIIA:	South African Institute for International Affairs
SADF:	South African Defence Force
SANDF:	South African National Defence Force
SPARC:	SWAPO Party Archive Resource Centre
SWA:	South West Africa
SWAPO:	South West Africa People's Organization
SWATF:	South West African Territorial Force
TRC:	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UDF:	Union Defence Force
UN:	United Nations
UNITA:	National Union for the Total Independence of Angola
VNS:	Video News Service

Chapter 1: Introduction: Representing history through film with reference to various documentary films

Chapter one discusses the motivation, methodology and literature accessed for research to inform both *Captor and Captive* and the dissertation. It further explores the manner in which history can be represented through the visual medium of film, as an alternative or supplementary approach to representing history in written text. The practice of using film to represent history is not a new phenomenon. As early as 1910, artists, intellectuals and politicians realized the power of film to help shape the memories of historical realities. Historians only bought into the idea of using film to enrich historical knowledge at a later stage and during the past three decades it has been researched and explored by academics with viewpoints for and against the practice.¹ Notable is the work of historian Robert Rosenstone, who advocates the use of film to represent history, and is gradually being integrated into mainstream Western historiography. Opinions and comments from South African documentary filmmakers whose films represent history are discussed, to supplement the film academics and critics' opinions. The chapter includes a brief history of film in South Africa for contextual background. The development of film in South Africa is not an isolated affair and forms part of a wider global world, despite the cultural bans during apartheid which placed restrictions on the film industry.

The dissertation is supplementary to a documentary film entitled *Captor and Captive – the story of Danger Ashipala and Johan van der Mescht* (2010); produced, directed and researched by the author, and referred to as *Captor and Captive*. Summary of the film as follows: Johan van der Mescht, a South African Army conscript was stationed on the northern border of Namibia when he was captured in 1978. He was held as a POW in Sao Paulo prison, Angola, for four years and three months before being exchanged for a Russian spy, Aleksei Koslov, at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin in 1982. Danger Ashipala was a young idealist when he joined the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), the military wing of SWAPO, to help liberate his country from colonial oppression. He

¹ Ashkenazi, O. 'The future of history as film: apropos the publication of A Companion to Historical Film', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, DOI, 2013, p 2.

was responsible for Van der Mescht's capture. The film chronicles the first meeting between Van der Mescht and Ashipala in 2009, and explores their respective experiences of the war. Ultimately it is a story of forgiveness and redemption.



Captor and Captive was produced before the dissertation, over a three year period and completed in December 2010. It serves as a useful case study of the manner in which film can represent and contribute towards history. Subsequently, after *Captor and Captive* has been produced and the dissertation underway, a book has been published with a dedicated section focusing on the essence of the film. *Vang 'n Boer, die stryd tussen Boer en Ovambo* revolves around the history of the conflict between Afrikaners and the Oshivambo people, and dedicates a small section on the story contained in *Captor and Captive*. The author and the book's author had an agreement to share the research for both the film and the book which led to a collaborative effort.² This is indicative of the multi-disciplinary approach available to both film and historical writing.

The motivation for producing *Captor and Captive* and the subsequent writing of a dissertation based partly on the film is due to the author's interest in the political maneuvering behind wars. This entails the manner in which ordinary people are being used by politicians and people in power as pawns in war situations, to make sense of a troubled past in a transforming society and to explore social issues regarding the period of Afrikaner rule during the Border War. The story of Van der Mescht was stumbled

² The author of the book is Louis Bothma, a former platoon commander (conscript) of 32 Battalion who conducted his military service during the period 1977 to 1978. Today he does extensive research about the Border War which led to a number of publications. He introduced the author to the Van der Mescht family which led to a collaborative effort as the associate producer of *Captor and Captive*.

upon in 2007; the subsequent search for information provided limited material and it seemed that there were tension and controversy around his story which makes for good film material. In addition, the author also seeks to bring a positive message of reconciliation by uniting Van der Mescht with his former captor and enemy, and believes that this will contribute towards a better understanding between former enemy soldiers and fostering nation building, in an idealistic effort.

Interest in stories and information about the Border War is currently very prevalent and topical. It is common for people who participated in wars to only start talking and venting out 20 years or more after the events took place. In the instance of the Border War, the participants' age range between 40 and 80 years of age, and primary sources are still available to reflect on their respective experiences. Secondary sources such as documents from archives, newspaper articles and the few credible publications published to date are also available. Most of the documents accessed through the Documentation Centre of the Department of Defence were declassified for the first time. However, the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA), (No 2 of 2000) had limitations with selected information not being made available, which impacted on the verification of primary sources.

The Afrikaner community labeled Van der Mescht as a traitor and bad soldier that walked over to join SWAPO at the time of his imprisonment. Many closed doors were experienced from both former SADF officials as well as the former Afrikaner establishment (still partly active today), who did not want to discuss the matter in an effort to distance themselves from Van der Mescht and continued to accuse him of being a traitor and bad soldier. A prominent journalist from the Afrikaner establishment commented that Van der Mescht does not deserve a story, let alone a film. Many similar comments from the media and the general public were experienced. The NP government and Afrikaner intelligentsia used to discriminate against working class Afrikaners who did not fit into the establishment paradigm, and Van der Mescht was considered working class. By telling his story 30 years later, Van der Mescht was given a voice and platform and could take part in public discourse that he was shut out of before.

The South African Institute for International Affairs (SAIIA) was accessed for newspaper articles of the Border War during the period of Van der Mescht's capture, as well as media articles pertaining to his capture and release after imprisonment. A number of newspaper articles and publications on the question of the Namibian peace settlement were also accessed through SAIIA.

No information was available about the swap between Van der Mescht and a Russian spy Aleksei Koslov, except for a few media articles and a SABC news report. According to Russian historian Vladimir Shubin, the detailed history of the Soviet Union's military involvement and relations with the Angolan liberation movements, as in the rest of Africa, still has to be written. The information has been withheld from the public for many years in the USSR and abroad, and not always accessible.³ Attempts to find information from former South African National Intelligence Service (NIS) who managed the negotiations for Van der Mescht's release, proved to be unsuccessful.

Making contact with Van der Mescht's captor and information regarding the history and role of SWAPO within the Border War posed challenges. There was limited information available about SWAPO's role in the attack and upon embarking on the project it was unknown who the captor was. Official contact was made with former PLAN commanders through a military network which arranged for access to Ashipala and other key participants who provided information. The SWAPO Party Archive Resource Centre (SPARC) was accessed, as well as the Peter Katjavivi collection at the University of Namibia. However, the information was very limited compared to that of the SADF and the primary sources through oral testimonies were mostly used. Notable in this regard is SWAPO activities captured on film by Swedish journalist and filmmaker Per Sanden and colleagues from the early 1970's, which were used extensively in *Captor and Captive*.

³ Shubin, V.G. *The Hot "Cold War", the USSR in Southern Africa*, 2008, p 12.

Film footage of the Border War was mostly accessed through the National Film Video and Sound Archive (NFVSA). This footage was mostly stored on film reels which had to be digitized onto tape format. The Kimberley Regiment made private film footage of the preparation of the follow-up operation to find Van der Mescht after his capture available; it is authentic footage and thus very unique. The SABC made film footage available of Van der Mescht's return to South Africa after imprisonment which proved to be very effective for the use in *Captor and Captive*.

A number of psychologists, including the practitioner who counseled the Van der Mescht family were interviewed, regarding war trauma and related aspects. They all requested to remain anonymous. Publications on the memory and trauma of war were also accessed for information on war trauma and related aspects.

A number of publications were accessed to inform the sections on the theory and history of documentary film, as well as representing history through film. Notable is the work of historian Robert Rosenstone, who writes extensively on the representation of history through film as a proponent thereof. Regarding South African history of film, the work of Martin Botha is the most comprehensive resource, covering political divides. Information on both feature and documentary films based on the Anglo Boer War and Border War was accessed through the NFVSA. A questionnaire was sent to a number of South African documentary filmmakers whose films are based on historical events, to add the voices of local practitioners to the study, in addition to that of *Captor and Captive*, for a more comprehensive report.

Throughout the dissertation, reference is made of documentaries shot on both film and video and broadcast in theatres and / or on television. It excludes current affairs and magazine journalism programs of factual nature as these are separate genres with their own particular issues and conventions. A distinction is made between feature films (dramatized fiction) and documentary films (non-fiction).

Documentary film is such a comprehensive and complex film genre which makes it difficult to give an exact definition and perfect approach on how to execute. It deals with direct representations of actuality and can arouse an activation of belief for viewers. As early as 1926, John Grierson a Scottish documentary filmmaker considered the father of documentaries, explained that cinema's potential for observing life could be exploited in a new art form, and that unlike fiction where there is an actor and a story, a documentary interprets the world and captures the subject from the real world. It has the potential to expose, challenge and reveal the real world. Documentary film developed out of the Western world's middle class' need to explore, document, explain, understand and hence symbolically control the world. It boils down to what "We" do to "Them". The "Them" are usually poor, marginalized, oppressed, politically suppressed and disadvantaged.⁴

Documentary film is the representation of facts or stories of people, communities and individuals; or the representation of facts or stories of events, in the past or present. It often carries messages of social value, acts as catalysts for change and advocates specific causes or action. There are various sub genres including wildlife, natural history, socio-political, biographies and historical documentaries; each with their own distinct set of rules. The dissertation focuses on documentary film based on historical events, with reference to *Captor and Captive*.

Historical films, both documentaries and dramatized, is often the result of filmmakers' struggle with the past in an attempt to make sense of situations in their worlds. This usually stems from societies and communities being plagued by war and socio-political-economical challenges, mostly experienced in Third World or developing countries.

Documentary filmmaking is a complex multi-skilled and multi-dimensional practice. It has technical, creative, aesthetic, business and political complexities to be taken into consideration. Film is a combination of many elements including: still images, moving images, dialogue, sound effects, music, text and emotion. It communicates a variety of

⁴ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 47.

information and elements simultaneously. Historical documentaries use a variety of material towards the making of the film including: film archive footage; still photos from the era or subject matter to create a realistic sense of the historical moment; text from newspapers; maps; official documents; filmed interviews; cutaways;⁵ music; sound effects. All of the aforementioned elements get shaped into a narrative to tell a story.

With reference to *Captor and Captive*, a variety of elements were combined in the making of the film including: archive film footage, still photos, text records from archives, newspaper clippings, cutaways, re-enactments,⁶ interviews with the two main characters, interviews with the few sub characters and interviews with two “so-called experts” to explain the context of the Border War.

According to Robert Rosenstone, a pioneer in the field, historical films have a place in the world and historians must start to appreciate and learn to deal with it. It does play a role in the way we see, remember, think about, and understand the past.⁷ South Africa has one of the oldest film industries in the world dating back to 1896, with the earliest film footage consisting of newsreels available from the period of the Anglo Boer War which were filmed at the front.⁸ A prominent figure who dominated the industry in the early days is the New York born immigrant Isadore William Schlesinger, who continued the practice of the filming of newsreels started during the Anglo Boer War. Current affairs in South Africa was captured and presented in *The African Mirror* newsreel, and used since 1948 as propaganda to support apartheid.⁹ Subsequently, film footage from *The African Mirror* is a useful source today, especially within films of historical and political nature.

As early as 1916, an Afrikaans language feature film that represents an historical event *De Voortrekkers*, was produced by a London based company in South Africa. The film is based on the Great Trek movement of the 1830's, and the screenplay written by

⁵ Cutaways refer to visual images used to illustrate or support scenes and interviews in films. It could be in the format of still photos, text records, newspaper clippings, filmed footage or film archive footage.

⁶ Re-enactments refer to actors being filmed to depict certain scenes or scenarios that are not available otherwise; or to dramatize certain scenes.

⁷ Rosenstone, R.A. *Visions of the Past, The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*, 1995, p 197.

⁸ Botha, M. *South African Cinema 1896 – 2010*, 2012, p 9, 11.

⁹ *Ibid*, p 23.

Afrikaner historian Gustav Preller. It is based on his interpretation of the events surrounding the Battle of Blood River, a watermark event in Afrikaner history, marking the clash between the Voortrekkers and Zulu warriors with the Voortrekkers being victorious. *De Voortrekkers* helped create and sustained the ideology that was imprinted into the Afrikaner nationalist psyche that the Voortrekkers were the founding fathers of a new nation and a group of brave and heroic pioneers. In addition it portrayed black people as uncivilized and Dingaan is portrayed as a savage ruler.¹⁰ The presentation of this historical event on film was approached from the Afrikaner nationalist viewpoint, without consulting with the opposing Zulu force that took part in the Battle of Blood River for their perspective on the event. This indicates the portrayal of historical events through a Nationalist perspective for propaganda purposes. Nearly a century later the current ruling party in South Africa has a similar approach to the representation of history; representing the victors' point of view. With reference to *Captor and Captive*, the two main opposing forces fighting each other in the historical event portrayed in the film are the SADF and SWAPO. The film attempts to give a voice to both forces and represent both ideologies, as opposed to one viewpoint only.

The 1930's and 40's started a period in which Afrikaans language films, both features and documentaries were used to propagate Afrikaner nationalism. The first Afrikaans language film made in South Africa that made use of sound was *Sarie Marais* (1931), directed by Joseph Albrecht, and produced by Schlesinger's African Film Productions. It is based on a historical event and tells the story of a Boer POW during the Anglo Boer War. It was followed by *Moedertjie* (1931), based on a theatre play touching on poor white Afrikaners.¹¹

The centenary of the Great Trek movement in 1938 was an important event for the celebration and promotion of Afrikaner nationalism, and was documented in the propaganda film *Die Bou van 'n Nasie*, funded by the state and produced by African Film

¹⁰ Botha, M. *South African Cinema 1896 – 2010*, 2012, pp 24 – 25.

¹¹ Ibid, pp 26 – 27.

Productions.¹² The majority of South African documentary films made until 1994 were produced and funded by the state and generally served government propaganda, especially advocating Afrikaner nationalism and defending apartheid.¹³

An insightful historical study conducted by Eustacia Riley, examines Afrikaans language feature films produced between 1947 and 1989 set in the Cape Province, with the aim of exploring landscape, identity and place. Although the focus is not on historical films, she suggests that the films can all be viewed as historical evidence of apartheid and analyzed within this context. Both feature and documentary films were predominantly subsidized by the NP government and used as propaganda, with strong Nationalist overtones.¹⁴ *Simon Beyers* (1947), directed by Pierre de Wet, is based on a historical incident that took place in the late 17th century, involving the first Governor of the Dutch settlement Simon van der Stel. According to Riley's study, the intent of the film was to advocate Afrikaner nationalism and historical right to the land. *Matieland* (1955), also directed by Pierre de Wet and set in Stellenbosch, continued to represent the Cape Province as the territorial heartland and landscape of the Afrikaner.¹⁵

Director Manie van Rensburg based some of his feature films including television drama series' on the history of Afrikaners, exploring interesting dynamics within the Afrikaner psyche. Examples include his work set in the 1930's and 40's, *Verspeelde Lente* (1983) and *Die Perdesmous* (1982). Both productions portray historical events concerning the Afrikaner at the time, exploring culture, class and rural-urban conflicts. His feature film *The Fourth Reich* (1990) is a critical portrayal of Afrikaner nationalism during the 1940's. What makes Van Rensburg's work unique is the fact that he managed to produce work of high filmic quality that still resonates with Afrikaners today. He managed to

¹² Riley, E.J. *From Matieland to Mother City: Landscape, Identity and Place in Feature Films set in the Cape Province, 1947 – 1989*, PhD Thesis, Department of Historical Studies, University of Cape Town, 2012, p 32.

¹³ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 112.

¹⁴ Riley, E.J. *From Matieland to Mother City: Landscape, Identity and Place in Feature Films set in the Cape Province, 1947 – 1989*, PhD Thesis, Department of Historical Studies, University of Cape Town, 2012, p 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp 37 – 43.

make the films within the restricted, oppressive system of apartheid; challenging the Afrikaner establishment and opposing the system; yet outside of the radical leftwing class of filmmakers that emerged in the 1970's.¹⁶

The first film about the Anglo Boer War was produced in 1931, nearly three decades after the war has ended, entitled *Sarie Marais*. It could coincide with the notion that it takes 20 years or more after the atrocities of war for people to start talking about it and venting out, and can also be attributed to the fact that the film industry was still in an infancy stage. *Sarie Marais* was also the first Afrikaans language film with sound to be produced in South Africa. In 1949, *Sarie Marais* was reworked into a full length feature film by Unie Films. Since the 1960's, a number of Afrikaans language feature and documentary films were produced representing the war. It includes *Voor Sononder* (1962), directed by Emil Nofal; *Die Ruiter in die Nag* (1963), directed by Jan Perold; *Die Kavaliere* (1966), directed by Elmo de Witt and *Kruger Millions-Miljoene* (1967), directed by Ivan Hall. In the 1980's, Dirk de Villiers directed a television series representing the Anglo Boer War in *Arende*, about experiences of POWs in St Helena. The series was edited into a feature film for foreign markets entitled *Cape Rebel. That Englishwoman* (1989), directed by Dirk de Villiers, revolves around Emily Hobhouse helping women and children in the concentration camps.

Since the centenary commemoration towards the end of the 1990's, a new wave of feature and documentary films representing the Anglo Boer War was produced. Examples include the documentary film *Scorched Earth* (2001), directed by Herman Binge, and television miniseries *The Feast of the Uninvited* (2008), directed by Katinka Heyns. *The Feast of the Uninvited* looks at people who were traumatized by the war.¹⁷ The most recent feature film about the Anglo Boer War, *Die Verraaiers* (2012), directed by Paul Eilers, is partly based on the book *Boereverraaiers* by Albert Blake. According to Albert Grundlingh, an expert in the history of the Anglo Boer War, the term "verraaiers" is too strong as most of the men portrayed in the film were technically not

¹⁶ Botha, M. *South African Cinema 1896 – 2010*, 2012, pp 77 – 87.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp 212 – 216.

National Film Video and Sound Archive (NFVSA), email Trevor Moses, April 2013.

traitors but merely “handsuppers”, those who deserted without leave. He does however mention that one should consider and leave room for poetic license.¹⁸

In 1970, Rosenstone started incorporating the concept of history represented through film into his lectures, with the intention of students seeing and experiencing the past in addition to reading books. The initiative led to an increase in class attendance and student enrolment which resulted in a course in History on Film. Subsequently, many similar courses were developed and presented globally. South African documentary filmmaker David Max-Brown supports the use of film to represent history, as well as supplementing written text in history class context. “*We remember best when we can put pictures to words. Some images are so strong that they have caused changes in world views around certain issues, so students of history will definitely be affected by visual images and especially when they are supported by the clever and creative use of the script to support the images in a coherent film. I think that film has evolved as a way of representing history, from a bland chronological approach to a more nuanced approach in which film allows us to get into a time machine and travel with non linear access forwards and backwards in history. The best history lessons are given as stories, so the evolution of film is the evolution of storytelling and so is the story of history also*”.¹⁹ Historical films produced by Max-Brown include *Secret Safari* (2001), about the ANC’s smuggling of arms into South Africa during its armed struggle, and *The Manuscripts of Timbuktu* (2009), about the origin and history of libraries and text records in Mali.

South African documentary filmmaker David Forbes has similar sentiments and reckons that documentary films are critical to teaching history. He produced *Cradock Four* (2010), which revolves around the murder of four anti-apartheid activists by the security police near Port Elizabeth in June 1985. This tragic event became known as the Cradock Four murders. The film has been shown to a wide ranging audience including school children in rural areas, townships and urban areas; university students and film festivals across the globe. Forbes says: “*The film touches people emotionally; it invokes forgotten*

¹⁸ Albert Grundlingh, email, May 2013.

¹⁹ David Max-Brown, email questionnaire, March 2013.

*memories and reveals our hidden past. It brings to the fore questions of justice, dignity, equality, democracy and other important issues which make us human and has a lasting impact on audiences. This is the value of historical films; they become part of history, part of story-telling; part of our culture and remembrance of events”.*²⁰

Rosenstone felt that traditional forms of history have limitations that could be developed by incorporating film into the discipline. He suggests that filmmakers work in co-operation with historians when making historical films to ensure credible sources and products. Historians have a common approach to history and the challenges thereof including verification of evidence, random and overwhelming amount of data that needs to be placed, constructing a meaningful past and working within their own viewpoints and agendas. Today historians speak by virtue of this discipline, by virtue of special training and the standards of a profession. Filmmakers have no such standard training and common approach to history. Filmmakers who represent history through film will probably portray a more personal reflection on the meaning of the past, without the depth and insight that written history might have.²¹ Historical film and historical text thus need a different approach in the making and evaluation thereof.

In 2013, South African documentary filmmaker Rehad Desai, who holds a Masters Degree in Social History, produced a documentary series *Alexandra, my Alexandra* on the history of Alexandra, a township east of Johannesburg. He based the content on the book *Alexandra, a History* written by historians Philip Bonner and Noor Nieftagodien. This is a good example of history presented in both text and visual format, produced by both filmmakers and historians as a collaborative effort. Desai also produced a documentary film *Bhambatha War of the Heads 1906* in 2008 which posed challenges including few visual material available of an event that happened more than a century ago, in addition to an event that was not well documented and recorded at the time.

²⁰ David Forbes, email questionnaire, March 2013.

²¹ Rosenstone, R.A. *Visions of the Past, The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*, 1995, p 66.

Rosenstone had two of his major written works put onto film and has first hand experience in both mediums of written and visual history. He firmly believes that there is a place for both disciplines; written word and visual images, and that they can either support each other or stand alone as independent entities. Each has its own unique powers of representation. Film cannot do what a book does and a book cannot do what film does.²² Comparing film and written text led to many questions and dialogue about the relationship between moving images and the written word. The following questions and issues came up: what happens to history when words are translated into images; what happens when images transform information that can be conveyed in words; why do we judge films by how it measures up to written history; what can words do that images cannot do and what can images do that words cannot do.

In the words of Max-Brown: *“History happens from the moment the camera is turned on, and from the moment the person speaks in front of it or the image is captured. The image or the person in front of the camera is not the same as it once was, time has passed and what the camera captures is immediately a part of history. How we use those images and how we combine them with sound and music affects the way the story is perceived and which emotions are evoked. The best films seem to be those that do evoke emotion and do allow the viewer to think in a new way and to make new associations that they would not have had without the film, and when any other kind of storytelling medium would not or could not have done the same”*.²³

According to Rosenstone, an advantage of historical documentary films is that it can open a direct window onto the past, allowing viewers to see cities, factories, landscapes, battlefields and leaders of an earlier time. Documentary film uses film archive footage and still photos from a particular period to create a realistic sense of the historical moment. It has the capacity to play around with text and visual images in order to make it stand out. Using old black and white film footage in a color film has the potential to make it stand out and viewers to take note. When using text, despite the availability of using

²² Rosenstone, R.A. *Visions of the Past, The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*, 1995, p 15.

²³ David Max-Brown, email questionnaire, March 2013.

quotes, italics and footnotes, it does not stand out as visible as in the context of film. With reference to *Captor and Captive*, the editor treated some of the film archive footage to look older or more current, according to the context, since the film moves between the past and the present. This technique is referred to as grading, which means adjusting the color of the visual material.

As with any discourse, there are historians who are not in agreement with the practice of history represented through film. The philosopher Ian Jarvie, author of two books on motion picture and society argues that moving images are weak and contain poor information and therefore cannot portray meaningful history on film. History is a debate between historians about exact events, the reason for the events taking place and an account of the significance of the events. With moving images, there is no time or space for reflection, verification, making logical arguments or evaluation of sources.²⁴ Rosenstone argues that there are many written historical works representing the past without going into debates. If written texts can do this and be considered history, then an inability to debate on film cannot rule out the possibilities of history on film. In addition, many historical films do verify facts, make strong arguments and evaluate sources which makes Jarvie's argument seems weak.

With reference to *Captor and Captive*, differing viewpoints were presented. Regarding the issue raised about the allegation that Van der Mescht was a traitor, two opposing viewpoints were presented by secondary sources, supplemented by dialogue from the primary sources, Van der Mescht and Ashipala.

According to Rosenstone, academic historians have a general and unarticulated feeling that historical films, particularly dramatized historical films, cannot be as true as history in written text format, since words have the ability to provide a serious and complex past reality that film cannot do as well since it needs to entertain people. General assumptions being made in this regard include: films are inaccurate; distort the past; fictionalize; trivialize; romanticize people, events and movements; falsify history. Those in defense of

²⁴ Rosenstone, R.A. *Visions of the Past, The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*, 1995, p 26.

representing history through film argues as follows: the film medium is difficult for historians to control; film shows we do not own the past; film creates a historical world with which books cannot compete for popularity; film is a symbol of an increasingly post-literate world in which people can read but won't.²⁵

Film presents historians with a challenge of how to use the medium to its full capabilities for carrying information, juxtaposing images and words. Visual media also highlights the conventions and limitations of written history since film points towards new possibilities for representing the past. Scholars of history argue that written history is shaped by the conventions of genre and language, and that this is also the situation with visual history. If written narratives are verbal fictions, then visual narratives will be visual fictions, not mirrors of the past but representations of it. Rosenstone argues that all history, written and other formats is a construction, not a reflection, and that history is an ideological and cultural product of the Western world at a particular time in its development, a series of conventions for thinking about the past.²⁶

Max-Brown argues as follows: *“An historical film, or a film that tells the story set in the present day that might one day be considered a historical text, does not have to be factual in the sense of substantiated fact followed by substantiated fact to be a good historical film. Films can be constructed from the get go, but the reality that is restructured, even scripted sometimes can still be true to the vision or the theme. The filmmaker can however manipulate the situation. And yet it can still manage to purvey a useful interpretation and useful truth in itself which can still be thought of the truth of the situation that is filmed or documented”*.²⁷

South African Emmy award winning documentary filmmaker Mark Kaplan comments that he seeks out subjective truths in his documentary films and makes his standpoint as the filmmaker clear so that audiences are clear to make up their own minds. His films explore the subjective nature of largely personal histories. The narratives are mined for

²⁵ Rosenstone, R.A. *Visions of the Past, The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*, 1995, p 46.

²⁶ Ibid, pp 10 - 11.

²⁷ David Max-Brown, email questionnaire, March 2013.

their veracity but also for their fallibility and sometimes deliberate lies. His films do not seek a balanced interpretation of the past.²⁸ Kaplan is the director of historical documentary films including *Between Joyce and Remembrance* (2003), that follows a family who lost a son and father to apartheid's brutality and their meeting with his killer during the TRC hearings; *Betrayal* (2006), about former ANC exiles returning home; and *Village under the Forest* (2013), about Israeli forces invading Palestinian settlements.

Desai argues as follows: *"Truth is always highly subjective but approaching it dialectically assists in coming to a 'truth'. I don't buy into histories belonging to communities, they belong to society. I don't believe in filmmakers having to be careful about who tells whose story, it is post modern nonsense. It is the individual filmmaker's point of view that makes a film unique"*.²⁹

The author's approach in producing historical documentary film is discussed towards the end of the dissertation in Chapter five where she reflects on the making of *Captor and Captive*. But to substantiate on the aforementioned comments on truth and objectivity, her approach is to present various viewpoints of a story or an event, with a personal point of view and message brought across, central to the narrative. Audiences are presented with options to interpret in their own way. Stories are presented with the aim of stimulating dialogue and raising debate about issues. Her films are not sold as the objective truth and it is argued that it depends from whose perspective a story is told. In order to present historical documentary films of credible value, content is well researched by presenting various viewpoints and verifying factual information as accurately as possible.

Rosenstone argues that the question to ask is not whether historical films convey facts or make arguments as well as written history. The question should be what sort of historical world does each film construct and how does it construct that world and how we judge that construction, what it means to us and how does the historical world on the screen

²⁸ Mark Kaplan, email questionnaire, March 2013.

²⁹ Rehad Desai, email questionnaire, March 2013.

relate to written history. Film creates different sorts of projects, pose different sorts of questions, give different sorts of answers from written history, carry different sorts of data and creates a different sort of historical world than written text.³⁰

Both historians and filmmakers approach the materials of the past with one similarity; both possess attitudes, assumptions, beliefs and value systems that influence their interpretations of the past. In film, certain techniques have to be used to reproduce events, which is not possible by the written word.³¹ Rosenstone argues that historians should reconsider the standards between historical film and written history. Historical films' cannot be evaluated in the same manner and standard as written texts and include many elements unknown to written history and historians. Historians need to learn about the film practice in order to make critical comments.

In 2006, the editor of the *American Historical Review*, Robert Schneider noted that film analysis by historians does not necessarily contribute to the analytical, sophisticated understanding of history.³² Historians tend to use written works of history to evaluate historical films, whilst historical books are also subject to being evaluated for its credibility within the discipline. Representing history through film does not mean the lowering of the standard of historiography, but a different approach and more options available towards the understanding of the past. For instance, the density of research and conceptualization is often absent in the standard documentary, though one must allow for different kinds of research and different kinds of conceptualization within the respective medium.³³

Robert Toplin, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina who teaches film and history suggests the importance of consideration of the people who made the films, having their own agendas and interpretations that impact on the outcome of the film. The same is applicable to written text of history. Kaplan argues that the characters

³⁰ Rosenstone, R.A. *Visions of the Past, The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*, 1995, p 50, 238.

³¹ Rosenstone, R.A. *Revisioning History, Film and the Constructions of a New Past*, 1995, p 6.

³² Ashkenazi, O. 'The future of history as film: apropos the publication of A Companion to Historical Film', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, DOI, 2013, p 2.

³³ Rosenstone, R.A. *Visions of the Past, The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*, 1995, p 231.

(subject matters) being interviewed for documentary film also have their own agendas; why else would they agree to participate.

Historian and filmmaker Janaki Nair argues that films can serve as a tool to convey a social message and bring change to a community in a manner that research papers or studies cannot do. Films are more far reaching and assessable to a wider audience since research studies often land up in an archive and only used by fellow researchers or academics as opposed to the broader public. It is also a valuable tool in Third World countries. This was evident in the film that Nair made about a mining community in India that was under threat of closing down. *After the Gold* (1997), was set out as a research study to write a book and resulted in a film.

There are numerous examples in both South Africa and globally that effectively used film as a means for social change. In South Africa, the use of film to portray social messages to bring about change was used as an effective tool during the mass movement against apartheid that gained momentum in the 1980's, to showcase the atrocities of apartheid. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, filmmakers outside of the mainstream industry made feature films and documentaries reflecting the oppressive apartheid system which were mostly screened at film festivals, universities, church halls and trade union offices. It involved independent filmmakers such as Lindy Wilson and Kevin Harris; a group of students from the University of Cape Town; and collectives such as Video News Service (VNS) including filmmakers Brian Tilley, Laurence Dworkin, Nyana Molete, Seipati Bulane and Tony Bensusan. Most of these films had small budgets and were funded by the producers themselves, progressive organizations such as the South African Council of Churches and British and European television stations. These developments that coincided with the mass movements against apartheid led to the formation of the Film and Allied Workers' Organisation (FAWO) in 1988, with the aim of uniting all filmmakers towards the establishment of a democratic society. This period marked the beginning of a new, critical South African cinema, reflecting the realities of the black

majority in addition to the Afrikaner nationalist propaganda films of the 1970's, the Bantu film industry and tax-shelter films of the 1980's.³⁴

The VNS collective was formed in 1985 and became the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (COSATU) unofficial film unit, producing documentaries. They first made documentaries for international television companies and later diversified towards the production of short documentaries referred to as video pamphlets to use for local purposes. VNS was constantly under threat from the state organs and their output is considered as remarkable. Examples of their work include *Tribute to David Webster* (1989), about the human rights activist, *Fruits of Defiance* (1990), showing resistance to apartheid in Cape Town in 1989 and *Forward to a People's Republic* (1991), juxtaposing the mass militancy and mobilization with white militarization. *Witness to Apartheid* (1986), directed by Kevin Harris is a documentary filmed clandestinely during the state of emergency and exposes the brutality and violence of apartheid and was subsequently banned.³⁵ At the time of production these films were used as agents for change and today they are valuable historical sources. When using these films as historical sources, it is important to recognize that it was made from a purely leftwing perspective.

Anirudh Deshpande argues for a new relationship between visual and written history in the interest of both public memory and a socially relevant history. He explores the use of film as a different form and source of history.

With the unbanning of the political parties in 1990, South African filmmakers started focusing their themes on the transition period towards democracy. There was a realization that film could play a vital role in forging social cohesion, as well as documenting history in the making. It led to several documentations on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process, which also led to feature films about the theme. Post apartheid cinema is characterized by an emergence of a diverse group of new

³⁴ Botha, M. *South African Cinema 1896 – 2010*, 2012, pp 147 – 149.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p 150.

voices and diverse themes.³⁶ The period after 1994 led to a time of reflection on apartheid, its brutality and devastation. Various documentary films were produced during the past 20 years dealing with events that were previously left out of history books, and it became guardians of the popular memory. Most of these films are representations of historical events, and a valuable contribution towards our collective past in addition to written text. South Africa presents filmmakers, especially documentary filmmakers with a vast amount of material to make films in the wake of apartheid, as well as the many new challenges facing the country today. The country is rich with numerous untold stories of the past and present, reflecting diverse voices and cultures. South Africa's socio-political situation lends itself to documentaries of historical nature.

The Long Journey of Clement Zulu (1992), directed by Liz Fish, follows political prisoners after their release from Robben Island as they try to rebuild their lives. *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* (1998), directed by Zola Maseko, tells the controversial story of Sara Baartman and is followed up in 2003 by *The Return of Sara Baartman*. *The Gugulethu Seven* (2000), directed by Lindy Wilson, look at the TRC investigation into the murder of seven Cape Town activists. *Drum* (2004), directed by Zola Maseko, chronicles life in Sophiatown in the 1950's. *Born into Struggle* (2004), directed by Rehad Desai, is a personal essay of his life as a child of political parents who lived in exile. *Forgotten* (2007), directed by Rina Jooste, explores what happened to musicians who left the country to join the cultural ensemble Amandla, aligned to the ANC in exile, and the impact it has on their lives today. *More than Just a Game* (2007), directed by Junaid Ahmed, tells the story of political prisoners on Robben Island in the 1960's who created a football league. *Skin* (2008), directed by Anthony Fabian, is the tragic and true story of Sandra Laing, a Colored girl born into an Afrikaner home, taken away by the authorities and classified as non-white. *Afrikaaps* (2010), directed by Dylan Valley, explores the origin, history and development of the Afrikaans language within the Western Cape.

During the past decade there was an attempt by South African feature and documentary filmmakers to explore Afrikaner identity within the broader scope of the country, again

³⁶ Botha, M. *South African Cinema 1896 – 2010*, 2012, p 203.

drawing from history. *Promised Land* (2002), directed by Jason Xenepoulos, is an exploration of choices made by Afrikaners after 1994; the choice to assimilate or to continue racial separation. *Pure Blood* (1999), directed by Ken Kaplan, looks at a group of white supremacists who are trying to revive the old order of apartheid. These two feature films are an important alternative to the idealized portrait of Afrikaners in the Afrikaans language escapism cinema of the 1970's.³⁷ *The Heart of Whiteness* (2005), directed by Rehad Desai, explores what it means to be an Afrikaner in post apartheid South Africa and the reason for fear of change, touching on the past. *Ouma se Slim Kind* (2006), directed by Gustav Kuhn, examines relationships in the 1940's and how the Afrikaner culture at the time destroyed hopes of non-racialism. *Betrayed* (2007), directed by Rina Jooste, explores the psyche of Afrikaner males in post apartheid South Africa today, against the background of the Border War. *Afrikaner Afrikaan* (2008), directed by Rina Jooste, uses Afrikaans music as a springboard for discussion, and captures the new buoyancy and divergence in Afrikaner identities freed from the straightjacket of Afrikaner nationalism, touching on the past.

To get back to Deshpande who argues for the use of film as a different form and source of history, he suggests that historians have more options to find information from nowadays, in addition to the disciplines of archeology and anthropology. He uses the Iraq war as a case in point where access to digital cameras and internet helps to portray visual images of the war which adds value and another dynamic to written text. According to Deshpande, the greatest asset of film is its ability to show history as an integrated process in a holistic manner, using many elements simultaneously to bring it alive, as opposed to books that seldom have the ability to be as powerful as film. Emotions and experiences not available in written histories can be portrayed through film, and have the power to illustrate concepts; complement and enrich written texts such as love, humiliation, hatred, anger and helplessness. In summary, Deshpande argues that both disciplines of history

³⁷Botha, M. *South African Cinema 1896 – 2010*, 2012, p 219.

and film can gain from each other in searching for information about the past and present.³⁸

Historian and filmmaker Janaki Nair mentions that she gets better access to people's stories and interviews when she has a camera with her as opposed to a notebook and pen. It seems as if people are more willing to talk since film is viewed as an opportunity for stories to be heard. There is also the situation of it being a cathartic process for people to relive their emotions. And then there is the perception of glamour associated to a film crew and the possibility of the film as end result. Generally, people like to see themselves on screen.

Kristin Pichaske, an American film academic, lecturer and documentary filmmaker who worked in South Africa for several years, suggests that the use of characters' stories and interviews for documentary film is a political sensitive and complex situation. The subject matter of many documentary films manifests in the use of characters that come from poor socio-economic conditions, especially when working in Third World countries, including South Africa as a developing country. This inevitably opens the door for exploitation. Characters are often very eager to participate; expecting monetary or other gain.³⁹ Most television broadcasters requires a signed letter of consent from characters participating in films, referred to as release forms. According to Michael Rabiger "*Some participants are not attentive or sophisticated enough to absorb all the implications, and although the signature on the release form discharges legal obligations, it doesn't meet those that are moral*".⁴⁰

Film is more limited than written history in its inability to deal with a lot of complicated ideas at once, although it uses many elements simultaneously. It is a challenge to condense large amounts of content including ideas, viewpoints and ideologies into a short space of time as opposed to written text which can be elaborated on. Historical

³⁸ Deshpande, A. 'Films as Historical Sources or Alternative History', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2004, pp 4458 – 4459.

³⁹ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 59.

⁴⁰ Rabiger, M. *Directing the Documentary*, 2004, p 243.

documentary and feature films' length vary between one and two hours and filmmakers generally stick to a simple formula for keeping the focus and audience attention. Unlike reading a book, when watching a film, there is no time for stopping and reading or watching again. According to Kaplan "*There is always the danger of oversimplification but on the other hand there is a real edge, a sharpness to approach, to interviewing, to creating the storyline which can be the real strength of the medium of film*".⁴¹

With reference to *Captor and Captive*, it is a comprehensive piece of work with lots of information and issues that had to be condensed into a 52-minute film. It was further condensed into a 48-minute and 45-minute version respectively for different broadcast specifications. It took careful planning to include all the critical information, retaining the focus of the story, retaining audience attention by creating tension and suspense as well as the consideration of factual accuracy throughout.

R.J. Raack, a historian who has been involved in the production of many documentary films advocates representing history through the medium of film. In his view, film seems to be a more appropriate medium for history than the written word. He argues that traditional written history is too linear and narrow in focus to illustrate the fullness of the complex, multi-dimensional world in which humans live. He argues that only film that uses techniques that can juxtapose images and sound, quick cut to new sequences, dissolve, fade, speed-up and slow down; can depict real life, preoccupations, distractions, sensory deceptions, conscious and unconscious motives and emotions. Only film can provide an adequate empathetic reconstruction to convey how historical people witnessed, understood and lived their lives. Only film can recover all the past's liveliness. He believes that visual images let us look through a window directly at past events to experience people and places as if we were there, more easily than the written word does.⁴²

⁴¹ Mark Kaplan, email questionnaire, March 2013.

⁴² Rosenstone, R.A. *Visions of the Past, The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*, 1995, p 26.

Desai has similar opinions as Raack and says: “*I don’t think people like to watch films to be taught something, rather they watch to experience and feel, hopefully have empathy. Making historical film that is not dry and full of information is exceptionally difficult. The key is to bring history alive and ensure that it fosters critical thinking. This is largely achieved by showing competing ideas and attempting to be as dialectical as possible*”.⁴³

Getting back to South Africa’s film industry and history, a number of films touching on the Border War were produced during the 1970’s and 1980’s whilst the war was waging. These films were often funded and dictated by the Department of Information and serving government propaganda needs, defending the war. The feature film *Kaptein Caprivi* (1972), directed by Albie Venter, became part of the propaganda machine advocating the war, with strong undertones of Afrikaner nationalism. The film which romanticized the Army motivated white schoolboys towards joining the force to fight the terrorists from taking over their country.⁴⁴ Thereafter, a number of feature films with a similar purpose of propaganda followed. It includes: *Six Soldiers* (1974), directed by Bertrand Retief; *Mirage Eskader* (1975), directed by Bertrand Retief; *Die Winter van 14 Julie* (1977), directed by Jan Scholtz; *Terrorist* (1978), directed by Neil Hetherington; *Grensbasis 13* (1978), directed by Elmo de Witt; *Forty Days* (1979), directed by Franz Marx; *’n Wêreld Sonder Grense* (1987), directed by Frans Nel. *Boetie Gaan Border Toe* (1984), directed by Regardt van den Bergh, is a satire about military recruits and of entertainment value. It is not critical of the war, nor does it seek answers, but it does not fall into the propaganda film category either. Following on this film was *Boetie op Manoevres* (1985), again directed by Regardt van den Bergh and of entertainment value.⁴⁵

Documentary films revolving around the Border War produced during the period of the war in the 1970’s to 1980’s and serving government propaganda needs include *A Visit to the Border*, *The Guardians*, *Aantree* and *Dit is Diensplig*. These documentaries were

⁴³ Rehad Desai, email questionnaire, March 2013.

⁴⁴ NFVSA, Trevor Moses email, April 2013.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

produced and funded by state organs.⁴⁶ Also produced during this period, but not funded or dictated by state organs, was the documentary film by war correspondent, author and filmmaker Al J. Venter, entitled *The Last Domino*.

A limited number of documentaries and feature films made by leftwing filmmakers critical of the war, emerged during the war. *The Stick* (1987), directed by Darrell Roodt, is a feature film that examines the raids conducted by the SADF into Angola during the Border War. It explores the trauma of war and impact it has on the people participating, in this instance the psychological damage done to conscripts. The film was initially banned in South Africa and eventually it was screened at a film festival in 1989.⁴⁷

After the war, few publications including books and films were produced and there was an initial silence for a number of years. This coincides with the notion that it takes 20 years or more after the trauma of war for people who participated to start talking or venting out. Currently it is a very topical issue, and an emotional discourse with differentiating viewpoints is in process within the public domain, ranging from causes of the war, who won the war to the emotional scars and trauma at stake. Various books have, and are published, many of which are personal stories written by former soldiers who want to make sense of a war that seems pointless to them today. There are also books published by former generals, as well as historians and the collection of voices of the war is expanding. The latest book by military historian Leopold Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966 – 1989*, published in 2013, was written many years after the war ended for the sake of historical perspective, the dust to settle and for official documentation to become available through various archives and institutions. A few theatre productions and films have emerged as well. Feature films include *On the Wire* (1990), directed by Elaine Proctor, and *A Reasonable Man* (1999), directed by Gavin Hood, both critical of the war effort and produced from a leftwing perspective. *Betrayed* (2007), a documentary directed by Rina Jooste, follows three former 32 Battalion soldiers remembering the trauma of war, and the impact it has on their lives today. It becomes a

⁴⁶ NFVSA, Trevor Moses email, April 2013.

⁴⁷ Botha, M. *South African Cinema 1896 – 2010*, 2012, pp 129 – 130.

personal story and a process of reflection, leading towards a cathartic process. *At Thy Call* (2008), directed by Christopher-Lee dos Santos, is a short-length feature film that was produced as a student project through the African Film and Drama Academy (AFDA). It looks at the personal conflicts that a conscript is experiencing during his national service on the border, during the Border War. *My Heart of Darkness* (2010), a documentary directed by Marius van Niekerk, is a personal story of his and three other war veterans' experience of the trauma of war. Similar to *Captor and Captive*, it is a story of reconciliation since they are all representing different forces of the war experience, meeting each other many years later. In 2007, a documentary series on the Border War was commissioned by KykNET entitled *Grensoorlog*, directed by Linda de Jager. It chronicles the Border War from its inception to the end and looks at the various opposing sides of the conflict.

It is interesting to note the various viewpoints and comments from academics and filmmakers regarding the representation of history through film. The topic is diverse and increased dialogue continues to raise questions. Both disciplines of history and filmmaking are dynamic in a constantly changing world order and a multi-disciplinary approach is an inevitable result. It is evident that the genre of film holds a strong position in its representation of history, and filmmakers around the world especially in developing countries are contributing to the phenomena. In South Africa there are many untold stories waiting to be told in various formats, be it text or visual.

Chapter 2: Background to the political situation in southern Africa during the period of Van der Mescht's capture and imprisonment

This chapter explores the political situation in southern Africa at the time of Van der Mescht's capture by Ashipala, and resultant imprisonment, discussing the various armed forces and political alignments involved in the conflict. The focus remains with the SADF and SWAPO, since they are the two main opposing forces relating to the dissertation; Van der Mescht being a SADF member, and Ashipala a member of SWAPO.

Gysbertus Johannes (Johan) van der Mescht was born in 1955 in Randfontein and grew up in Boksburg in the East Rand of the then Transvaal. After completing standard eight, Van der Mescht left school to become a craftsman, following in his father's footsteps. Van der Mescht was part of the first intake of military conscripts who performed nine months national service. In 1973, he completed his initial nine months national service in Bethlehem and thereafter performed annual military camps which formed part of the conscription obligations. For the duration of his national service Van der Mescht was assigned to 6 Field Squadron in Bethlehem, part of the Engineering Corps which focused on building bridges, landmine detection and the purification of water.⁴⁸

Ruben Michael (Danger) Ashipala was born in 1947 in the village of Ogongo in West Ovamboland where he grew up. His father was a soldier who served in the Union Defence Force (UDF) during the Second World War. After completing primary school, Ashipala moved to the south of Namibia in search of work, and like many Ovambo's at the time became a migrant worker. He found contract work in a fishing factory in Walvis Bay where he became subjected to discrimination from the white authorities. Many of the migrant workers, including Ashipala, became politically involved with SWAPO. In 1974, Ashipala left Namibia willingly to join the liberation struggle in exile and received

⁴⁸ Personnel file, Ref Army HQ (82) CF, Van der Mescht G.J. 71511430 BT, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

military training in the Soviet Union, focusing on reconnaissance. Thereafter, he returned to join PLAN in waging war against the SADF, and was destined to become a war hero.⁴⁹

Chapter two briefly explains the position and role of the SADF within the South African political landscape and how it related to the Cold War. The SADF perceived Communism as one of the threats to the safety and security of its public. The SADF aligned itself with a Western ideology, and its opponent SWAPO with ideologies from the Soviet Bloc, suggesting Communism. Therefore one can argue that the Border War was waged within the broader context of the Cold War.

The war that took place in Namibia and Angola between 1966 and 1989 is referred to as the Border War or the Namibian War of Independence, depending on the participating armed force's ideology. With regards to the dissertation, reference will be made to the Border War. It is closely associated and overlapped with the Angolan Colonial War that took place during the 1960's, as well as the Angolan Civil War that started in 1975. The Border War took place between South Africa's armed forces, the SADF and its allies on the one side; and SWAPO's military wing PLAN and its allies on the other side. This military conflict took place over a period of 23 years and comprised of many small scale operations or skirmishes, as well as a few operations of a bigger and more comprehensive scale, ending in a full scale conventional war referred to as the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale.

The war had many characteristics and was fought as a revolutionary war, an insurgency and counterinsurgency war, a fast-moving, mobile and conventional war.⁵⁰ The geographical area where the various battles took place was vast and comprised the northern border between Namibia and Angola stretching from the west to the east with the concentration of activity taking place in Ovamboland and the Caprivi. Many cross border operations took place within Angola, mostly concentrated in the southern area bordering Namibia, and towards the final years of the war it gradually moved north into Angola. There were no frontlines, permanent occupation of places or capitals. For the

⁴⁹ Danger Ashipala, interview, October 2009, December 2009.

⁵⁰ Scholtz, L. *The SADF in the Border War 1966 – 1989*, 2013, p 5.

most part, the war was fought within the parameters of a counterinsurgency campaign.⁵¹ Counterinsurgent wars do not focus on the destruction of an enemy on the battlefield, but rather winning the hearts and minds of the local population; in this instance mostly concentrated within Ovamboland. The mobile war had ever changing positions and possession of territory was not an objective. It gradually transformed towards a full scale conventional war towards the end of the conflict, which was mostly concentrated in Angola.

There are various opposing viewpoints and debates about the causes of the war. According to Leopold Scholtz, the origins of the Border War can be traced back as far as 1884 with the annexation of Namibia by Germany, which formed part of the Scramble for Africa by European powers. When the First World War broke out in 1914, the Union of South Africa became military involved upon request from Britain, against Germany. The military force under the command of General Louis Botha, invaded Namibia and by the middle of 1915 the Germans surrendered. After the war in 1919, The League of Nations declared Namibia a C-Mandate territory, to be administered by the Union of South Africa. When the League of Nations dissolved after the Second World War in 1946, South Africa applied to its successor, the United Nations (UN) to take over Namibia. The request was refused because of South Africa's racial policies and resulted in a long term and controversial legal battle. In 1971, the International Court of Justice agreed that South Africa's rule of Namibia was illegal and that they should withdraw. The South African government never officially incorporated Namibia into its territory and administered it as a fifth province, with the white minority having representation in parliament and apartheid laws being implemented.⁵² The UN recognized SWAPO as the sole legitimate representative of the Namibian people and in 1974 the Security Council asked South Africa to transfer power. The Namibian question remained a controversial issue and was only settled towards the end of the Border War in 1989 and through protracted negotiations.

⁵¹ Geldenhuys, J. *At the Front, A General's Account of South Africa's Border War*, 2009, p 68.

⁵² Scholtz, L. *The SADF in the Border War 1966 – 1989*, 2013, pp 1 – 3.

Organized resistance to South African rule within Namibia started with the establishment of the Ovamboland People's Congress in 1957 in Cape Town, by a group of migrant workers in an attempt to put an end to the contract labor system. In 1959, the organization changed its name to the Ovamboland People's Organisation, led by Sam Nujoma. The organization became increasingly militant and changed its name in 1960 to South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) with Sam Nujoma as the elected president.⁵³ Other key founders of the organization included Herman Toivo ya Toivo and Jakob Kuhanga. The liberation movement represented all Namibians, but accommodated predominantly Ovambo speaking people from the north of Namibia, with its main purpose to oppose the oppressing apartheid laws imposed by the South African government. In 1962, SWAPO resorted to armed struggle and formed a military wing, PLAN. They started clashing with the South African security forces in the north of Namibia, with the first official clash on 26 August 1966 at Ongulumbashe, officially known as the start of the Namibian War of Independence.⁵⁴ From the SADF's perspective, it is also generally assumed that the Border War started on this date when a number of 121 policemen and 9 SADF members under the command of Jan Breytenbach attacked a PLAN base at Ongulumbashe.⁵⁵

SWAPO had many supporters both in Africa and globally including the Soviet Union and Scandinavian countries, contributing financial aid, weapons and military training. In the early 1960's, SWAPO had its headquarters in Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania; a diplomatic office at the UN in New York; and offices in Moscow, London, Stockholm and various other cities from where it lobbied support to free Namibia from South African colonial rule.⁵⁶ It was an ironic situation as SWAPO waged an armed struggle against South Africa whilst it was never officially banned as an organization. The

⁵³ Ferreira, R. and Liebenberg, I. 'The Impact of War on Angola and South Africa: Two southern African Case Studies', *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31 (3), 2006, p 44.

HSOPS, Group 5, Box 19, Ref HSOPS/204/2/2/1, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

⁵⁴ Martin Shalli, interview, January 2010. Former PLAN commander and Chief of Operations at the time of Van der Mescht's capture.

HSOPS, Group 5, Box 19, Ref HSOPS/204/2/2/1, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

⁵⁵ Scholtz, L. *The SADF in the Border War 1966 – 1989*, 2013, p 7.

⁵⁶ Ferreira, R. and Liebenberg, I. 'The Impact of War on Angola and South Africa: Two southern African Case Studies', *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31 (3), 2006, pp 44 – 45.

members and leadership willingly went into exile and took up an armed struggle as they saw no alternative to gaining their independence. As early as 1962, the first group of recruits was sent to Egypt for military training. SWAPO camps were set up for the exiles that left Namibia where they were accommodated and trained in military practice, and from where the armed struggle against the SADF could be waged. SWAPO mainly infiltrated into the Caprivi and Ovamboland areas in northern Namibia, where many skirmishes took place throughout the war. The majority of SWAPO members were from the Ovamboland region. The first SWAPO exile camps were located in Tanzania, and in the early 1970's camps were also set up in Zambia. Before Angolan independence in 1975, SWAPO had many challenges operating from exile, mainly because of logistical reasons and not being able to set up camps and operate from within Angola. The main port of supply was in Dar es Salaam and a very long distance to the military areas of operation in the Caprivi and Ovamboland.⁵⁷

Initially from 1966, the South African Police (SAP) was involved to keep PLAN infiltrators outside the borders of Namibia. In 1973, the SADF took over most of the counterinsurgency operations because it became too much for the SAP to handle, and was not solely within their mandate. The SAP maintained a counterinsurgency element for the remainder of the war, later to become the much feared and notorious "Koevoet" unit, who operated as a special force. The first SADF troops to be deployed in Namibia were national servicemen, also known as conscripts from the training battalions. They were led by members of the Permanent Force (PF) who were employed as fulltime soldiers. The initial focus of attention was the eastern part of the Caprivi, since PLAN infiltrators entered from Zambia. By 1974, the SADF has grown its number of combat personnel considerably and within the SA Army there were now eight full-time infantry battalions and a combat ready parachute battalion.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Shubin, V.G. *The Hot "Cold War", the USSR in Southern Africa*, 2008, p 207.

⁵⁸ Steenkamp, W. 'The Citizen Soldier in the Border War', *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31 (3), 2006, pp 8 - 10.

Until 1975, the efforts from the South African security forces in protecting its borders, was mainly to prevent the Marxist backed liberation movements to take over power from the colonial rulers in southern Africa. They posed a common threat of Communism to South Africa. The countries at stake comprised Angola, Mozambique and Rhodesia. The SAP also helped Britain fight against the Rhodesian liberation movements. At that stage the perceived military threats for South Africa were Communism, internal uprising from the African National Congress (ANC), and African nationalist movements. The idea that Communism was a threat to South Africa became entrenched in the minds of SADF members. G.D. Scholtz, an Afrikaner historian and journalist wrote many books on Communism during the 1950's and 1960's, widely read by SADF senior officers.⁵⁹

Between 1970 and 1974, SWAPO mobilized itself politically. A national strike (1971 – 1972) by contract workers in Windhoek led to reforms of the migrant labor system. Activists expelled from the mines and industry returned to Ovamboland and mobilized the people politically on behalf of SWAPO that led to an uprising in 1972 amongst the rural people in Ovamboland. This led to increased numbers of SADF troops deployed in the north of Namibia.⁶⁰

By 1974, the political situation in southern Africa changed rapidly and had an impact on the strategy of the various armed forces and political alignments in the region. In April 1974, a military coup took place in Portugal that brought the end of Portuguese colonial rule over Angola and Mozambique. A new regional group, the Frontline States came into being; consisting of Mozambique, Angola, Rhodesia, Botswana, Zambia and Tanzania with their primary goal to free South Africa from white rule.⁶¹ The Marxist backed liberation movements, including the ANC, posed a threat to South Africa and its government of white supremacy. The military coup in Portugal also brought the end of the Angolan Colonial War, which turned into the Angolan Civil War, and intensified the rivalry between the three Angolan rebel movements. These movements include the

⁵⁹ Warwick, R. *White South Africa and Defence 1960 – 1968: Militarization, Threat Perceptions and Counter Strategies*, PhD Thesis, Department of Historical Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 164.

⁶⁰ Cock, J. and Nathan, L. (eds). *War and Society, The Militarization of South Africa*, 1989, pp 91 - 92.

⁶¹ Pretorius, F. (eds). *Geskiedenis van Suid Afrika, Van voortye tot vandag*, 2012, p 356.

Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), and they competed in taking over the seat of power in Luanda. The United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) also became involved in this regional conflict, and the Cold War theatre escalated in southern Africa into Angola. This inevitably meant participation of the allies of the USA and the USSR becoming involved, all looking after their own interests with their own political agendas, playing out in Angola and Namibia.

The Angolan nationalist movement the MPLA, was founded in 1956 by a group of educated exiles mainly from Luanda, who believed that an armed struggle was the only solution to overthrow Portuguese colonialism and imperialism. Agostinho Neto, a member of the Mbundu tribe, born in a village near Luanda became one of the prominent leaders. Whilst studying medicine in Portugal, he became involved in Marxist, anti-Salazar organizations. The MPLA formed a guerilla army in exile and received military training in Ghana, Morocco and Algeria from 1961, and weapons were supplied by many Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union. Military bases were opened in Zambia towards 1964.⁶² The military wing of the MPLA was called the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA).

The main rival of the MPLA was the sub nationalist group the FNLA, with its history linked to the north of Angola. The FNLA had the same objectives as the MPLA, including national independence for Angola and the destruction of Portuguese colonialism and imperialism. Its ideology, regional base, foreign affiliations, ethnic cohesion and religious roots differed from the MPLA. The FNLA drew their support from the Bakango refugees in Zaire, and in 1960 Holden Roberto became its leader. In 1961, a revolution amongst coffee plantation workers led to a colonial uprising and people fled into refugee camps in Zaire where they started seeking military bases, allies and weapons to create a guerilla army to resist the Portuguese colonialism and imperialism. Zaire was hospitable towards the FNLA and Roberto Holden married

⁶² Hamann, H. *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p 12.

Mobutu Sese Seko's sister in law, creating a more permanent relationship with Zaire. The FNLA was threatened by the MPLA whose membership was better educated and more organized. Roberto Holden asked for support from the West, claiming to be anti-communist. The USA, keen to develop anti-Soviet allies in Africa, gave military and financial support, South Africa gave support and China supplied weapons. The Organization for African Unity (OAU) recognized the FNLA as a provisional government in exile.⁶³

UNITA, the third rebel movement fighting against the Portuguese colonial rule in Angola, was formed by Jonas Savimbi in 1966. Savimbi was born to a prominent Ovimbundu family and received tertiary education abroad. UNITA's regional focus was the highlands of the south and they mainly operated in the southern and eastern parts of Angola. The UNITA leadership was initially involved in the exiled political movements of both the MPLA and the FNLA, but different opinions led to their own political formation. UNITA initially gave support to PLAN guerillas wanting to infiltrate Namibia. They turned towards the West for support and stopped helping PLAN when they became an ally of South Africa, until the end of the Border War, supported by both the USA and South Africa, and fought alongside the SADF in Angola.⁶⁴

During this period of regional political instability in the mid 1970's, South Africa's Prime Minister John Vorster, changed strategy and became friendly towards African states. He started making secret visits to various African countries in an attempt to make friendly overtures which formed part of his African détente initiative. He wanted to prevent conflict in especially Rhodesia and Namibia, as well as preventing Marxist backed liberation movements to take over the rule in these countries. Further goals of his détente initiative were to establish relations with moderate African states to establish an economical block of southern African states and to gain membership from the OAU.⁶⁵

⁶³ Birmingham, D. *Frontline Nationalism in Angola and Mozambique*, 1992, pp 41 – 43.

Hamann, H. *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p 43.

Ibid, p 14.

⁶⁵ Pretorius, F. (eds). *Geskiedenis van Suid Afrika, Van voortye tot vandag*, 2012, p 357.

In 1975, the Minister of Defence PW Botha, decided that the FNLA needs support in the form of weapons and military training to counter the MPLA forces in Angola, after asked for assistance by the USA, Zambia and Zaire. This led to South Africa becoming part of the anti-Marxist alliance to support both the FNLA and UNITA in Angola. Under the code name of Operation Savannah, this was the SADF's first cross border operation into Angola. Jan Breytenbach, founding commander of 32 Battalion, was responsible for the training of the FNLA soldiers. The plan was to train and assist both the FNLA and UNITA until the election that was scheduled for November 1975. It was soon realized that the MPLA was a formidable force and the SADF was instructed to become military involved, in addition to training and giving assistance. General Constand Viljoen mentioned that it was never the intention of the SADF to capture Luanda. The aim was to apply pressure on the OAU, and put in place a government of national unity to avoid the MPLA to take over control, by using limited war efforts in the process.⁶⁶

Operation Savannah was a clandestine operation and the general public in South Africa was not aware or informed of its troops being deployed far from home. According to General Constand Viljoen, Jonas Savimbi and Roberto Holden also asked the SADF to keep it secret.⁶⁷ National servicemen were not allowed to talk about the war, the policy around disclosing information was strict and it remained a secretive war until the end and long after. The majority of the soldiers were conscripts and the SADF was dependant on them to perform military duties in both Namibia and Angola. Since the early 1960's, the SADF was viewed by Afrikaner leaders, alongside apartheid, as a guarantee for white supremacy.⁶⁸

In 1968, the SADF introduced a national service system whereby all white males from age 18 were subject to fulltime conscription for nine months. The period changed to one

⁶⁶ Hamann, H. *Days of the Generals*, 2001, pp 25 – 32.

Jan Breytenbach, interview, July 2007.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p 32.

⁶⁸ Warwick, R. *White South Africa and Defence 1960 – 1968: Militarization, Threat Perceptions and Counter Strategies*, PhD Thesis, Department of Historical Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 34.

year and eventually to two years service, followed by a number of military camps.⁶⁹ The conscription was spearheaded by Commandant General Rudolph Hiemstra who played a decisive role in the restructuring of the SADF during the 1960's in promoting Afrikaner interests and apartheid, advocating the SADF as a force to counter the perceived threat of Communism. The SADF was increasingly being popularized amongst the Afrikaners. It gradually entrenched every sector of South African society, starting at school level, mobilizing the white minority, focusing on Afrikaners. Failure to perform national service resulted in legal action and imprisonment, whilst the alternative option was self exile. Young school leavers getting killed in Namibia and Angola in a war that could not be sufficiently explained to the public was an uncomfortable and sensitive situation for the NP government, who depended on votes to remain in power. Many of the conscripts' parents were NP supporters, and it was important to reinforce support for the government.

War resistance emerged during the 1970's when youth from mostly English speaking universities and churches became politicized and started objecting to compulsory military service. The resistance was based on moral and political objections to the role of the SADF inside and outside the country. Conscripts started failing to report for national service and between 1978 and 1982, twelve conscientious objectors were imprisoned for refusing to do national service because of political and religious beliefs. This led to the formation of the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) at the end of 1983, with the support limited to radical elements within the English universities and churches. In 1988, the NP government banned the ECC organization.⁷⁰

Divisions formed within the political sphere as to the reasons for South Africans to be involved in a war outside of their own country, and the government was criticized for waging war in the north of Namibia and southern Angola. Opponents to the government saw this as a foreign affairs fiasco. There are many reasons and theories about the SADF entering Angola in 1975 during Operation Savannah, and continuing with the war until

⁶⁹ Steenkamp, W. 'The Citizen Soldier in the Border War', *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31 (3), 2006, p 6.

⁷⁰ Cock, J. and Nathan, L. (eds). *War and Society, The Militarization of South Africa*, 1989, pp 308 – 309.

1989. John Vorster told Parliament the reason for the SADF being in Angola during Operation Savannah was to protect its Ruacana-Calueque hydro-electric scheme. In a Parliamentary speech a year after Operation Savannah, PW Botha mentioned that South Africa had to protect itself and its investments from Communist aggression and attacks from SWAPO guerillas concentrated in southern Angola. Cuba's representative to the UN had a different perspective, and mentioned in a speech to the General Assembly that South Africa entered Angola with the intention of preventing the independence of Angola, and occupying the entire territory. Other political observers believed South Africa wanted to exploit Angola's minerals and resources and believed the threat of Communism was only an excuse.⁷¹ Since Namibia was administered as a fifth province of South Africa, it claimed that it was protecting its territory from SWAPO who wanted to take over the rule in Namibia, which posed a Communist threat. It also wanted to prevent the MPLA of taking over the rule in Angola which posed a Communist threat, especially in the light of Cuba sending troops to Angola in support of the MPLA.

According to Louis Bothma, the cause for the war should be found outside of the parameters of the Cold War and Communist threats. It should be explored within a wider historical context, starting with the annexation of Namibia by Germany in 1884. The first clash between South African forces and the Ovambo people was in 1917, and not in 1966, stated as the official start of the Border War. The South Africans killed the Ovakwanyama tribe's king, Mandume ya Ndemufayo, because he prevented them from exploiting Ovamboland's labor force to work in the mines. The tombstones of the South African soldiers, who died in February 1917 at king Mandume's kraal, can still be seen at St Mary's Mission, a kilometer from the Angolan border. Locals living here related to Bothma that the Ovambo people don't feel comfortable with the soldiers being buried amongst them, since they killed their king. Bothma reckons that South Africa lost the war long before the Cold War came into play.⁷² This article published in the local media to explain that the causes of the war should be found outside of the parameters of the Cold War, was in reaction to a Border War publication of 2011, *Ons was daar – Weners van*

⁷¹ Hamann, H. *Days of the Generals*, 2001, pp 14 – 15.

⁷² Bothma, L.J. *Anderkant Cuito, 'n Reisverhaal van die Grensoorlog*, 2011, pp 17 – 18. *Beeld*, 04.11.2011

die oorlog om Suider-Afrika, edited by General Jannie Geldenhuys. This publication portrays the general belief that the SADF was fighting Communism during the Border War. The trade union Solidarity, who published the book, reacted strongly to Bothma's opinion stating that he does not know his facts. In return, Bothma comments that he is open to criticism and opposing viewpoints from fellow soldiers, but not from trade union administrators that lacks military experience.⁷³

Journalist and author Rian Malan wrote a review of the publication under discussion. He summarizes the book as an attempt to portray the war as a Cold War clash between a Communist super power and the Boers and their allies. He reckons this viewpoint is insulting towards those who prefer to see it as a struggle between freedom fighters and apartheid racists. He does however consider the book to be an important contribution.⁷⁴

According to Jan Breytenbach, the reason for the SADF being in Angola was to prevent the Communists from taking over Angola, Namibia and eventually South Africa.⁷⁵ The latter argument seems to be the most common explanation given by former PF members of the SADF. According to General Constand Viljoen, the reason why South Africa became involved in the internal affairs of Angola was because Zambia, Zaire and UNITA asked for help. He further mentioned that in the military it became clear that they should become part of Africa in line with Vorster's détente strategy. Apart from the threat of Communism this was the most important reason for meddling in Angola.⁷⁶

The various opposing viewpoints are indicative of the varying emotions involved in the aftermath of the Border War. It is interesting to note that the most recent publication of the Border War, *The SADF in the Border War 1966 – 1989*, by Leopold Scholtz, published in 2013, again evoked intense emotion and varying viewpoints from the public, especially in reaction to book reviews on the publication. Comments are mostly restricted to the opinions of former conscripts and PF soldiers who romanticize the war and defend

⁷³ *Volksblad*, 18.11.2011

Beeld, 22.11.2011

⁷⁴ <http://www.beeld.com/Boeke/OnlangsVerskyn/n-Ongemaklike-waarheid-20111113>

⁷⁵ Jan Breytenbach, interview, July 2007.

⁷⁶ Hamann, H. *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p 15.

any criticism towards it; former conscripts who tries to make sense of the war and suffer from war trauma, who asks if it was worth it, question why they had to fight in a war, and feels betrayed by the NP government whom they feel sold them out to the ANC; and lastly the liberal voices who objected to national service and criticize the Border War as a matter of principle.⁷⁷

In an essay where he tries to make sense of the Border War, Albert Venter identifies five political paradigms with which the Border War is analyzed, criticized, attacked and legitimized. They comprise of the total onslaught, the liberal opposition analysis, the struggle critique, the technical analyses and the radical critique. Under PW Botha's rule (1978 – 1989), South Africa increasingly became more militarized and the security forces comprising the SADF and the SAP gained increased power. In 1977 the Department of Defence published a White Paper spelling out the belief that South Africa faced a total onslaught against the political system and the solution to counter this became known as the total strategy. The total strategy was fought internally against black resistance forces, and externally against Marxist backed neighboring states. The basis of the total onslaught against South Africa was the fear of black majority rule and the threat of Communism. One of the justifications to legitimize the Border War was the fear of the total onslaught against South Africa that needed to be countered by the total strategy. The liberal opposition criticized this viewpoint by arguing that the NP government attracts the total onslaught through maintaining the repressive laws of its policy of apartheid. They did not support the Border War and viewed it as a waste of money. The ANC and its military wing Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) was one of the main opponents in the total onslaught against South Africa. Throughout its struggle against apartheid, the ANC received support from Marxist backed countries. The ANC indirectly took part in the Border War because it had military camps in Angola and Tanzania. However, MK was never directly involved in a military war against the SADF. The importance of the ANC paradigm in relation to the Border War is that it is used in post apartheid South Africa to influence the historiography of the war. Public debates about who won the battle of Cuito Caunavale

⁷⁷ *Beeld*, 24.05.2013
Rapport, 26.05.2013

started in 2008 to popularize the struggle history of the ANC and implicates that MK took part in this battle which they did not. Regarding the technical analyses of the Border War, Venter looked at the work of authors who analyzed the war purely from a military-strategic-historical viewpoint and not seeking to justify it morally or otherwise. Authors include Chester Crocker, Willem Steenkamp and Helmoed Römer Heitman who supports the Border War within the wider context of the Cold War. They further view the Border War as a means for the military to buy time, in order for the politicians to find a political solution. Radical critical analysts that wrote about the Border War view it from within the total onslaught strategy which they criticize as a Communist plot orchestrated by Moscow. The SADF is portrayed as a group of officers being paranoid about Communism. They further view the Border War as protecting white and by implication Afrikaner rights within South Africa. Although the SADF claims to be non-political, the radical critical analysts view the organization as an extension of the apartheid state and NP political leadership. According to Venter, the aforementioned paradigms to explain and justify the Border War can be reduced to one reason: to protect the white minority political rule against a black majority political rule.⁷⁸

When Angola became independent in November 1975, the MPLA came to power, supported by the Soviet Union, various Eastern European countries and Cuba supplying most of the troops for the civil war. The USA supported FNLA, who in turn formed an alliance with UNITA. MPLA supported SWAPO and the situation enabled them to set up military and refugee camps in southern Angola from where it was easier to launch attacks into northern Namibia (Ovamboland) and the Caprivi. This also led to an increase in young people leaving Namibia to join the struggle for independence. With Angola and Mozambique having Soviet backed governments in place, the Communist threat increased for South Africa. The military support from the Soviet Union and Cuba to the MPLA, SWAPO and the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) was a concerning factor for the SADF. Algeria, Egypt, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Soviet Union, China,

⁷⁸ Venter, A. 'Mededingende Politieke Paradigmas oor die Grensoorlog 1966 – 1989', *Journal for Contemporary History*, 34 (1), 2009, pp 43 – 53.

North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba were all involved at one stage or another in helping the southern African liberation movements.⁷⁹

After the Soweto student uprising in June 1976 that escalated throughout South Africa, the political situation and climate in southern Africa changed rapidly. This led to an increase of ANC youth leaving the country for exile, joining the military training camps in Angola and Tanzania. From here they could infiltrate back to South Africa to take part in the urban war fighting against apartheid. Politically, South Africa increasingly became more isolated and Vorster's attempt to establish relations with African states failed.⁸⁰

When the SADF withdrew from Angola after Operation Savannah in March 1976, UNITA and the FNLA were left largely to fend for themselves. The soldiers from FNLA were mostly taken in by 32 Battalion who used them as troops in their fighter platoons. Those not taken in disappeared as a military force. UNITA withdrew into the south-eastern corner of Angola and built a capital in the bush at Jamba, where they started to regroup and organize themselves.⁸¹ Until the end of the Border War in 1989, UNITA was aligned with the SADF from whom they received support. The stage was now set for a new era and strategy within the SADF, and the main enemy that they fought in Angola and northern Namibia was PLAN.

In 1977, the Western Contact Group was formed by Western members of the UN Security Council including Canada, France, West Germany, United Kingdom and the USA. The group's aim was to find a solution to the Namibian transition to independence. South Africa had reservations and wanted all Cuban soldiers first to withdraw from Angola. South Africa was concerned that Namibia will become another safe haven for the ANC and SWAPO, from where they could enter South Africa. At the time, Namibia was also going through political changes. In September 1977, Dirk Mudge broke away from the ruling white National Party to form the Republican Party which formed alliances with

⁷⁹ Somerville, K. *Southern Africa and the Soviet Union*, 1993, p 5.

Martin Shalli, interview, January 2010.

⁸⁰ Hamann, H. *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p 68.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p 69.

Jan Breytenbach, interview, July 2007.

political parties from other race groups. In 1978, Andreas Shipanga, a SWAPO stalwart returned from exile, broke away from SWAPO and formed the SWAPO Democrats which became part of the Namibian National Front. In September 1977, meetings between the Western Contact Group and South Africa ended without any agreements being reached. In February 1978 at a meeting in New York with South African Foreign Affairs, Sam Nujoma said that SWAPO was not interested in taking part in elections. SWAPO's aim was to take over control in Namibia, and would do everything in their power to disrupt and wreck the negotiation process.⁸² According to Ep van Lill, a former PF SADF soldier who often conducted cross border operations for the duration of the war, and part of the rescue operation that were tasked to find Van der Mescht after his capture: "*SWAPO was informed that South Africa wanted to negotiate, but they preferred violence instead*".⁸³ Similar statements were repeated during various interviews with former PF and conscripts from the SADF. It is indicative of the general belief system within the SADF at the time; SWAPO was a terrorist organization resorting to violence and killing innocent people and the SADF had to protect its public from the terrorists.

In 1978, the UN introduced Resolution 435 for settling the Namibian problem. It called for a cease fire and holding of elections in Namibia under UN supervision, and withdrawal of the SADF troops from Namibia, which ultimately led to the independence of Namibia in March 1990. These were all important developments taking place in Namibia whilst the war between the SADF and PLAN intensified.

It is necessary to set the political situation in southern Africa at the time into the context of the Cold War that was playing out in the region. As African countries started to gain their independence from colonial rule and waves of nationalism spread throughout Africa in the 1950's and 1960's, the USA and Soviet Union started competing in Africa. Both had an interest in Africa due to the many resources available. The Angolan Civil War running parallel to the Border War, created the opportunity for the USA and Soviet Union to compete with each other in southern Africa. The Soviet Union assisted African

⁸² Hamann, H. *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p 71.

⁸³ Ep van Lill, interview, February 2010.

countries with the liberation and fight for independence from colonial rule, mostly through military training and supplies of military hardware. Supporting the struggle of people for national liberation and social progress was confirmed as one of the aims of Soviet foreign policy in the USSR Constitution of 1977.⁸⁴ In October 1976, Agostinho Neto and Leonid Brezhnev signed a Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation in Moscow. In addition to this treaty, Angola signed a series of political, economical and military agreements with Cuba, East Germany and Bulgaria. The agreements with Cuba led to thousands of Cuban troops and advisors being sent to Angola.⁸⁵

Shubin reckons that there is a tendency to look at the conflict in Angola, from the perspective of rivalry between the Soviet Union and USA during the Cold War, as the only factor, especially by Western academics. It was definitely a factor, but the Soviet Union did not only assist because of the Cold War. It formed part of the world anti-imperialist struggle, waged by the socialist community, the national liberation movements and the working class of the capitalist countries. For the Soviet Union, the global struggle was not a battle between the two super powers and their allies, but a united fight of the world's progressive forces against imperialism.⁸⁶

MPLA leaders visited the Soviet Union in July 1961, on invite from the Solidarity Committee. The meeting raised financial assistance and provision of arms to the MPLA, as well as training of party cadres in the Soviet Union. This was the beginning of assistance given to the MPLA to fight for independence in Angola. The interest from the USA in the Portuguese colonies was primarily strategic as the Portuguese islands off the African coast were important for Western air communications. Co-operation between Portugal and the leading Western countries took place within NATO structures.⁸⁷ Archive documents and oral sources prove that Cuba made its own decision to become involved in the Angolan conflict, and Cuba was not acting as Soviet proxies. In 1975, Fidel Castro initiated Cuban armed support for the MPLA without Moscow's agreement or

⁸⁴ Shubin, V.G. *The Hot "Cold War", the USSR in Southern Africa*, 2008, p 2.

⁸⁵ Somerville, K. *Southern Africa and the Soviet Union*, 1993, p 69.

⁸⁶ Shubin, V.G. *The Hot "Cold War", the USSR in Southern Africa*, 2008, pp 2 - 3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p 10.

knowledge.⁸⁸ According to Shubin, detailed history of the Soviet Union's military involvement and relations with the Angolan liberation movements, as in the rest of Africa still has to be written. The information has been withheld from the public for many years in the USSR and abroad and not always accessible.⁸⁹

The USA had a global approach and saw the regional conflicts in southern Africa, Central America and South East Asia as global confrontations with the USSR. Since South Africa was threatened by the Soviet's involvement in southern Africa, it became an ally of the USA, although the USA could not acknowledge it publicly. Varying opinions in the USA prevailed about the conflict with the Soviet Union in southern Africa and aligning with apartheid South Africa against the Communist threat. When President Ronald Reagan took over office in the USA in 1981, together with his African Affairs adviser Assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker, they abandoned the critical approach to South Africa adopted by the Carter regime. Chester Crocker was clear on how the USA viewed its role in southern Africa. Its intention was to protect Western interests and ensuring access to mineral wealth and the Cape shipping routes.⁹⁰ They embarked on the constructive engagement process through extensive political consultations with all the role players. Periodic rounds of talks were held in Paris, New York, London and various African capitals between 1983 and 1988 between the West and East, to try and resolve the war in Angola and transfer of power in Namibia. Throughout this period, Reagan continued the global struggle with the Soviet Union, was sympathetic towards South Africa, and hostile towards the ANC and other liberation movements in Africa.⁹¹

Wars are seldom won through military intervention, and political will is often the decisive factor in determining the winner. International pressure on South Africa to end apartheid increased towards the late 1980's, and was one of the contributing factors towards additional momentum to the peace negotiations to put an end to the Border War

⁸⁸ Shubin, V.G. *The Hot "Cold War", the USSR in Southern Africa*, 2008, p 52.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p 12.

⁹⁰ Somerville, K. *Southern Africa and the Soviet Union*, 1993, p 235.

⁹¹ Ibid, p 227.

and subsequent transfer of power in Namibia. The peace process was negotiated by politicians and high ranking military officers, far removed from the operational area. The various participants of the Border War continuous to debate on who won the war, and there are various opposing viewpoints. With regards to the two opposing forces relevant for the dissertation being the SADF and SWAPO, both claim to have won the war. Leopold Scholtz is of the opinion that the only manner in which to determine and conclude who won the Border War is to identify each participant's objectives and measure whether it was met. Regarding SWAPO's main objective of gaining majority rule in Namibia; it did become the ruling party of Namibia in 1990, but fell short of its intended two-thirds majority. Regarding South Africa's main objective if it is reduced to the core intention of remaining the status quo; it could be argued that the NP government handed over political power to the ANC. This is however a contentious issue amongst many former soldiers and the general sentiment is that the NP government sold them out to the ANC. Similarly, the white, mostly Afrikaner establishment, is still getting to terms with the loss of political power. General Constand Viljoen mentioned that the aim of the Border War was never to win but to stop the spread of Communism in southern Africa, which the SADF succeeded in doing.⁹²

It was during this period of complex political dynamics and conflict taking place in southern Africa, that SWAPO embarked on a strategy to counter the military strength of the SADF. As a consequence, PLAN increased its guerilla activities against the SADF in northern Namibia and southern Angola, and one of these planned military operations led to the successful capture of Van der Mescht in February 1978.

⁹² Scholtz, L. *The SADF in the Border War 1966 – 1989*, 2013, pp 440 – 448.

Chapter 3: Van der Mescht's capture and subsequent imprisonment in Angola

This chapter explores SWAPO's strategy towards 1978 to counter the SADF's attempts to keep PLAN soldiers from infiltrating into Ovamboland with their strong military force. It discusses SWAPO's propaganda strategy intending to capture SADF soldiers which they referred to as Boers.⁹³ It further describes the background and planning of the attack on the waterhole near Elundu in Ovamboland where Van der Mescht was captured, and his imprisonment in Angola as a POW. The International Rules of Law embodied in the Geneva Convention pertaining to POWs is briefly discussed. Reference is made to other POWs imprisoned in Angola during the Border War as well as reference to South Africans held as POWs during previous wars, dating back to the Anglo Boer War (1899 – 1902). The SADF's reaction on the capture of Van der Mescht, including the results of the Board of Enquiry after the attack will be interrogated, in the light of the incident that was destined to have major ramifications.

Towards 1978, the war fought in Ovamboland and the south of Angola between the SADF and PLAN intensified. PLAN operated as a guerilla force and conducted their war within the parameters of guerilla tactics which do not end quickly through military action, and often needs to be resolved through political negotiation. Although the SADF conducted a counterinsurgency campaign to get back at PLAN, theoretically it was structured as a conventional armed force and had many advantages over PLAN. They were well equipped, having access to military hardware including helicopters, fighter aircraft and various armored vehicles; infrastructure, resources and equipment that PLAN could not match. The advantage that PLAN had over the SADF was that they knew the operational area very well and could operate in small mobile groups. SWAPO members were mostly drawn from Ovamboland and received support by means of food, shelter and information from the local population in the area of operation. PLAN conducted guerilla warfare using small groups of foot soldiers who moved fast, and is almost the equivalent

⁹³ The term Boers is derived from the Afrikaans language and refers to Afrikaner farmers. During the Anglo Boer War (1899 – 1902), the commandos that fought against the British were referred to as Boers. During the Border War, the reference to Boers was used by SWAPO to refer to the predominantly Afrikaner men who made up the military force of the SADF. It was borrowed from the black majority in South Africa that referred to the Afrikaner security apparatus as Boers.

of the Boer commandos in the Anglo Boer War. 32 Battalion, who operated as foot soldiers in Ovamboland and the south of Angola at the time, observed that SWAPO became more aggressive and started moving in bigger groups to look for contact with the enemy and increasingly gained more military success. PLAN bases in the south of Angola were difficult to detect, the locations often moved and the guerillas commonly attacked by surprise which left the SADF in a position of vulnerability.⁹⁴ Ep van Lill comments: “*PLAN was an enemy that frustrated us because we never knew where they were going to attack next. Our tactical information was limited*”.⁹⁵ Interviews with various former SADF conscripts and PF members serving on the border between Namibia and Angola during this period confirmed that PLAN was “*an armed force to reckon with*”. Martin Shalli summarized it aptly: “*No amount of machines can defeat people who are committed and united in a common purpose*”.⁹⁶

Against this background, SWAPO embarked on a strategy to counter the military strength of the SADF. Towards the end of 1977, Sam Nujoma, the leader of SWAPO and commander-in-chief of PLAN, gave the direct order to capture a Boer. The purpose was to use the captured enemy as propaganda to further the liberation struggle of SWAPO, with the intent to impact negatively on the morale of the military strength of the SADF. Nujoma was concerned about the many SWAPO members taken prisoner by the SADF and urged PLAN to counter the situation.⁹⁷ At that stage the NP government imprisoned a number of SWAPO members in Pretoria and Robben Island under the Terrorism Act, and held them as political prisoners. SWAPO prisoners were not given the status of POWs because they were viewed by the government as terrorists committing illegal acts. One of the founder members of SWAPO, Herman Toivo ya Toivo was arrested in Namibia in 1966 and held in detention in Pretoria for nine months before he was brought to trial. He was allegedly tortured throughout this period, according to SWAPO’s Department of Information and Publicity.⁹⁸ In 1979, SWAPO uncovered a concentration centre at

⁹⁴ Bothma, L.J. *Vang ‘n Boer, die stryd tussen Boer en Ovambo*, 2012, p 431.

⁹⁵ Ep van Lill, interview, February 2010.

⁹⁶ Martin Shalli, interview, January 2010.

⁹⁷ Danger Ashipala, interview, October 2009, December 2009.

⁹⁸ Document: International World Campaign for the Release of South African Political Prisoners, Peter Katjavivi Collection, PA1, University of Namibia (UNAM).

Hardapdam near Mariental in the south of Namibia, where as many as 140 SWAPO members, allegedly captured during the Cassinga raid, was held in appalling conditions and tortured by the SADF.⁹⁹

Ashipala told Nujoma that he would try his best to capture a Boer, since he specialized in reconnaissance tactics. The operation was planned by the command structure of PLAN's northeast front at Oihapeto which served as both headquarter and military base. Oihapeto is approximately 25 kilometers north of the cut line (border between Angola and Namibia) in Angola. The regional commander at the time was Mbulanganga Ndakolo; Chief of Staff, Charles Namoloh, whose battle name was Ho-Chi-Min, adopted from the Chinese Cultural Revolution, inspired by Mao Zedong; Chief of Operations, Martin Shalli; Chief of Engineering, Martin Nashandi.¹⁰⁰

Ashipala started conducting reconnaissance in Ovamboland to find a suitable target where the South African soldiers could be captured. Hosea Martin, an informer living in a local village, suggested the waterhole next to his village as a possible target. The waterhole was used by the SADF and permanently guarded. The geographic location of the waterhole; absence of physical barriers and structures for protection such as sandbags, walls and underground bunkers; made it an open target, vulnerable to a possible attack. Ashipala studied the routine and activities of the SADF soldiers around the waterhole and noticed poor discipline. The absence of physical security structures combined with the poor discipline of the SADF soldiers were the decisive factors in choosing this target. The tactic decided upon for the operation was to make the nearby SADF bases Eenhana and Elundu the primary targets, and the waterhole the secondary target. The plan was to create chaos at Eenhana and Elundu to give Ashipala's group the chance to capture the SADF soldiers and allow enough time to retreat to Angola. The attack would start with the shelling of Eenhana and Elundu after midnight, thereafter attacking the waterhole. A strong artillery presence, commanded by Martin Shalli, would be positioned on the cut

⁹⁹ Press Release issued by SWAPO Department of Information and Publicity, 1979, Peter Katjavivi Collection, PA1, UNAM.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Namoloh, interview, October 2009.
Martin Shalli, interview, January 2010.

line to stop the SADF from following Ashipala and his captives. It was decided to capture a number of four SADF soldiers at the waterhole.¹⁰¹

Soldiers were selected from various PLAN units to take part in the operation. Ashipala trained a group of 30 soldiers for the attack on the waterhole. The operation had as a result the more structured formation of PLAN's unit of reconnaissance soldiers. The unit was named Volcano at the time and renamed Typhoon at a later stage, commanded by Ashipala, who subsequently became the Chief of Reconnaissance for the duration of the war.¹⁰²

Completely oblivious to all of this, Van der Mescht received call up papers in December 1977 to perform a three month military camp on the border. This would have been his last camp. At the time the 22 year old Van der Mescht, his wife Cheryl and nine month old baby daughter Chantal was living in Sishen in the Northern Cape with his parents. Van der Mescht was an apprentice boiler maker working for Iscor. He left Sishen by train for border duty on 4 January 1978, reported at Grootfontein and eventually reached Elundu on 15 January, where he was to be deployed for the next three months.¹⁰³

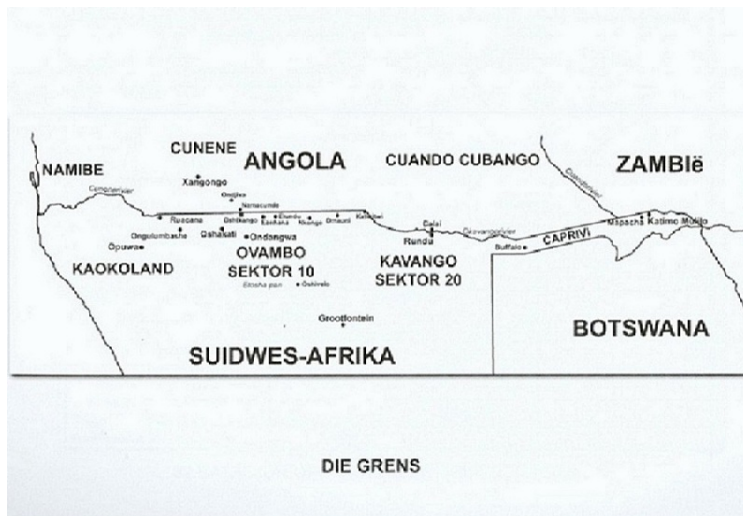
¹⁰¹ Danger Ashipala, interview, October 2009, December 2009.

Martin Shalli, interview, January 2010.

¹⁰² Danger Ashipala, interview, October 2009, December 2009.

Martin Shalli, interview, January 2010.

¹⁰³ Johan van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.



**Elundu is situated on the border of Angola towards the east of the operational area.
Courtesy of Louis Bothma.**

Elundu was a small base approximately 10 kilometers south of the cut line, 25 kilometers east from Eenhana and positioned within the east of the operational area of Ovamboland. Elundu was initially a temporary base for infantry soldiers conducting patrols in the area and served as a logistical station for cross-border operations into southern Angola. When the water pipes at Elundu were sabotaged by PLAN in December 1977, a waterhole was dug approximately 2 kilometers from Elundu, next to a local village, to provide water to the many soldiers operating in the area. The primary task of Van der Mescht and his colleague Sapper Gerrit Nel, was to purify the water for human consumption. There were no physical structures at the site, except for one tent that served as sleeping quarters for both Van der Mescht and Nel.



**Waterhole at Elundu, an open target for possible attack.
Photo courtesy of Louis Bothma.**

In December 1977, A Company, 54 Battalion, a camp of 2 South African Infantry (2 SAI) was moved from Walvis Bay to Elundu. The battalion group under the command of Lieutenant Flip de Witt was stationed at Elundu with the aim of patrolling the operational area, and to protect the nearby waterhole. At the time 2 SAI shared the base with 32 Battalion, who operated their tactical headquarter from Elundu. Nine infantry soldiers provided permanent protection at the waterhole and rotated at weekly intervals. Cattle, livestock and local people from the adjacent village also made use of the waterhole for their water supplies. The daily presence of people from the village made Van der Mescht uncomfortable as he suspected they might be studying the routine for intelligence purposes. Shortly before sunset on 18 February 1978, nine infantry soldiers from 2 SAI, under the command of temporary section leader Rifleman Hannes Ferreira, arrived at the waterhole to take over the protection from the previous section.¹⁰⁴

On 18 February 1978, PLAN was ready for the operation they have been planning meticulously the past few months. PLAN often attacked in the early hours of the morning during full moon when it is easy to approach the target in moonlight, and attacked upon the moon going down. On Sunday 19 February around 3h00 in the morning, Ashipala and 30 men approached the waterhole. The attack group was split into two with one group positioned on the northern wall of the waterhole right across the tent. This was the support group that had to fire on the tent and neutralize the only Bren machine gun position. The second group, with Ashipala in the front, took position west of the tent. The attack group was in position too early and Ashipala waited for Eenhana to be shelled so he could start the attack on the waterhole. Getting the signal from Eenhana took longer than anticipated and Ashipala was getting concerned that it would be light before they could retreat to Angola. He was also concerned about the movements of the men on duty. Movement towards the tent suggested that they might have been aware of PLAN's presence. The moon went down and Ashipala decided to start the attack without waiting for Eenhana's shelling. He used a stick to beat on his AK47 machine gun to give the signal for attacking. Intense fire came from the support group towards the tent, and

¹⁰⁴ Diverse, Group 2, Box 99, Board of Enquiry, Nr 18/78, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

Ashipala threw hand grenades at the tent.¹⁰⁵ Kamati ka Elio, the troop that physically picked up Van der Mescht, recalls Ashipala's command: "*Forward, forward, capture the enemy, capture the enemy*". As Ashipala's group moved towards the tent, the fire from the north turned towards neutralizing the Bren machine gun.

Van der Mescht was shot and wounded by shrapnel from the hand grenades thrown into the tent. He crawled out of the tent and was lying between the tent and the waterhole when Ashipala instructed ka Elio to pick him up.¹⁰⁶ Equipment such as radios, clothing and ammunition were raided during the attack.¹⁰⁷ Ashipala and his men managed to capture two soldiers, including Van der Mescht. Ashipala relates that "*the second soldier who was caught was big, obnoxious and refused to co-operate*". As a result, he was killed a few hundred meters from the tent by the section leader, Commander Haufiku.¹⁰⁸ Hannes Ferreira's body was ripped apart by an AK47 machine gun and finished off with several bayonet stabs.¹⁰⁹ Van der Mescht was carried away by Ashipala's group on a stretcher, made by wooden poles taken from the village and a sleeping bag looted from the tent.

After the attack, the PLAN unit again split into two groups to retreat back to Angola. Ashipala's group used different directions towards the cut line to deter the enemy and avoid contact as was instructed by him during the training phase. The group under the command of Haufiku didn't follow the instructions and made their way directly north towards the cut line. 32 Battalion picked up the tracks and set an ambush, killing Haufiku and another PLAN soldier.¹¹⁰ Ashipala was very upset with Haufiku's actions and the

¹⁰⁵ Danger Ashipala, interview, October 2009, December 2009.

¹⁰⁶ Kamati ka Elio, interview, December 2009.

¹⁰⁷ 2MG, Box 156, Ops Hoër IN/UIT, Ref Q/OPS/693/24 Feb 78, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁰⁸ Danger Ashipala, interview, October 2009, December 2009.

¹⁰⁹ Email to *Beeld*, 16.12.2009, by Dawid Ferreira, brother of Hannes Ferreira who was killed, in reaction to an article that appeared in *Beeld*, 14.12.2009, about the meeting between Van der Mescht and Ashipala, where reference is made about the Boer that was killed during the attack. Dawid Ferreira was upset about Van der Mescht reaching out to Ashipala, whilst his brother was killed by the "terrorists" in a brutal manner during the incident. The matter was resolved and clarity given to Ferreira, facilitated by Louis Bothma who wrote the article; again testament to the many scars and questions left by the war.

¹¹⁰ Contact Report: 309/1/A LETTA/3, 19 Feb 78, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

killing of Ferreira, a few hundred meters from the waterhole. He believed it could have been avoided, if his instructions were followed.¹¹¹

During the attack, two of the infantry soldiers ran back to Elundu to find help. No one was allowed to go back to the waterhole until daybreak, for fear of landmines on the road and a possible ambush by PLAN. Shortly after daybreak, the six wounded and two dead soldiers were picked up by helicopter from the waterhole and transported to Grootfontein and later to 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria.¹¹² When it was discovered that Van der Mescht was missing, Allouette helicopters, also referred to as gun ships were dispatched from Oshakati to do a search and rescue operation.¹¹³ The retreating PLAN soldiers were detected from the air and the helicopters circled above them. When Van der Mescht waved at the helicopter to alert them of his presence, Ashipala held an AK47 machine gun to his head and told him if he tries it again he will be killed.¹¹⁴ The helicopters had to turn around and cease the air operation.

Three hours after the attack, a group of paratroopers were dropped at the waterhole to assist with a search and rescue operation on foot to find Van der Mescht, which was unsuccessful.¹¹⁵ 32 Battalion continued to do a land search and rescue operation to find Van der Mescht, in addition to retaliation of the PLAN attack. When they reached the cut line to enter Angola, they found PLAN's strong artillery presence under the command of Martin Shalli. A brief skirmish took place and 32 Battalion had to retreat without finding Van der Mescht.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Danger Ashipala, interview, October 2009, December 2009.

¹¹² Diverse, Group 2, Box 99, Board of Enquiry, Nr 18/78, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹¹³ Allouette helicopters were referred to as gun ships when ammunition was placed on the helicopters and used as weapons during air to ground operations.

¹¹⁴ Danger Ashipala, interview, October 2009, December 2009.

Johan van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

¹¹⁵ Bothma, L.J. *Vang 'n Boer, die stryd tussen Boer en Ovambo*, 2012, p 451.

¹¹⁶ Eddie Viljoen, interview, October 2009. Former SADF PF member and attached to 32 Battalion in a senior capacity from 1976 onwards; officer commanding of 32 Battalion between 1983 and 1986. He was involved in the follow-up operations to find Van der Mescht.

Martin Shalli, interview, January 2010.

Upon the failed land and air search and rescue missions, the SADF senior command instructed a major rescue follow-up operation to find Van der Mescht. The task was given to a mechanized infantry battalion, Battle Group Juliet, under the command of Joep Joubert, code named Operation Striker. This was Battle Group Juliet's first combat experience and Ep van Lill was in command of the Ratel infantry combat vehicles. In addition to the Ratel vehicles, Eland armored combat vehicles and G2 guns accompanied the battle group. Eddie Viljoen, senior officer at 32 Battalion, accompanied the group since he was familiar with the operational terrain in southern Angola. Battle Group Juliet left Oshivelo in Ovamboland on Sunday afternoon for Eenhana where they waited until Tuesday 21 February to enter Angola, two days after the capture of Van der Mescht.¹¹⁸

Political decision making by the NP government to authorize entry into Angola, preparing the equipment and clearing the roads from landmines by the Kimberley Regiment all contributed to the delay in the rescue response.¹¹⁹ It was the first time that the Ratel vehicles operated in southern Angola, the unit had no experience and the equipment was not adequate for the terrain. A light wingspan aircraft moved with the ground forces to help navigate through the dense vegetation. Despite the air support, the vehicles got stuck in trenches in temporary PLAN bases and had to be towed out. It became a logistical challenge to continue.¹²⁰ The instruction given was to destroy the PLAN bases of Nutalala and Eengosha and advance as far as Oihapeto and then return, with or without Van der Mescht. At Oihapeto, PLAN and the SADF fired at each other, Van der Mescht was not found and Battle Group Juliet returned to Namibia the following day on 22 February.¹²¹ Shalli says of the battle at Oihapeto and attempt by the SADF to find Van der Mescht: *"I don't know who won the battle, probably both of us won, if you*

¹¹⁸ Ep van Lill, interview, February 2010.

Eddie Viljoen, interview, October 2009.

HSAW, Group 2, Box 169A, Ref HSAW/106/23/2, Ops/590 22 Feb 78, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹¹⁹ 2MG, Box 156, Ref Ops Hoër IN/UIT, Ref Q/OPS/545 19 Feb 78, 309/1/A1 LETTA/3, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹²⁰ Ep van Lill, interview, February 2010.

Eddie Viljoen, interview, October 2009.

¹²¹ HSAW, Group 2, Box 169A, Ref HSAW/106/23/2, Ops/590 22 Feb 78, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

Ep van Lill, interview, February 2010.

*like, depending on what the objective was. Their aim was to recapture Van der Mescht. They did not. Our aim was to prevent them from capturing him. So now you judge who won”.*¹²²

During the time of Van der Mescht’s capture, Nordic countries supported the liberation movements in southern Africa. In 1962 the Nordic countries launched their first joint aid project in Tanganyika (Tanzania). The motivation for both Sweden and Norway to contribute towards development aid for Third World Countries stems from their respective security consideration in the post Second World War period. Small countries concerned with creating peace and stability within the international political arena viewed development aid as a good investment for a peaceful future, in addition to gaining influence. Both Sweden and Norway’s involvement in the UN provided an arena where they could co-operate, and together gain influence on international politics. Another motivation behind development aid was moral obligations and international solidarity with international socialism as the broad ideology whereupon these ideals were based. Sweden’s support was the most prominent of all the Nordic countries, and served as a bridge between southern African liberation movements and the West.¹²³

Swedish Television was tasked to join SWAPO activities in order to film their war efforts to use for propaganda purposes, and raise awareness about the liberation struggle. This task was given to a Swedish journalist and filmmaker Per Sanden, who started working with SWAPO in 1972, assisted by a few colleagues. Subsequently, Per Sanden remained with SWAPO and is still a member today, traveling between his home in Stockholm and Windhoek. When Van der Mescht was moved to Lubango after his capture, Sanden was instructed to interview and film him, assisted by his colleague Tommy Bergh. A photo of Van der Mescht surrounded by three PLAN soldiers was sent throughout the world as part of the SWAPO propaganda strategy. Van der Mescht was under the impression that Sanden came to rescue him, but was informed by Sanden that they are Swedish journalists covering the war in support of SWAPO. Van der Mescht was very shocked

¹²² Martin Shalli, interview, January 2010.

¹²³ Engh, S. ‘The Conscience of the World? Swedish and Norwegian Provision of Development Aid’, *Itinerario*, 33, 2009, pp 67 – 72.

and traumatized and Sanden felt pity for his situation. He was in no position to offer him hope or do anything for him, other than giving him assurance that SWAPO will not cause him any harm nor kill him, since they keep him for propaganda purposes.¹²⁴



Van der Mescht surrounded by PLAN guerillas. Directly to his right is Martin Shalli. Photo courtesy of Per Sanden.

Questions asked to Van der Mescht in the interview included: reason for the SADF making war against SWAPO in Namibia; will SWAPO gain power in Namibia; why was Van der Mescht doing border duty for the SADF in Namibia; what happened during the attack on 19 February 1978.¹²⁵ Sanden says he could tell that Van der Mescht was not honest in his interview and that he was trying to please SWAPO for the fear of getting killed. In a letter written to Cheryl shortly after he was captured, Van der Mescht mentioned that he lied in the interview with the Swedish journalist. He was concerned that she would see the interview and wanted to alert her to the fact that he tried to protect himself and his family at home. Sanden sent the filmed interview to London where the material was edited by the BBC and distributed throughout the world. The BBC broadcast the filmed interview on 9 May 1978, including extracts of the Cassinga massacre that took place on 4 May 1978.¹²⁶

On Wednesday night 22 February 1978, Cheryl was informed by a police constable at her parents' home in Boksburg that Van der Mescht was missing on the border, and that his whereabouts are unknown. At the time, she was visiting her parents whilst she was waiting for Van der Mescht to return home to Sishen. Van der Mescht's parents were not at home either and visiting relatives in the Western Transvaal. The SADF had

¹²⁴ Per Sanden, interview, January 2010.

¹²⁵ Transcript of an interview of Johan van der Mescht conducted by Per Sanden and Nanyemba Nujoma, Peter Katjavivi Collection, PA1, UNAM.

¹²⁶ Per Sanden, interview, January 2010.

challenges locating both Cheryl and Van der Mescht's parents and they were given late notice as a result. The available contact address was that of the house in Sishen. It was SADF policy to inform relatives of a missing soldier within 48 hours after the incident. On 23 February, the SADF issued an internal statement that confirmed that Van der Mescht was taken POW during contact on 19 February at 04h00 in the morning, and that follow up operations were unsuccessful thus far.¹²⁷ The office of the Minister of Defence sent a letter to Cheryl on 24 February stating that the SADF shares her concern about her husband's whereabouts and will support her during this difficult period. The Minister requested the SADF to ensure that Cheryl and Chantal are taken care of regarding welfare and financial matters.¹²⁸ On 25 February, Cheryl was officially informed by the SADF that Van der Mescht was captured and being held by SWAPO as a POW.

A welfare officer from the SADF, Major van Wyk, was appointed to take care of Cheryl and Chantal in terms of financial and emotional wellbeing. Throughout the period of Van der Mescht's imprisonment, Major van Wyk visited Cheryl on a monthly basis, in addition to regular telephone calls to make sure she is comfortable. Cheryl did not return to Van der Mescht's parents in Sishen and decided to remain with her own parents in Boksburg. She received Van der Mescht's monthly salary from the SADF as well as his monthly salary from Iscor for the duration of his imprisonment, which enabled her and Chantal's financial needs to be met. In 1981, Cheryl had to move out of her parents' home and found alternative accommodation paid for by the SADF. The agreement was that the SADF would pay the rent until Cheryl found employment, which she did, later that year.¹²⁹

Shortly after the incident where Van der Mescht was captured, a Board of Enquiry was convened by the SADF on 28 February to investigate the successful attack on the waterhole. It was found that three soldiers were killed, five wounded and one captured during the incident. Hannes Ferreira and Rifleman R.O. Hunter were killed. Rifleman H.

¹²⁷ HSAW, Group 2, Box 169A, Ref HSAW/106/23/2, Ops/656/ 23 Feb 78, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹²⁸ MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, 24 Feb 78, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹²⁹ MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, Welfare report 4 May 1981, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

Bosh were wounded and died from his injuries a while later. Sapper Gerrit Nel, Riflemen T. Buchwald, F.C. Bezuidenhout, H.A. Aspeling and J.P. Coertze were wounded. Rifleman J.H.S. de Lange was unharmed and fled to Elundu for help during the attack. Rifleman de Beer had no physical scars and also fled to Elundu with de Lange during the attack, however he was sent back to South Africa because his mental health deteriorated.¹³⁰

The summary of the Board of Enquiry found that the discipline of 2 SAI soldiers, under the command of 54 Battalion deployed to protect the waterhole, was bad and the morale was low. During the period of the attack, the national service was extended from one to two years, and many of the conscripts had to remain doing border duty and could not return home as was expected. The military command possibly never considered the impact of the extension of military service on the morale of conscripts. For logistical support 2 SAI based at Elundu resorted under Eenhana, and for operational support under Onkankolo, creating confusion and limitations to the logistical capacity and support. Lieutenant de Witt, the company commander had no operational and limited command experience. He had to divide his attention between the management of logistics and tactical responsibilities. Soldiers did not have access to enough weapons and ammunition to protect the waterhole, and only one Bren machine gun was positioned on a wall for fire support. There was no access to sandbags or equipment to build barriers for protection either. The lack of adequate weapons and the geographic location made the waterhole an easy and open target for a possible enemy attack. The lack of logistical support in Elundu included late delivery of letters, inadequate food rations and the absence of a canteen to buy basic items such as cool drinks and cigarettes. The tents that served as sleeping quarters at Elundu were in a bad state and conscripts mostly slept on the sand. There was a lack of recreational facilities and down time for soldiers at Elundu. Protecting the waterhole was a welcome break and perceived as down time where the infantry soldiers relaxed, played in the water and sat around a camp fire at night. These were all

¹³⁰ Diverse, Group 2, Box 99, Board of Enquiry, Nr 18/78, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

contributing factors to the low morale and ill discipline of the soldiers responsible for guarding the waterhole that contributed to the successful attack.¹³¹

The Board of Enquiry found that Lieutenant de Witt, company commander, was held directly responsible for the successful attack on the waterhole. The tactical protection of the waterhole was his responsibility. There were no standing orders, defence plan or procedures in place to protect the waterhole in the event of an attack. De Witt visited the waterhole a few times, but never enquired or initiated standing orders for protection of the location. He left this responsibility to his platoon commanders and failed to take responsibility himself. De Witt was more concerned to solve logistical problems than the tactical situation at the waterhole. He lacked the necessary training and experience of tactical warfare that would have enabled him to focus on the protection of the waterhole.¹³²

The Board found that Second Lieutenant M.J. van Niekerk, the second in command from 2 SAI, was held directly responsible for the successful attack on the waterhole. Sections protecting the waterhole rotated on a weekly basis. On the night of 18 February, a new section under the command of Corporal J.S. Dryden was deployed at the waterhole. He didn't feel well and requested permission from Van Niekerk to remain in the base. Van Niekerk approved of Dryden remaining at Elundu and left the responsibility to hand over command to Dryden who gave the acting command position to Ferreira, who had no leadership or tactical experience. Van Niekerk didn't have time to assist in a tactical briefing of protecting the waterhole because he had to manage incoming rations that he deemed more important. The Board found that Dryden was held indirectly responsible for the successful attack on the waterhole. By remaining in the base because of a minor illness he neglected his responsibility as section leader and handed over to an inexperienced person, without giving clear instructions.¹³³

¹³¹ Diverse, Group 2, Box 99, Board of Enquiry, Nr 18/78, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

The Board found that Rifleman Ferreira from 2 SAI, the acting section leader who was killed during the attack, was held directly responsible for the successful attack on the waterhole. He instructed two soldiers to be on guard duty together between 22h00 to 6h00, rotating on an hourly basis; one positioned at the Bren machine gun, the other a roving guard. The Bren machine gun was the only defence position at the waterhole, placed on a wall. There were no sandbags or other equipment to protect and cover in the event of an attack, and the waterhole was an open target. It is clear that the weaponry and defence at the waterhole was inadequate. De Lange, who guarded the Bren at the time of the attack, testified that the position was not conducive to shooting and defending and the Bren could thus not be used effectively during the attack. It was not tested before guard duty started either. De Lange fell asleep in his position at the Bren at 03h00 and only woke up during the attack. The tent was the sleeping quarters of the two engineering (Sappers) soldiers only. The infantry soldiers protecting the waterhole had to sleep at their respective guard duty locations surrounding the waterhole, and not in the tent. However, it was found that they often slept in the tent which was also the case on the night of the attack. Soldiers on duty, patrolling at night, were not allowed to take off their uniform and boots. It was found that some of the soldiers removed their boots on the night of the attack, which further indicates the ill discipline at the waterhole.¹³⁴

The position that the Board of Enquiry took towards Ferreira is alarming. Not only was he killed during the incident, but he was given a responsibility that he was clearly not equipped to handle. The fact that there were a lack of ammunition and no barriers surrounding the location was not his responsibility as a junior conscript. One would expect that he would have been excused for his lack of tactical leadership considering he had no combat experience, nor training, and had to take responsibility in a more senior person's place.

The Board of Enquiry recommended disciplinary action against the people held responsible for the successful attack on the waterhole. The incident had a far reaching impact affecting many people over many years.

¹³⁴ Diverse, Group 2, Box 99, Board of Enquiry, Nr 18/78, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

Two weeks after his capture, Cheryl wrote a letter to Nujoma where she appealed for Van der Mescht's release. She wrote: "*My daughter of nine months and I miss him more than words can describe. If you had a son suddenly taken away from you, would you not do everything in your power to get him back*"?¹³⁵ She also wrote a letter to Van der Mescht and SWAPO's publicity director in Windhoek, and was assured by the *Sunday Times* that the letters will be delivered to the respective parties. The *Sunday Times* used the incident and capitalized on it for increased newspaper circulation. Cheryl's father, Wilfred Ford started interfering in attempts for Van der Mescht's release. He used his daughter's young age, unemployed status, a baby to care for and his position as a disabled pensioner as motivation for consideration. He was in direct contact with both the local press and SWAPO, and made statements without consulting with the SADF and the NP government first. The situation disrupted official and diplomatic government communication and continued to cause tension and discomfort for all the parties involved; including the government, SADF, Van der Mescht and Ford families.

Shortly after the incident, a rumor developed within the SADF that Van der Mescht was a traitor that walked over to join the enemy, and that the capture was a smoke screen. The story is still prevalent today, and he is often referred to as a bad troop by former SADF officers and troops. Cheryl relates how people talked about her husband being a traitor and joining the enemy, whilst he was imprisoned. This rumor was confirmed by a number of former SADF officers, some still serving in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). The officers, mostly working for Military Intelligence and the Engineering Corps, request to remain anonymous. Ep van Lill says he is aware of the strong rumor that was spread about Van der Mescht being a traitor. He says that he does not know where it stems from or the reason for the allegation. He further mentions that as a militarist, he never had any sympathy for Van der Mescht's situation. Clarity was

¹³⁵ *Sunday Times*, 05.03.1978

requested on the statement “*no sympathy for Van der Mescht’s situation*” whereupon Van Lill answered that he does not want to comment any further.¹³⁶

The various viewpoints from the former SADF and current SANDF officers stating that Van der Mescht was a traitor include sweeping statements such as: why was he at the waterhole; what did he do there; he slept when he was supposed to protect the waterhole; why did he not protect himself during the attack; he met with the enemy the day before the attack; he is a bad soldier; why was he the only person being captured amongst a group of eleven soldiers; he is now training the enemy in Angola; impossible that the follow-up reaction force was not able to recapture Van der Mescht which suggests he made sure to vanish with the enemy. They claim that there are too many loose ends involved in his capture that points the finger to him and suggests that he walked over to join the enemy. No text records were found to substantiate the traitor allegations, and were spread by word of mouth only.¹³⁷

Shalli confirms that Van der Mescht was captured in combat, and that there were witnesses present. He says: “*in my view that was totally outrageous, from the leadership that sent young people into battle and then disclaims them, totally outrageous. Du Toit was captured in Cabinda. Was he a traitor*”? Shalli suggests that the SADF was shocked by the unexpected incident and didn’t know how to react, comment and tell the public.¹³⁸

The capture of Van der Mescht was both a shock and embarrassment to the SADF. A soldier was caught in the early morning hours whilst sleeping, approximately 10 kilometers from the border inside Namibia and taken across the border into Angola. His duty was to purify water and he was protected by a section of nine infantry soldiers who could not safeguard him. The rescue operations including trained infantry soldiers, paratroopers, aircraft and mechanized motor convoys failed to find Van der Mescht. PLAN was perceived by the SADF as a guerilla army without discipline and military

¹³⁶ Cheryl van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

Ep van Lill, interview, February 2010.

¹³⁷ Various former SADF and SANDF officials, interviews, 2007- 2010.

Bothma, L.J. *Vang ‘n Boer, die stryd tussen Boer en Ovambo*, 2012, p 481.

¹³⁸ Martin Shalli, interview, January 2010.

teeth, and yet they managed to capture Van der Mescht successfully. It is clear that the SADF underestimated the efficiency of PLAN. The SADF and NP government were very secretive about operations and activities in both Namibia and Angola, and tried to keep it hidden from the public. However, the capture made headline news in South Africa and abroad and highlighted the possibility of young men getting killed and held captive in Angola. It became more evident through the South African media and became increasingly difficult to hide from the public. The NP government needed the public's vote to remain in power. It seems that it was easier to put the blame on a troop with little use for the SADF than to accept responsibility for the incident, and spread a rumor of him being a traitor. Throughout the Border War, the SADF continuously glamorized their victories and maintained an image of a powerful military force.

From Lubango, Van der Mescht was flown to Luanda and handed over by SWAPO to the MPLA government of Angola, and held in Sao Paulo prison for four years and three months. He was held as a POW of SWAPO under MPLA supervision for the duration of his imprisonment that started on 10 March 1978. Sao Paulo was originally a civilian prison, used during the colonial period for political detainees. It consisted of several buildings surrounded by a high wall.¹³⁹

On 11 March 1978, SWAPO held a press conference in Luanda chaired by Nujoma, to introduce Van der Mescht to the world's press. It made news headlines in South Africa and abroad. The conference was purely propaganda driven, and Van der Mescht was paraded before foreign newsmen and television cameras, questioned by Nujoma. He was handed a telegram from his father and told that he could reply immediately, to show that SWAPO allows him to receive communication from home. Nujoma stated: "*we have given you a human treatment in accordance with the Geneva Convention on war prisoners, and I give you this cable so that you can read it*". Van der Mescht told the press that he was treated well by SWAPO. The *Sunday Express* broke the news to the Minister of Defence PW Botha, and to Cheryl, who said she is relieved to see that her

¹³⁹ MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Report, 3 September 1979, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

husband is alive and well. The *Rand Daily Mail* reported that the Minister of Defence said he had no comment on “*an obvious attempt at propaganda by making a prisoner make certain statements under pressure*”. He did not want to comment on reports that SWAPO was prepared to exchange Van der Mescht for SWAPO members held by South Africa. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Pik Botha, declined to comment on the fact that Van der Mescht was paraded before foreign newsmen, or to indicate whether his department was taking steps to secure his release.¹⁴⁰

On 4 May 1978, incidentally the same day as the Cassinga massacre, a press release was issued by SWAPO’s Department of Information, disclosing that SWAPO communicated a recent photo of Van der Mescht to his wife through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on 2 May. It stated that SWAPO is living up to their declared principles regarding the treatment of POWs in accordance with the Geneva Convention, unlike the racist South African regime who callously disregard and violate all aspects of such international conventions.¹⁴¹

A POW is a person, whether civilian or combatant, who is held in custody by an enemy power during or immediately after an armed conflict. POWs receive protection under a set of international humanitarian law, which regulates the conduct of armed conflicts. It contains the Geneva Conventions and the Hague Conventions, treaties, case law and customary international law. The Geneva Conventions comprise a set of rules that establish the standards of international law for the humanitarian treatment of the victims of war. It is applicable in times of armed conflict and seeks to protect people who are no longer taking part in hostilities, such as POWs.¹⁴² The practicality and actual enforcement thereof varies in different parts of the world and the manner of war at stake. The Geneva Convention is an idealistic theory which in the practical chaos of war is not always enforced and monitored by organizations such as the ICRC. It seems easier to enforce the

¹⁴⁰ *Sunday Express*, 12.03.1978

Rand Daily Mail, 13.03.1978

HSAW, Group 2, Box 169A, Ref HSAW/106/23/2, Memorandum: Angolans Parade SA Prisoner, 13 March 1978, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁴¹ Press release issued by SWAPO Department of Information, 4 May 1978, Peter Katjavivi Collection, PA1, UNAM.

¹⁴² <http://www.icrc.org>

Geneva Conventions in an international war, whereas it can be easily overlooked at in the event of civil wars and liberation struggles, such as the Border War / Namibian War of Independence.

The history of POWs in the South African context can be traced back to the Anglo Boer War. POW camps for captured Boer forces were initially set up in the Cape and Natal colonies. When it ran out of space, the captured Boer forces were sent to POW camps in St Helena, Ceylon, India and the islands of Bermuda. The general treatment of the POWs depended on the respective camp management. More than 20 000 Boer forces including boys as young as eight years old were held as POWs during the war. At the end of the war in 1902, which was victorious for the British Empire, they had to pledge their support to the British Crown before returning home. The Boer forces held British troops as POWs in Pretoria and outside of Nelspruit during the course of the war.¹⁴³

The legacy of the Anglo Boer War contributed towards the political division amongst South Africans regarding participation in the First World War. It reached boiling point with the 1914 Rebellion when a group of former Anglo Boer War soldiers with strong anti-British sentiments contested participation in the war. South African armed forces of the UDF did however participate in the First World War; in both Africa and Europe. South African soldiers taken prisoner during the war were given the status of POWs but there is limited information available about the camps and their conditions and circumstances. Therefore it is sufficient for the sake of this study, to merely note that there were South African POWs held during the First World War.

With the Anglo Boer War still not forgotten, followed by the 1914 Rebellion and participation in the First World War which further divided the country politically; the UDF decided to participate in the Second World War, again as an ally of Britain. The UDF relied heavily on volunteers and motivation to participate was often due to economical reasons. According to the 1946 official year book of the Union of South Africa, a total of 14 583 South Africans were taken prisoner during the Second

¹⁴³ Pretorius, F. (eds). *Geskiedenis van Suid Afrika, Van voortye tot vandag*, 2012, p 244.

World War.¹⁴⁴ South Africans were mostly captured during the North African campaign by German forces during the Battle of Sidi Rezegh in November 1941, and during the fall of Tobruk in June 1942, where over 10 700 South Africans were taken prisoner.¹⁴⁵ The POWs were handed over to Italian forces and initially held in transit camps in North Africa from where they were moved to camps in Italy. The transportation modes included marches on land, boats, cattle trucks and trains; and POWs often endured inhumane conditions and attacks since they moved through war zones. Following Italy's Armistice, the Germans took control of the POWs and they were moved to prison camps in Germany towards 1943, which they found to be more organized than the camps in Italy.¹⁴⁶ General treatment in the camps and the relationships between POWs and their captors was dependant on the camps' commanders and it varied. During the course of the war, South Africa held nearly 100 000 Italian POWs that were captured in East and North Africa and started arriving from 1941, in addition to the small number of German, Vichy French and Indo-Chinese POWs.¹⁴⁷

The post war government and new political direction followed after 1948, resulted in the government distancing itself from participation in the war and it came to be largely disregarded in scholarly publications and popular history.¹⁴⁸ Most POWs shut down emotionally after their return and continued with life as if nothing has happened. Their situation was not a priority, it was not politically correct within the new political landscape and few people understood.¹⁴⁹ This is a global phenomenon experienced by many war veterans, and parallels can be drawn with POWs of the Border War.

The South African Air Force (SAAF) took part in the Korean War (1950 – 1953), which was the first serious clash between the East and the West after the Second World War.

¹⁴⁴ Gleeson, I. *The Unknown Force: Black, Indian, and Colored Soldiers through Two World Wars, 1994*, p 195.

¹⁴⁵ Horn, K. *South African Prisoner-of-War Experiences during and after World War II: 1939 – c.1950*, PhD Thesis, Department of History, University of Stellenbosch, 2012, p 224.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp 145 – 146.

¹⁴⁷ Blumberg, L. 'Italian POWs in South Africa', *Military History Journal*, 1(4), 1969.

¹⁴⁸ Horn, K. *South African Prisoner-of-War Experiences during and after World War II: 1939 – c.1950*, PhD Thesis, Department of History, University of Stellenbosch, 2012, p 24.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p 204.

The communist North Korea invaded South Korea. The personnel of 2 Squadron, a combat aircraft unit, comprised of volunteers and not conscripts as was the case with the Border War. A number of eight South Africans were held as POWs during the Korean War. Dennis Earp evacuated his aircraft after being shot at, was captured and held as a POW for a period of 23 months. According to Earp, the Geneva Convention on POWs did not apply to prisoners held by communists, and the conditions were very hostile. The SAAF POWs were interrogated by Chinese, Korean and Russian officers who were interested in the tactical information of the squadron. The interrogation often included solitary confinement, deprivation of food, threats of summary execution and other threatening techniques.¹⁵⁰

Limited information is available on POWs during the Border War, partly because the war was secretive, and partly because the issue of young men held captive in Angola was a political embarrassment to both the NP government and the SADF. This was especially applicable in the beginning phase and specifically during Operation Savannah. The first record of POWs dates back to 1975 and 1976 during the period of Operation Savannah, when eight SADF soldiers were captured inside Angola, during different incidents.

On 13 December 1975, Corporal J.G. Terblanche was instructed to recover an enemy vehicle across the border inside Angola. He was assisted by Private R.H. Wiehahn, R. Wilson and G.E. Danney. Later that night they were reported missing. News from Radio Luanda reported that they were captured with the recovery vehicle inside Angola. On 4 January 1976, Riflemen A.H. Potgieter, L.J. Kitshoff and P.J. Groenewald had gone missing after contact between a fighting unit of Group Orange and enemy forces took place. An infantry platoon went looking for the men without success. Uniform pieces and a rifle were found on the terrain where the soldiers were probably loaded onto a vehicle. On 26 August 1976, Rifleman E. de Lange got lost at Macusso in Namibia and

¹⁵⁰ Moore, D. and Bagshawe, P. *South Africa's Flying Cheetahs in Korea*, 1991.

accidentally drove over the cut line into Angola. He was captured by a MPLA and Cuban patrol force.¹⁵¹

The eight POWs were held in a prison in Luanda, as Cuban prisoners, and not in Sao Paulo prison where Van der Mescht was later imprisoned. Angola was in the middle of a civil war with various role players involved, hostile towards South Africa who fought their war with SWAPO on Angolan soil, and they claimed calamity from Pretoria. As a result, the negotiations for release and diplomacy in this regard were complex. The parents of the eight POWs wanted their sons back, and some were angry with the SADF and held them responsible for the fate of their sons. The ICRC was involved to assist the POWs in a humanitarian capacity in Angola and report back to the NP government.¹⁵² In August 1978, the eight POWs were released in return for three Cuban POWs held in Pretoria. This exchange was a result of negotiations between South Africa and the Angolan authorities with the assistance of the ICRC, and took place inside Angola at Ndjiva.¹⁵³ Van der Mescht was not part of the exchange deal, since he was captured and held as a POW by SWAPO.

The next available record of a POW from the Border War is that of Captain Wynand du Toit who was captured in May 1985 in Cabinda, Angola, and held as a POW by MPLA for a period of two years and four months. Du Toit was captured by FAPLA, the military wing of MPLA, and held in a prison in Luanda. He was tortured by enemy forces since he was captured during a secret mission to sabotage the oil refinery in Cabinda, and could provide valuable information. This is in contrast to Van der Mescht who was a conscript and of no value to the enemy regarding information. Du Toit was released in an

¹⁵¹ OAMI, Group 10, Box 1, Ref MI/106/23, MI/203/1/2, 8 August 1978, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁵² MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, HSP/DMR/TS/106/23/1, 14 June 1977, HSP(4)/TS/106/23/2, Welfare Report, 23 June 1978, GG/106/23/2/ Welfare Report, 18 May 1989, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁵³ *Rand Daily Mail* 12.05.1982. Reference was made to the POWs released in 1978 in the report of Van der Mescht's release in 1982.

international prisoner exchange in Maputo that made international news headlines in 1987.¹⁵⁴

The last available record of a POW captured during the Border War is that of Rifleman Johan Papenfus, who was captured in May 1988 inside Angola, during a battle between Cuban forces and 101 Battalion. Badly wounded, he was sent to a hospital in Cuba where he was held as a POW, and displayed to the media in Havana. He was released in an exchange in April 1989 and returned to South Africa.¹⁵⁵

According to Article 146A of the Defence Act 1957, POWs remain members of the SADF who is morally responsible to look after them and their families' welfare.¹⁵⁶

According to Victor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor and psychiatrist, prisoners experience three mental phases during captivity, starting with consignment to prison and resultant shock, acceptance of camp routine and finally liberation.¹⁵⁷ It is interesting to note the similar emotions experienced by POWs globally. They include shame and guilt for being captured; leading towards survivors guilt; fear for getting killed or tortured by the enemy forces; anger, hopelessness, depression, longing for home and uncertainty about the future that sets in whilst being captured; and lastly the perseverance, resilience and hope that keeps them going.

During Van der Mescht's imprisonment, Sao Paulo prison held inmates ranging from mercenaries, diamond smugglers, Portuguese prostitutes; as well as soldiers from FAPLA, UNITA, PLAN and the ANC. The prison authorities, warders and most of the inmates spoke Portuguese which made communication for Van der Mescht problematic. Initially, Van der Mescht was held in solitary confinement for military intelligence purposes, but it was realized that he had no military strategic and tactical information

¹⁵⁴ Soule, A. and Dixon, G. and Richards, R. *The Wynand du Toit Story*, 1987, pp 154 - 155.

¹⁵⁵ <http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za/cgi-bin/getpdf?year=1989&refno=391&topic=20>

¹⁵⁶ MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, HSAW/523/1/13/1, HSAW/509/1, 4 May 1981, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁵⁷ Horn, K. *South African Prisoner-of-War Experiences during and after World War II: 1939 – c.1950*, PhD Thesis, Department of History, University of Stellenbosch, 2012, p 115.

available for use by SWAPO. He requested to be transferred to a communal cell where he could interact with other people and the request was approved in November 1978. Van der Mescht now shared a communal cell with British and American mercenaries. They were sentenced by the MPLA during the Luanda Trial of 1976, for supporting the FNLA during the Angolan civil war. The post-colonial wars in Africa from the 1960's onwards created a breeding ground for mercenaries. Cecil Martin (Satch) Fortuin was originally from South Africa and became a British citizen from where he conducted his mercenary work. Van der Mescht and Fortuin communicated in their home language Afrikaans, and became good friends as a result.¹⁵⁸

Inmates in the communal cell were free to move around within the prison compound during the day. There were no planned routine or activities followed. They were locked up in the cell from 22h00 at night until 7h00 in the morning. Inmates were allowed to watch television over weekends. They slept on beds with mattresses, had access to drinking water and could shower on a daily basis with soap and toothpaste provided. Van der Mescht regularly received three meals a day, mostly consisting of bread and coffee in the morning, rice and fish for lunch and supper, and at times tinned fruit and corned beef.¹⁵⁹

Van der Mescht received the same hostile treatment as the rest of the political prisoners, and there were no reported incidents of torture during his imprisonment, or before when he was held by SWAPO on the way to prison.¹⁶⁰ Van der Mescht had no information on military intelligence of value to the enemy. It was also important for SWAPO to remain the party that treated Van der Mescht well, whilst claiming that the SADF treated their prisoners bad and denied them POW status.

During his imprisonment, Van der Mescht received six visits from the ICRC delegate in Luanda, always accompanied by an Angolan government representative. The first visit

¹⁵⁸ Johan van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luanda_Trial

¹⁵⁹ MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, ICRC Report, 3 September 1979, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

took place on 1 September 1978 and it became his main source of communication with the outside world. The remainder of the visits took place on 13 February 1979, 3 September 1979, 10 April 1981, 27 April 1981 and 9 November 1981. Van der Mescht received one visit from a SWAPO representative, Mr Mushimba, in May 1979.¹⁶¹

After the September 1979 ICRC visit, it was reported that the conditions have been fairly harsh for Van der Mescht between February and September of that year. Since the previous December, he received no mail from home. At that stage, Van der Mescht only received two letters from home since his imprisonment started; one from Cheryl and one from his parents. All inmates received collective punishment and were locked up in their cells for a two month period. Van der Mescht became increasingly worried about his future and his morale was low.¹⁶²

Communication with Cheryl and his parents remained challenging and problematic throughout Van der Mescht's imprisonment. Letters and parcels between the parties arrived late, at irregular intervals, or not at all. Van der Mescht's family was not allowed to visit him, neither were telephone calls allowed. Months literally passed without communication between husband and wife; and son and parents. In addition, when letters were received it was censored, and the communication remained a problem. There were various reasons for this unfortunate situation.

In the beginning, Cheryl and Van der Mescht's parents wrote letters in Afrikaans that could not be censored by the Angolan authorities and as a result the letters were never delivered. This matter was not communicated to the respective parties. From the beginning of his imprisonment, Van der Mescht decided to smuggle his letters out of prison through a contact that was postmarked from Portugal. In the letters, Van der Mescht mentioned that he had lost all faith in the SADF and that his family should not trust them either, nor should they write back. He requested his family to communicate with the ICRC and the NP government to plead for his release. These letters were

¹⁶¹ MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁶² MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, ICRC Report, 3 September 1979, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

intercepted by the NIS who withheld it from the family. The SADF supported the idea that Van der Mescht's family should receive the letters, but the Department of Foreign Affairs disagreed. Cheryl's father had direct contact with SWAPO and there was the possibility that he might leak information to SWAPO and the local media. The content of Van der Mescht's letters was not favorable towards the SADF and it was feared that it might cause additional stress and trauma to his family, as well as painting a negative picture of the SADF to the public. If it became known to SWAPO and the Angolan prison authorities that Van der Mescht was smuggling letters out of prison, it could complicate and jeopardize the negotiations towards his release, and impact on his safety.¹⁶³

In 1981, it came to the attention of the SADF that Van der Mescht has smuggled a letter from prison to Cheryl that she has received. In the letter he mentions a visit from a Russian, probably the KGB, and requests that she finds an attorney to attend to his release and / or swapping as advised by the Russian, else he plans to escape from prison in July 1981. It was not in his best interest to escape from prison, since he would have difficulties leaving Luanda. Cheryl's welfare officer Major van Wyk, explained to her that they are putting Van der Mescht's life in danger by taking matters in own hand. Cheryl understood and agreed to, in future, communicate all matters with the SADF first.¹⁶⁴ Both Van der Mescht and Cheryl were frustrated since the communication was erratic and unstable for the duration of his imprisonment, and they were often in the dark about what the present or the future was holding. Cheryl was very young and had to take care of their daughter and the situation remained unstable and insecure for all parties involved, until Van der Mescht's release in May 1982.

¹⁶³ HSOPS, Group 5, Ref HSOPS 311/1/3, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.
MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, Memorandum: HSP/DDS/TS/106/23/2, 8 May 1981, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

Johan van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

Cheryl van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

¹⁶⁴ MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, Memorandum: HSP/DDS/TS/106/23/2, 8 May 1981, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

OAMI, Group 10, Box 1, Ref MI/106/23, Memorandum: HSP/DDS/S/523/1/13/1, 19 May 1981, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

HSOPS, Group 5, Ref HSOPS 311/1/3, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

SWAPO's successful capture of Van der Mescht and the fact that he was kept alive was very important to them in terms of propaganda value. After Ashipala handed Van der Mescht to his commanders in Oihapeto, he continued with the war effort until 1989 when it ended. Ashipala was known amongst SADF soldiers operating on the border as a ruthless terrorist, and was feared by many. He did not visit Van der Mescht in prison, but often wondered about him long after Van der Mescht's release. It turned out that Van der Mescht became Ashipala's trophy and that he became a legend within SWAPO and a hero for the struggle for liberation; partly because of his soldiering skills and partly because of his capture of Van der Mescht. He wanted South Africans to remember him for saving the life of an enemy. He emphasized that Van der Mescht was kept alive during the attack and retreat to Angola until he was put into jail.¹⁶⁵ A war song dedicated to Van der Mescht was composed and sung throughout the war as a motivational song within SWAPO. The song was performed to Van der Mescht by members of the police force at Eenhana, in 2009 when Van der Mescht returned to visit the site of his capture. The refrain as follows: "*we capture Johanna alive in Elundu*".¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Danger Ashipala, interview, October 2009, December 2009.

¹⁶⁶ SWAPO members refer to Van der Mescht as Johanna, to this day. Before traveling to Elundu and Eenhana for the sake of filming *Captor and Captive*, permission had to be obtained from the Police Headquarters in Windhoek where Ashipala was a senior officer at the time. Van der Mescht accompanied Ashipala to the Headquarters and it created a frenzy of excitement amongst police personnel, many of them former PLAN members. Ashipala and Van der Mescht were followed whilst people sang the refrain of the song. It emphasized the notion that Ashipala was considered a hero because of his trophy, Van der Mescht.

Chapter 4: Van der Mescht's release from prison and experience of war trauma; comparing the different circumstances of POWs Van der Mescht and Du Toit

This chapter discusses the negotiations for the release of Van der Mescht as a POW of SWAPO by the NP government during the period 1978 to 1982. It further discusses Van der Mescht's return home and the challenges he and his family faced in adapting to the situation. The psychological impact that the attack and imprisonment had on the psyche of Van der Mescht over an extended period is briefly explored. This leads to a summary on the impact that the trauma of war has on soldiers, often leading to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The fact that Van der Mescht spent four years and three months in prison as a POW contributed to his trauma and added another dimension to the situation.

Then, for comparative purposes, the chapter further focuses on the capture of a Special Force soldier, Wynand du Toit, who was captured by FAPLA and held as a POW of MPLA in Angola for two years and four months. Through limited available literature and popular belief, it might seem as if Du Toit was given better treatment whilst in prison and thereafter, in contrast to Van der Mescht. It will be analyzed to reveal what the situation was, since many factors were at stake regarding the different circumstances surrounding Du Toit and Van der Mescht's capture, imprisonment and release.

During his imprisonment, Van der Mescht received six visits from the ICRC delegate in Luanda over an extended and irregular period starting on 1 September 1978, followed by visits on 13 February 1979, 3 September 1979, 10 April 1981, 27 April 1981 and 9 November 1981.¹⁶⁷ During these visits, Van der Mescht was informed that negotiations were taking place to arrange for his possible release or prisoner exchange, but no details were available. No visits took place during 1980 and his future remained uncertain whilst he was mostly kept in the dark throughout his imprisonment. Van der Mescht was of the opinion that not much was done by government or the SADF to secure his release; however this was due to the limited communication and information available, with long periods where no news was received from home. Various press reports and official

¹⁶⁷ MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

records were found in the Documentation Centre of the Department of Defence, to substantiate that the NP government was doing extensive work behind the scenes, maneuvering and negotiating in an attempt to release Van der Mescht. It was a complex scenario with Van der Mescht held as a POW of SWAPO in an Angolan prison under MPLA authority. Angola and South Africa were not waging war with each other, but the diplomacy between the two countries were not friendly since South Africa used Angola's territory to fight their war against SWAPO, and South Africa's apartheid policy was condemned by the Frontline states. The complex political landscape and scenario whereby Van der Mescht was being held as a POW in Angola necessitated negotiations for his release to take place in secrecy. In addition, the NP government could not reveal to its public that it was meeting with its perceived Communist enemies in an attempt to release Van der Mescht.

The negotiations to release Van der Mescht were managed by NIS in co-operation with the Department of Foreign Affairs, with input from the SADF.¹⁶⁸ The Bureau for State Security (BOSS) was formed in 1969, renamed the Department of National Security in 1978 and changed its name to NIS in 1979. Official information and an interview were requested from Niël Barnard, former Director-General (1980 – 1992) of NIS, to inform *Captor and Captive* as well as the dissertation. Barnard played an instrumental role in the negotiations towards the exchange of Van der Mescht for a KGB spy in 1982. The request was denied and further attempts to secure information through PAIA were unsuccessful.

Five days after Van der Mescht's capture, the *Star* reported that the case of suspected abduction on the Angolan border was taken up with the Angolan government in the appropriate manner, according to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Brand Fourie. The *Rand Daily Mail* reported that they made direct contact with SWAPO and was given news of Van der Mescht by the Vice President, Misheck Muyongo. He confirmed that Van der Mescht was captured by SWAPO, held in Angola, in good hands and treated as a POW. Muyongo added that there is no question of Van der Mescht getting released

¹⁶⁸ HSAW, Group 1, Box 27, Ref 311/1/3, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

anytime soon, until a settlement for Namibian independence could be reached. He added that South African forces captured SWAPO guerillas and none have been released. The South African government did not regard or treat SWAPO prisoners as POWs. Sources in Lusaka said that SWAPO was planning to exhibit Van der Mescht before the OAU Liberation Committee and make him confess to the atrocities committed by South African forces in Namibia. The *Beeld* reported on the same matter at a later date.¹⁶⁹

As early as 28 February 1978, the Department of Foreign Affairs' Mission at the UN in New York entered into discussion about the situation of Van der Mescht. Communication relating to the matter took place between the Chief of the SADF and Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Brand Fourie.¹⁷⁰ On 2 March 1978, SWAPO issued a press release about the status of Van der Mescht from their headquarters in Lusaka. SWAPO's administrative secretary Moses Garoeb, stated: "SWAPO would consider the release of captured soldier Johan van der Mescht, only if South Africa made a request for his release through the UN. South Africa must make contact with SWAPO through the UN or the contact group of the five Western Nations on the UN Security Council. We are at war with South Africa and any question on the exchange of war prisoners can only be done through these two organizations. South Africa should know that we are a force to reckon with".¹⁷¹ On 3 March 1978, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported about the statement made by SWAPO. The Minister of Defence PW Botha, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Pik Botha, both declined to comment on the report.¹⁷² The Cabinet's response was due to diplomacy and to avoid jeopardizing the negotiations that started shortly after Van der Mescht's capture. It could be viewed as lack of interest taking into consideration the traitor allegation discussed in Chapter three, if not considered within the context of diplomacy.

On 3 March 1978, the SADF issued an internal statement through a signal document stating that the Department of Foreign Affairs will initiate negotiations to swap Van der

¹⁶⁹ *The Star*, 24.02.1978

Rand Daily Mail, 25.02.1978

Beeld, 27.02.1978

¹⁷⁰ HSOPS, Group 5, Box 7, Ref HSOPS/106/23, Telegram, 28 February 1978, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁷¹ MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁷² *Rand Daily Mail*, 03.03.1978

Mescht with a political commissar from SWAPO held prisoner in Rundu, Namibia. The Chief of the SADF requested the Chief of the Army to ensure that the political commissar is in good health.¹⁷³

The NP government increasingly received pressure from the opposition about the situation in Namibia regarding the war, and capture of Van der Mescht. On 4 March 1978, the political correspondent of the *Transvaler* reported that the Prime Minister, John Vorster told Parliament that several diplomatic channels were used in an attempt to find out where Van der Mescht was shortly after his capture, to ensure his safety and return. Follow up operations were conducted without success and no information were available of his current whereabouts.¹⁷⁴

On 12 and 13 March 1978, the Van der Mescht capture made news headlines both locally and abroad and stated that SWAPO is prepared to release Van der Mescht in exchange for SWAPO prisoners held by South Africa.¹⁷⁵ These reports followed the press conference held by SWAPO and chaired by Nujoma on 11 March in Luanda, to introduce Van der Mescht to the world's press. SADF spokespeople declined to comment on the news reports.

Several months later, in September 1978, a meeting was held between the NP and MPLA governments to discuss an attempt to secure peace in the southern African region, with South Africa viewed as an aggressor, fighting SWAPO on Angolan territory. One of the agenda points noted the discussion of the wellbeing and release of Van der Mescht. The MPLA officials commented that the Van der Mescht question is a matter between SWAPO and South African authorities. The South African officials commented that Van der Mescht's continuous detention would be a negative factor in the relations between

¹⁷³ HSOPS, Group 5, Box 7, Ref HSOPS/106/23, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁷⁴ *Die Transvaler*, 04.03.1978

¹⁷⁵ *Sunday Times* 12.03.1978

Sunday Express 12.03.1978

The Star 13.03.1978

Rand Daily Mail 13.03.1978

Angola and South Africa, and in the event of harm being done to Van der Mescht, none of the SWAPO prisoners will be released.¹⁷⁶

Since 1977, the Department of National Security (predecessor to NIS) in co-operation with Foreign Affairs was in contact with a representative of the Angolan Intelligence Service, with the code name of SYDNEY. The negotiations for the release of the South African POWs captured during Operation Savannah were arranged through SYDNEY, and they were subsequently released in August 1978. In August 1979, the Chief of the SADF was informed by the Secretary of National Security that negotiations for the release of Van der Mescht are being discussed through the same channel and in process.¹⁷⁷ During the course of 1980, the Consul General in New York and the Chief of the SADF communicated about the possibility of an exchange between four SWAPO prisoners and Van der Mescht.¹⁷⁸

In 1981, Van der Mescht smuggled a letter out of prison to Cheryl telling her about a visit from a Russian, probably an agent of the KGB, who suggested that he should find an attorney to attend to his release and / or swapping. The communication channel between prison and home was erratic and unreliable, hence Van der Mescht smuggled letters out with the help of a contact. In the letter he asked Cheryl to find an attorney to help them. Cheryl discussed the matter with the President of the ICRC in South Africa, Kelsey Stewart, who also happened to be an attorney and subsequently offered his service in this regard. The head of the mission of the ICRC in South Africa, Mr de Rougemont, suggested the use of an attorney with experience of similar cases based in London. The SADF supported the idea of the London based attorney to handle the case, because at that stage all previous efforts to release or swap Van der Mescht were in a phase of stalemate.¹⁷⁹ This new possibility would have been additional to negotiations already underway.

¹⁷⁶ HSAW, Group 1, Box 27, Ref 311/1/3, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ HSOPS, Group 5, Ref HS OPS/311/1/3, 4 October 1980, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁷⁹ OAMI, Group 10, Box 1, Ref MI/106/23, Memorandum: HSP/DDS/S/523/1/13/1, 19 May 1981, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

In October 1981, the Soviet Union made diplomatic overtures to South Africa for the release of their captured military adviser, Warrant Officer Nicolai Pestretsov, who was captured by the SADF in Angola. This raised hope for the release of Van der Mescht. The contact between the two countries took place at the UN headquarters and the ICRC acted as the mediator.¹⁸⁰

In November 1981, a secret meeting was held in Paris between a South African and an Angolan military and diplomatic delegation. South Africa requested the meeting with the purpose of continuing dialogue between the two countries. Angola agreed because the continuous military aggression on Angolan soil prevented securing peace in the region. One of the agenda points noted the possibility of returning prisoners on both sides. South Africa wanted an indication from Angola what the situation on releasing Van der Mescht was. South Africa regarded the Van der Mescht matter as him being removed from Namibia by SWAPO, and assumed that Angola as a sovereign state would suggest to SWAPO to have him released. The Angolan spokesman emphasized that Van der Mescht was in SWAPO custody, held in an Angolan prison and suggested Angolan facilitation for direct talks between South Africa and SWAPO. He further indicated that the Van der Mescht question remains a matter between South Africa and SWAPO.¹⁸¹

Towards the end of April 1982, negotiations to release Van der Mescht reached finalization, unbeknown to him and the public. The NIS and the KGB negotiated directly and in secret without involvement of any other Western agency.¹⁸² The plan was to exchange Van der Mescht and a number of Western intelligence agents for a KGB agent, Major Aleksei Koslov, who was held by the NIS in Pretoria. Koslov, posing as a German businessman, visited South Africa since 1976 to gather information on the ANC. In July

¹⁸⁰ *Rand Daily Mail*, 12.05.1982

¹⁸¹ Summary notes of meetings between South Africa and Angola: Paris 28 - 29 November 1981, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁸² *Rand Daily Mail*, 12.05.1982

1980, during his fourth visit, Koslov was captured and detained by agents of the NIS until the swap took place.¹⁸³

In preparation for the swap, Koslov was flown to West Berlin in Germany, accompanied by NIS agents spearheaded by Barnard. He was held in a place of safety in West Berlin for a period of two weeks, whilst final preparations and negotiations were arranged for the exchange. At the same time, Van der Mescht was flown from Luanda to East Berlin, and held in the Karl Marx Prison for a period of two weeks. He was not given any information about the reason for being released from Sao Paulo prison, and only assumed that it meant possible freedom. On 11 May 1982, both Van der Mescht and Koslov were taken to Checkpoint Charlie, the neutral territory between East and West Berlin. Here they were released, met by their countries' intelligence agents and flown by helicopter over the Berlin Wall towards East and West Berlin respectively.¹⁸⁴ Van der Mescht was taken to a hotel where he was prepared for the return journey home.

After the successful swap the Prime Minister PW Botha, informed Parliament, and the news was welcomed by all parties including the opposition. The SABC news reported on the story the same evening. It stated that Van der Mescht was on his way home after a major exchange deal had been clenched in Europe, involving a Russian KGB spy, eight Western intelligence agents and Van der Mescht. The Western agents who had been in custody behind the Iron Curtain for some time were not identified but included people from the USA, Israel, Britain and France. Botha claimed this swap to be a major diplomatic coup that was the culmination of difficult and protracted negotiations, carried out periodically and in secret over many months. The release of Western agents held behind the Iron Curtain is proof of South Africa's goodwill towards Western countries and its contribution to end Communism, according to Botha. It seems as if the NP government made an attempt to showcase South Africa as an opponent to Communism to win support from the West. Botha praised Barnard from the NIS who was leading the negotiations and commented that the ethics of intelligence work demand secrecy and

¹⁸³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13.05.1982

¹⁸⁴ Johan van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

behind the scenes maneuvering. Therefore no further detail or information about the negotiations and resultant swap could be supplied to Parliament or any other media.¹⁸⁵

A spokesperson from SWAPO commented that Van der Mescht's release did not signify a change in their policy. "He was just a kid who happened to be caught and there is nothing to be gained from holding him any longer. We would expect the South Africans to start to observe the Geneva Convention on POWs and treat our prisoners in the same manner as we have treated theirs".¹⁸⁶

Late afternoon on the day of the successful swap, Cheryl and the 5 year old Chantal, accompanied by Major van Wyk, were taken to a hotel in Pretoria where they were accommodated with Van der Mescht's parents, his brother and sister, in preparation for his return. The family was told that he is in an apparent good mental and physical condition, and that Cheryl and Chantal will be allowed to meet Van der Mescht inside the aircraft before he meets his parents and the press. They were further briefed that a press conference would be held and that they are not allowed to ask questions or make comments during the proceedings. Early the following morning, the family was flown by helicopter to Air Force Base Waterkloof where Van der Mescht was due to arrive later in the morning.¹⁸⁷

Van der Mescht's return on 12 May 1982 turned out to be a big media affair. Air traffic control who received instruction from government authorities, directed the aircraft between the public airport Jan Smuts outside Johannesburg and Air Force Base Waterkloof outside Pretoria. The aircraft circled between the respective airports before finally touching down at Air Force Base Waterkloof. Cheryl recalls the bewildered look in Van der Mescht's eyes when she met him in the aircraft and how upsetting it was to

¹⁸⁵ SABC News, 11.05.1982

¹⁸⁶ *Rand Daily Mail*, 12.05.1982

¹⁸⁷ Cheryl van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

Nellie van den Bergh (Van der Mescht's sister), interview, February 2008.

see him in such a state.¹⁸⁸ A news conference was held and the incident was widely publicized in both the local and international printed and broadcast media.¹⁸⁹

After the press conference, Van der Mescht, Cheryl and Chantal were taken to premises of Military Intelligence where they were accommodated for a week. During this period, Van der Mescht was interrogated by officers from Military Intelligence and NIS to find out details about the capture and imprisonment. It involved sessions with infantry soldiers who were present at Elundu and the waterhole during the attack in order to arrive at a more comprehensive report of the incident. No documentation of the interrogation and proceedings could be accessed through any channels, despite PAIA. Van der Mescht's recollection of this period is vague and he only recalls that he was given bad treatment and could not substantiate any further.¹⁹⁰ The allegation that Van der Mescht was a traitor that walked over to join SWAPO was now doing the rounds within the SADF and the public and impacted on the manner he was treated and perceived by fellow soldiers.

Lieutenant De Witt, who was held responsible by the committee of the Board of Enquiry after the successful waterhole attack, was summoned to attend a session during the interrogation phase. De Witt was never found guilty by a military court of law; however the incident did limit his career options within the SADF. De Witt developed a fierce resentment and anger towards Van der Mescht that was further influenced by the traitor allegation, and held him responsible for the slow progress in his career. For the first time in four years De Witt was now faced with meeting Van der Mescht. The anger has developed to such an extent that De Witt planned to shoot Van der Mescht. No weapons were allowed in the interrogation room, the proceedings were kept highly secret and strict security measures were implemented. The firearm was removed from De Witt upon entry, without anyone knowing of his intentions to shoot Van der Mescht. De Witt who

¹⁸⁸ Johan van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

Cheryl van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

¹⁸⁹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 12.05.1982

Los Angeles Times, 12.05.1982

New York Times, 12.05.1982

Sydney Morning Herald, 13.05.1982

SABC News, 12.05.1982

¹⁹⁰ Johan van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

remained a member of the SADF and later the SANDF, passed away in 2004. His wife, Elsa de Witt commented that the incident at the waterhole in 1978 changed her husband forever and limited his promotion opportunities within the SADF.¹⁹¹

After the week of interrogation by Military Intelligence, Van der Mescht, Cheryl and Chantal were free to continue with their lives. They returned to their flat in Boksburg where Cheryl and Chantal had been living. Van der Mescht was exempted from future military camps and obligations, and received backdated salary from the SADF in a lump sum, equal to the period that he was imprisoned. Cheryl also received his salary whilst he was in prison to keep her and Chantal financially secure.¹⁹²

Shortly after his return, Van der Mescht was approached by *Scope* magazine to sell his story. *Scope* published a comprehensive article about the experiences of Van der Mescht during his capture, imprisonment and release. The article concludes by commenting that Van der Mescht is deeply scarred and traumatized by the experience and would hopefully heal one day. It pays respect to his traumatic experience as a POW.¹⁹³

Van der Mescht received medical care from the SADF to attend to physical scars sustained during the attack, including treatment of a perforated eardrum and removing a bullet from his lower back. He was offered psychological counseling by the SADF for trauma suffered but declined. A few months after his return, Van der Mescht was re-employed by Iscor to continue his apprenticeship as a boilermaker, and remained an employee for a number of years thereafter. His nickname at work was SWAPO. However, the impact of the trauma that Van der Mescht was exposed to during the attack and thereafter soon started manifesting in PTSD.

Van der Mescht shut down emotionally, spoke very little about his experience and continued with life, as if the past few years never happened, a matter of self-induced

¹⁹¹ Louis Bothma, interview, February 2010. As told to Bothma by Elsa de Witt during an interview.

¹⁹² Personnel file, Ref Army HQ (82) CF 02.03.76 – 19.05.82 Van der Mescht G.J. 71511430 BT, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

¹⁹³ *Scope*, 18.06.1982

memory repression. Cheryl recalls the recurring nightmares at night, how he didn't want to talk about it and how he suffered from insomnia, to this day. She recalls how the event changed her husband from being a gentle person to a very hard man. Chantal was nine months old when Van der Mescht was captured and was only introduced to her father at the age of five. They had problems adapting and getting used to each other, competing for Cheryl's attention which caused additional tension in the household. Van der Mescht was restless and unsettled, and his anger was mostly directed at the SADF who he felt betrayed him.¹⁹⁴ After two years of this tension, Cheryl requested help from her former welfare officer Major van Wyk, and the family was referred to psychological counseling at 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria. The psychological reports were not available through PAIA because of ethical restrictions placed on mental health information. The psychologist who treated the Van der Mescht family shared selected information and requested to be anonymous. The psychologist is referred to as Psych X.

Psych X's summary of the situation as follows: *"I saw Van der Mescht, Cheryl and Chantal for a few sessions, approximately two years after his return home. It was a sad situation and I felt sorry for Cheryl who seemed vulnerable and bewildered about the situation they found themselves in. Van der Mescht was angry with the SADF for losing four years of his life and it seems as if he was expecting to be given more in terms of material needs. I remember there was tension because of the competition between Van der Mescht and Chantal for Cheryl's attention"*. After a few sessions, Psych X felt she made little progress and referred the matter to the Social Service of the SADF. The report that Psych X received from Social Service was similar to her own experience and summary of the situation.¹⁹⁵

During this period in 1984 when the Border War was escalating in Ovamboland and Angola, Psych X was primarily counseling PF members and conscripts returning from the operational area, who were exposed to war trauma. During military training young conscripts, who were mostly from protected backgrounds, were indoctrinated to believe

¹⁹⁴ Cheryl van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

¹⁹⁵ Psych X, interview, July 2010, October 2011.

that they were fighting a justifiable cause and to uphold the ideology of apartheid. They were taught not to think for themselves and to strictly follow orders without asking questions. In the operational area they were exposed to war trauma, having to kill the so called enemy, or the risk of getting killed and it was a harsh reality to deal with. They were the aggressors and perpetrators of the war, despite what they were told by the authorities. They were instructed not to talk about their war experience with people at home, to forget about it and continue with civilian life after completion of national service, as if it never happened. Testimonies of returning PF soldiers, especially conscripts, challenged the SADF and NP government's status quo of upholding their apartheid ideology. As a result, most soldiers, especially the conscripts remained quiet about their war experience and trauma, lived in denial and avoided psychiatric or psychological counseling; a recipe for future disaster.

According to Anthony Feinstein, PF members in operational areas generally regarded the war as an institution for strong men and signs of weakness were not tolerated. Feinstein performed his national service during the period 1982 to 1983, after completing his medical degree and served as a medical doctor, specifically attending to psychiatry matters. He was initially assigned to the psychiatry ward at 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria, and is of the opinion that mental health was not high on the agenda of the SADF.¹⁹⁶ He observed tension in military psychiatry with mental health being submissive to the state's demands. Feinstein illustrates this by using the following example: soldiers suffering from low intensity anxiety have it under control at home and in comfortable surroundings. When the same person gets exposed to war trauma or stressful military surroundings it could lead to severe anxiety and psychotic behavior. The SADF's manner of treating this would be to suppress the condition with medication to avoid the problem and send the soldier back to war. This is done to ensure the military machine is well oiled and keeps producing soldiers to make war.¹⁹⁷ Feinstein further comments that the SADF military machine eventually encompassed and consumed one completely and that no one could escape that reality.

¹⁹⁶ Feinstein, A. *Kopwond, Vergete slagoffers van die Bosoerlog*, 2011, pp 62 - 65.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, pp 24 – 25.

When Feinstein started working in the psychiatric ward after his basic military training, he only had his medical degree and no work experience yet, let alone psychiatric training and experience. Although he worked under supervision, he was given a huge responsibility to treat psychotic patients, mostly soldiers returning from the operational area having suffered war trauma. He reckons that the team including his seniors and PF medical doctors were inexperienced to deal with the situations they were faced with, and didn't understand the extent and magnitude of the problems. After working in the psychiatric ward for six months, Feinstein was sent to Oshakati in Ovamboland to manage a psychiatric unit to treat soldiers close to the operational area, so they can be returned to service quickly, without removing them from the area. He voiced his concern about his inexperience for such a responsible position, and in return was told that it is war, he will do as told, not ask questions and continue his duty.

According to Psych X, patients who became psychologically disturbed as a result of the Border War, were by far more scarred and damaged than those with physical injuries. There are numerous examples of broken people diagnosed with PTSD as a result of war trauma. PTSD is the most widely publicized trauma related psychiatric disorder which develops after exposure to traumatic events. Symptoms follows any serious psychological trauma such as exposure to combat, accidents, torture, disasters, assault, rape; anything out of the extraordinary. It can take immediate effect or surface years after the incident took place.¹⁹⁸ Symptoms associated with war trauma include survivor's guilt, self punishment, feelings of being a scapegoat, self pity, severe rage and violent impulses, alienation from one's own feelings, depression, substance abuse and suicide.¹⁹⁹

The impact of war on the psychological wellbeing of soldiers has a long history dating back to the American Civil War (1861 – 1865) when the Army's Surgeon General identified certain behavioral patterns amongst soldiers. No physical symptoms of disease were identified, but behavior manifesting in the form of fatigue, insomnia and psychotic

¹⁹⁸ Kaminer, D. and Eagle, G. *Traumatic Stress in South Africa*, 2010, pp 28 - 31.

¹⁹⁹ Cock, J. and Nathan, L. (eds). *War and Society, The Militarization of South Africa*, 1989, p 81.

conditions were noted. In years to follow, similar behavior and conditions were observed with soldiers participating in various wars. During the First World War the psychological damage and impact of war trauma on soldiers was officially recognized and psychiatrists became part of the military medical personnel.²⁰⁰ By the end of the First World War, 80 000 soldiers were treated for shell shock and some 200 000 veterans received pensions for nervous disorders that led to a reconsideration of psychoanalytic theory. Much contemporary work that seeks to understand what is now called war trauma stems from this period.²⁰¹

American military intervention in Vietnam during the period 1955 to 1975 and the devastating impact it had on soldiers suffering from war trauma necessitated urgent psychiatric intervention. In the late 1970's, the mental health sector in the USA acknowledged the effects of combat on soldiers. It was realized that psychological problems can emerge and manifest months or years after the actual trauma took place and can gradually worsen over time. In 1980, PTSD became an official category in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders, the official publication of the American Psychiatric Association. Military combat forms part of this classification.²⁰²

Getting back to the South African POW case involving Du Toit who was captured in 1985; it is argued that his story is given more media publicity and coverage than the POWs that were captured between 1975 and 1978, who received very little media and scholarly attention.²⁰³ This is true regarding the eight POWs that were captured during Operation Savannah which was conducted in a clandestine manner. The fact that all eight were captured inside Angola was an uncomfortable situation for the SADF and NP government and had to be kept secret from its public. However, a few media articles did appear in the local and international press, and the fact that the POWs families' had to be liaised with made it difficult for the authorities to keep it secret. Today, a few official

²⁰⁰ Cock, J. and Nathan, L. (eds). *War and Society, The Militarization of South Africa*, 1989, p 79.

²⁰¹ Edkins, J. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 2003, pp 1 - 2.

²⁰² Cock, J. and Nathan, L. (eds). *War and Society, The Militarization of South Africa*, 1989, p 80.

²⁰³ Baines, G. 'The Saga of South African POWs in Angola, 1975 – 1982', *South African Journal of Military Studies*, 40 (2), 2012, p 102, 134.

records of the POWs can be accessed through the ICRC and the Documentation Centre of the Department of Defence. With regards to Van der Mescht's situation who was captured inside Namibia; it became progressively more complicated for the SADF and NP government to keep the reality of soldiers getting abducted from its public. Operation Savannah's POWs were released shortly after Van der Mescht's imprisonment started, which further complicated matters. Official records of Van der Mescht's capture are available at the Documentation Centre of the Department of Defence and the ICRC, and his story was more widely reported in the local and international media than was the situation with the POWs captured during Operation Savannah. A month after Van der Mescht's return home, a comprehensive article was published in the *Scope* magazine about his capture, imprisonment and release. The *Scope* was not a mainstream publication and mainly focused on soft pornography stories, a publication that the NP government and SADF would not want to be associated with. In the article Van der Mescht was not given the status of a national hero, although he did receive recognition for the ordeal and trauma suffered as a POW in Angola. A similar article appeared shortly thereafter in *Rooi Rose* magazine. Van der Mescht received a Pro Patria medal from the SADF in 1979 and his mother received it on his behalf. The medal was awarded to SADF members who served in the operational area.²⁰⁴

The Documentation Centre of the Department of Defence and other archival state organs' have no official records available of Du Toit's capture and release, despite requests made through PAIA. It is assumed that information on the secret missions conducted by the Special Forces was either destroyed or not made public, despite PAIA. It is further underlined by the fact that no information of NIS was made available to this study either. However, it does seem as if Du Toit's story was given popular publicity when a book *The Wynand du Toit Story*, sponsored by Military Intelligence, was published within a record time of two weeks after his release.²⁰⁵ It was written from an SADF propaganda perspective and clear that the objective was to portray the SADF as the victorious

²⁰⁴ Personnel file, Ref Army HQ (82) CF 02.03.76 – 19.05.82 Van der Mescht G.J. 71511430 BT, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

²⁰⁵ Baines, G. 'The Saga of South African POWs in Angola, 1975 – 1982', *South African Journal of Military Studies*, 40 (2), 2012, p 134.

military force and to turn the situation into a positive story, defending the Border War. Du Toit is sketched as a brave and heroic soldier, a patriot who carried out a secret mission for his country, got captured in the process and suffered torture as a POW in Angola. His release received both local and international media attention, and locally he received the status of a national war hero by the NP government and its public. Today it is known that the purpose of the mission was to sabotage and destroy the oil refinery at Cabinda, whilst in the book it is stated that the mission was to detect PLAN and ANC military camps in Angola for intelligence purposes.²⁰⁶

Du Toit was a member of the Special Forces, an elite group of soldiers commonly known as the recces. Only the best candidates got selected to serve in this elite corps and the training was exceptionally rigorous. In contrast to Van der Mescht who was a conscript, Du Toit joined the SADF willingly as a PF member making a career of it, believing in the ideology and system that was propagated. The primary task of the Special Forces during the Border War was to conduct secret operations deep inside Angola behind enemy lines; doing reconnaissance, gathering intelligence information, destroying or sabotaging strategic installations and extracting soldiers from missions. Du Toit hails from a well respected Afrikaner family and grew up on a farm in the Western Cape. This is in stark contrast to Van der Mescht who came from a working class Afrikaner family, born in the West Rand and grew up in the East Rand of the then Transvaal, considered working class residential areas. Van der Mescht was an ordinary troop without rank who performed his national service in Namibia and his primary task was to purify water for human consumption.

In May 1985, Du Toit commanded a group of selected Special Force soldiers on a secret mission to sabotage the oil installation at Cabinda. The mission didn't go according to plan and they were detected by FAPLA whose bases surrounded the oil installation. During an ambush with FAPLA, two of Du Toit's men were killed, some managed to return safely home and Du Toit was captured. Already badly wounded, he was beaten up by his captors who initially thought that he was a mercenary. Du Toit was first taken to

²⁰⁶ Soule, A. and Dixon, G. and Richards, R. *The Wynand du Toit Story*, 1987, p 34.

the town of Cabinda where he was interrogated and tortured by FAPLA. After hours of interrogation, Cuban doctors performed an operation on Du Toit's badly wounded arm in a makeshift hospital.²⁰⁷ Thereafter he was flown to Luanda where he was admitted to a hospital for further medical care. The Angolan authorities handed Du Toit to the Cubans who imprisoned him. During the first 10 months of imprisonment, Du Toit was held in a cell that was four meters square in a Cuban military base in Luanda. His movements were monitored by his interrogators through a television camera. Here he was interrogated on a daily basis by Cubans and Angolans. When the physical torture stopped, the mental and emotional torture followed. Initially Du Toit was not given POW status since he was captured by FAPLA and considered a terrorist, infiltrating their country without permission in an attempt to destroy infrastructure. After each SADF operation into Angola, Du Toit was interrogated more vigorously.²⁰⁸

In April 1986, Du Toit was moved to another jail in Luanda, and held in solitary confinement for the duration of his imprisonment which stretched over a period of two years and four months.²⁰⁹ Van der Mescht was imprisoned for a period of four years and three months, and in solitary confinement for a period of nine months. Du Toit had very little freedom, limited communication except with his guards and was seldom taken out of his cell. He was able to do exercise in a small cage outside of his cell. For most of his imprisonment, Du Toit had access to a television set and radio in his cell. He received three meals a day, similar to the food that Van der Mescht received.

Van der Mescht was a POW for a much longer period than Du Toit, had relative freedom of movement outside of his communal cell during the day, and communication with fellow prisoners. For both POWs, communication between prison and home were challenging and erratic and little news were received. Du Toit's wife Louwna, visited him on three occasions in August 1985, March 1986 and December 1986. Du Toit was captured by FAPLA and held as a POW by Cuban forces waging war in Angola. Visits by his wife were arranged by the Angolan authorities, who treated her like a VIP; it was

²⁰⁷ Soule, A. and Dixon, G. and Richards, R. *The Wynand du Toit Story*, 1987, p 10, 15, 22, 28, 31, 39.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p 45, 80.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p 152.

manipulated for propaganda purposes, showing diplomacy and goodwill towards the West. Van der Mescht was captured by SWAPO and held in an Angolan prison as a POW of SWAPO. The political circumstances and authorities in power differed for the two POWs, and SWAPO did not allow visits by Van der Mescht's wife. As detailed in Chapter three, the SADF made a concerted effort to look after the welfare of Cheryl and Chantal whilst Van der Mescht was imprisoned. It seems as if the SADF and NP government did not favor any parties, they were attempting behind the scenes to get the respective POWs released. As with Van der Mescht, the ICRC visited Du Toit, monitored his captivity and submitted reports to the NP government.

Du Toit had feelings of guilt when he was in prison and thereafter. He felt that he failed his country and his unit, he did not succeed with the operation, two of his men died and he was captured.²¹⁰ Van der Mescht also felt guilty about the fact that he survived the attack and fellow soldiers got killed. In defence of Van der Mescht's situation, it can be noted that Van der Mescht was performing his national service as a conscript; he was not the aggressor and attacked in the early morning hours; whilst Du Toit was committing sabotage in Angola as the aggressor on behalf of the SADF.

After Du Toit's capture, PW Botha instructed the Ministers' of Defence and Foreign Affairs to do everything in their power to release Du Toit.²¹¹ The urgency that stemmed from the most senior office in the country might have been absent at the time of Van der Mescht's capture, however comprehensive negotiations for his release did take place as set out in the beginning of the chapter. Various avenues were followed in order to release Du Toit, amongst others working through the ICRC, but without success. At this stage the diplomatic relationship between South Africa and Angola was strained to the extent that communication broke down which made negotiations very complicated.

Negotiations for Du Toit's release made no progress until a French businessman with interests in southern Africa came to the rescue in July 1986. He used a pseudo name of

²¹⁰ Soule, A. and Dixon, G. and Richards, R. *The Wynand du Toit Story*, 1987, p 146.

²¹¹ *Ibid*, p 283.

Monsieur Jacques, and acted as the international peace broker in the complicated negotiations towards organizing a prisoner exchange. Monsieur Jacques had the consent from his own Prime Minister, Jacques Chirac, to act on non diplomatic terms as a French citizen. He also had the loose mandate from the NP government and worked with an SADF official in meeting with Angolan authorities. Today it is known that the man's real name is Jean-Yves Ollivier. He recently financed a documentary film *Plot for Peace* (2013) about his alleged involvement in bringing peace and stability to southern Africa towards the release of Nelson Mandela in 1994, which involved the release of Du Toit in 1987.²¹²

The main actors in the prisoner exchange deal were the governments of South Africa, Angola, France, the Netherlands and Mozambique; the independent homeland of Ciskei; and UNITA. The airport at Maputo was chosen as the neutral location for the exchange to take place. Jonas Savimbi offered a number of 133 FAPLA soldiers that UNITA held captive to use in the exchange. Pierre-André Albertini, a French citizen who smuggled arms for the ANC became part of the prisoner swap, in exchange for the French involvement. He was imprisoned in the homeland of Ciskei at the time. A Dutch citizen, Klaas de Jonge, who smuggled arms for the ANC and was held captive in Pretoria, became part of the prisoner swap, and Du Toit completed the list.²¹³

On 7 September 1987, Du Toit was released from prison. From Luanda he was flown to Maputo in an Angolan presidential aircraft. Only now was the exchange agreement signed between Monsieur Jacques and two Angolan cabinet ministers present in the aircraft. A very specific route was followed so the aircraft with Du Toit onboard could be picked up by radar, for the remainder of the role players to start their respective journeys towards Maputo for the exchange to take place. The plan was that the various aircraft would reach Maputo at roughly the same time and park in a predetermined position. Albertini was onboard an aircraft from Ciskei, De Jonge was onboard an aircraft from Pretoria and the FAPLA prisoners were onboard a South African passenger aircraft from

²¹² Soule, A. and Dixon, G. and Richards, R. *The Wynand du Toit Story*, 1987, pp 283 – 285.

<http://plotforpeace.com>

²¹³ Ibid, pp 293 – 298.

Namibia. An Angolan passenger aircraft temporarily withdrew from the national airline to fly to Maputo to fetch the FAPLA prisoners to return them to Angola. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Pik Botha, was onboard a presidential aircraft from Pretoria in which Du Toit would return to South Africa. A French executive aircraft was on its way to Maputo to fetch De Jonge and Albertini and return them to Europe.²¹⁴

In Maputo, Du Toit was first met by an SADF medical doctor who explained to him that Pik Botha was present to welcome him, that he was considered a national hero at home and that the international media was waiting to report on the major international exchange about to take place. According to Mozambique officials, the media contingent present was the biggest seen in the country since independence. The various prisoners walked across the runway towards their freedom and boarded the respective aircraft that would return them home. Du Toit arrived at Air Force Base Ysterplaat in Cape Town where he was personally welcomed by PW Botha and several other high ranking politicians and senior SADF officers. He was accompanied by Louwna and their son Klippie to the presidential home for a welcoming reception and party, attended by high ranking politicians and senior SADF officers.²¹⁵

The homecoming reception that Du Toit received is in stark contrast to Van der Mescht's return, although Van der Mescht did receive a warm welcome by SADF officials at Air Force Base Waterkloof. This can be attested to the fact that Du Toit was an elite soldier with the rank of an officer in contrast to Van der Mescht who was an ordinary troop conscript without rank. Differential treatment between officers and non-commissioned officers is common practice in the military. Van der Mescht lacked both the educational and military credentials that Du Toit had, and it was easier to continue the allegation that he was a traitor, since he was of little value for the NP government and the SADF.

It has to be considered that Van der Mescht and Du Toit was captured and released during different periods of the war. September 1987 saw an increased military action in

²¹⁴ Soule, A. and Dixon, G. and Richards, R. *The Wynand du Toit Story*, 1987, pp 303 – 311.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp 153 – 156.

Angola that leaned more towards a conventional war, with FAPLA, Russian and Cuban forces getting progressively more involved. International pressure and local opposition increased on South Africa to resolve the Namibian independence matter and retreat its military force from Angola. The fact that Du Toit was captured as an aggressor deep inside Angolan territory did not sit well with the anti-apartheid community waiting for South Africa to settle its domestic affairs. Again, as was the case with the previous POWs captured, it reminded the public at home of the possibility for young men to die and get captured in the Border War waged far from home. Keeping its voters and the public satisfied became increasingly challenging for the NP government.

It is clear that Du Toit received a better welcome when he returned home and became a national hero whilst Van der Mescht was branded a traitor. In addition to the factors already discussed, it could further be attributed to a class division between Van der Mescht and Du Toit that stems from a historical Afrikaner perspective on class. Van der Mescht is viewed as a working class Afrikaner whilst Du Toit is viewed as part of the Afrikaner establishment. After school, Van der Mescht became an artisan which is considered a blue collar worker. In contrast, Du Toit was considered of a higher social standing because of his educational and military qualifications, holding a military tertiary degree and his position as an officer in the elite forces of the SADF.

Class division amongst Afrikaners can be traced back to the 1890's when the question of white poverty became an issue in Afrikaner politics, reaching urgency in the 1930's when it threatened white supremacy. After the Anglo Boer War, the scorched earth policy of the British Army forced many Afrikaners to leave their farms and find work in urban areas. The urban economy was already dominated by English speaking communities who were mostly better educated than the Afrikaners. The majority of the first generation urbanized Afrikaners lacked formal education and labor skills, and as a result became excluded from the formal job market, having to compete with workers other than white for the lowest levels of work that led to poverty.²¹⁶

²¹⁶ Giliomee, H. *The Afrikaners, Biography of a People*, 2003, p 323.

After the Union of South Africa was established in 1910, divisions between Afrikaners emerged as a result of those in favor and those against British sentiments, in the wake of the Anglo Boer War. General Jan Smuts, who became the leader of the South African Party and Prime Minister in 1919, unofficially represented the English. His Afrikaner supporters and followers were mostly wealthy and well educated.²¹⁷ The Pact government of General Hertzog that came to power in 1924 unofficially represented Afrikaners with republican and nationalist ideals and of a more conservative and modest status than those following Smuts. At the time it was referred to as the Sappe supporting Smuts and the Natte supporting Hertzog, and this dynamic dominated Afrikaner politics until the NP victory in 1948.

Between 1933 and 1950, the poor white issue was seriously addressed by the authorities and partly solved. The growth of the white educational system to help address the problem produced an Afrikaner intelligentsia comprising of teachers, academics, journalists, church ministers, politicians and legal professionals. After the NP victory in 1948, the newly formed government ensured that the interests of the working class were protected against competition from workers other than white. The new political dispensation comprised an alliance between Afrikaner intelligentsia, middle class and the working class. The working class was fully absorbed into the nationalist movement, but not placed in key positions. They were guaranteed employment through the civil service and state owned organizations such as Iscor and the South African Railways.²¹⁸

During the 1960's, the average economic growth of six percent, led to the emergence and the rise of an Afrikaner middle class. The majority of Afrikaners benefited materially during this period. They improved their education and business skills, and a new class of urban, financial, industrial and commercial capitalists emerged, leading towards a new Afrikaner social order.²¹⁹ Availability of credit and a better disposable income, coupled with a new consumer culture, contributed towards a shift in the Afrikaner social order.

²¹⁷ Giliomee, H. *The Afrikaners, Biography of a People*, 2003, p 397.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, p 415, 490.

²¹⁹ Grundlingh, A. 'Are we Afrikaners Getting too Rich? Cornucopia and Change in Afrikanerdom in the 1960's', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 21 (2/3), 2008, pp 144 – 145.

This new found status identification created a differentiated society with Afrikaners competing for social and economic success. Status was measured in terms of wealth and education, and increased wealth brought about a class division. Economic growth impacted on Afrikaner politics and differences occurred between the so called “verligte” and “verkrampte” Afrikaner, with the NP government increasingly represented as a bourgeoisie party, emphasizing economic growth and portraying whites as modern and the elite.²²⁰ Towards the end of the 1970’s, the class division amongst Afrikaners increased because of continuous political differences and Afrikaner unity further declined. The working class felt uncomfortable with the NP government’s policy of introducing skilled work to workers other than white who became competition in the labor market. This further led to a class differentiation between the educated intelligentsia and less educated middle and working class Afrikaners.²²¹

As in other state organizations, the SADF also absorbed working class and lower working class elements. During the 1960’s, the SADF was still dependant on officers who were mostly English speaking, with experience from the Second World War. The SADF increasingly promoted Afrikaner interests and by the late 1960’s, Afrikaners dominated the numbers within the organization, with an Afrikaner nationalist overtone, suggesting Broederbond infiltration in management positions. Membership to the Broederbond, who was concerned about Afrikaner unity and growth of Afrikaner interests, was not keen on accepting working class Afrikaners into its ranks, which further contributed to class differentiation. The NP government made an attempt to integrate the SADF into the Afrikaner domain. This situation remained the status quo until the SADF was transformed into the SANDF in 1994.²²²

There are both similarities and differences in the circumstances in which Van der Mescht and Du Toit were captured, imprisoned and released. They were captured by different

²²⁰ Grundlingh, A. ‘Are we Afrikaners Getting too Rich? Cornucopia and Change in Afrikanerdom in the 1960’s’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 21 (2/3), 2008, pp 157 – 159.

²²¹ Pretorius, F. (eds). *Geskiedenis van Suid Afrika, Van voortye tot vandag*, 2012, pp 396 - 397.

²²² Warwick, R. *White South Africa and Defence 1960 – 1968: Militarization, Threat Perceptions and Counter Strategies*, PhD Thesis, Department of Historical Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, pp 464 - 465.

enemy forces during different periods in the war, resulting in different political dynamics to their respective circumstances. Class division played a role in the manner that Van der Mescht and Du Toit were treated and perceived by their government and public. However, both men suffered trauma as a result of being POWs and imprisoned in a foreign hostile country.

Van der Mescht continued working for Iscor until he received a severance package in the wake of the new political dispensation in the 1990's. Since then he has worked in war torn Iraq on a few occasions, building armored vehicles; and work as a boiler maker for different companies.

After his return from Angola, Du Toit continued his employment within the SADF and left a number of years later to form a private security company in Johannesburg, in the period of transition to a new political dispensation. Du Toit and his first wife Louwna separated at the end of 2001.²²³ Du Toit and his new family, wife Frances and two pre-school children, permanently relocated to the Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville) in 2011 where they now live on the farm Belle Terre (Beautiful Land) that they lease from the government. Congo (Brazzaville) invited South African farmers to start commercial farming, develop the agricultural sector, contribute towards food security and transfer skills in a country where only two percent of the land is farmed and most food is imported. Ironically, Du Toit was asked to lead the first group of mostly Afrikaner farmers to the Congo (Brazzaville) by road and they passed not far from where he was captured 26 years prior. But this time the mission had a positive objective, to contribute in the centre of the African continent. The group of mostly Afrikaner farmers left South Africa for both economical and political reasons, although Du Toit says that his reason is not political, but economical: *"I don't bother with politics, the new government is better than the old one and I'm angrier with the old government"*.²²⁴

²²³ *Rapport*, 09.12.2001

²²⁴ *City Press*, 21.05.2011

Mail and Guardian, 15.05.2012

Wynand du Toit, email correspondence, May 2013.

Chapter 5: Reflecting on the reality of documentary filmmaking, with reference to the production of *Captor and Captive*

This chapter discusses the process towards the production of *Captor and Captive*, from inception to the end product, reflecting on the experience and the various challenges thereof. It explores the realities of producing documentary films with specific reference to *Captor and Captive*. The theoretical principles involved in the craft of documentary filmmaking are outlined, whereby documentary film can be analyzed. *Captor and Captive* is a documentary film of historical nature, drawing from historical events as well as the present. It follows the stories of two men, the main characters or protagonists of the documentary, namely Van der Mescht and Ashipala. Their respective stories form the narrative of the documentary, supplemented with additional content from sub characters. Very often, the content of documentary film is controversial and contentious, and characters' stories often traumatic, dramatic and painful, as is the situation in *Captor and Captive*. The factual reality of documentary film brings filmmakers into close contact with their characters and they ideally have to dig deep into characters' personal lives and everyday realities to maximize on the content.²²⁵ This inevitably leads to ethical matters which will be unpacked since it is an important aspect when representing individuals' or communities' stories through film. The chapter further discusses the role of filmmakers within the production process, having their own agendas, perceptions, viewpoints, ideas and perceived outcome, and how this ultimately impact on the outcome of a product. This is especially important when dealing with documentary films of historical nature, where matters of factual truth and objectivity versus subjectivity are at stake.

Filmmakers need to consider the criteria from film fund organizations as well as potential markets and distribution platforms for their products. In this regard, business decisions and principles are at stake. The reaction from the South African public on *Captor and Captive* is discussed, which underlines the opposing emotions and viewpoints regarding the Border War involved. This is measured against the reaction from the Namibian public

²²⁵ The term filmmaker used in the context of the dissertation refers to either producers or directors.

which is in stark contrast, underlining the impact that the portrayal of a heroic character has on a film.

To evaluate documentary film's relationship to reality, presenting the truth and ethical issues is a difficult task partly because the genre itself is difficult to define. There are many sub-genres, each with their own unique demands. To outline a theoretical framework for analyzing the practice of documentary filmmaking, the work of Bill Nichols is mostly used since his work is the most familiar and widely used within film analysis, and he is considered the guru of documentary theory by some film academics.

Bill Nichols developed a typology of documentary modes, recognizing that documentaries cannot be rigidly categorized. His work seeks to provide a framework for analyzing different forms and functions of documentary, which breaks down the documentary genre into six distinct sub-genres or modes. Each of these modes represents a set of features and conventions with the aim of representing the reality in documentary more accurately and ethically. Most contemporary films contain elements of more than one mode and it offers fluid strategies that can be applied across a wide range of films.

The expository mode of documentary is didactic and often uses voice-over with strong arguments advocating for a specific cause. Although the characters are given interviews to voice their opinions, their input is limited and the filmmakers' point of view is upfront. Expository mode assumes that the filmmaker knows absolute truths about the real world. Contemporary critics argue that no filmmaker has access to or can accurately represent the truth.²²⁶

Observational mode is a fly on the wall type of filmmaking where real events are observed and filmed as they happen with minimal intervention from the filmmaker. The editing style is also minimalist, observing the realities as it plays out in front of the camera. The term *cinéma vérité* that developed in Europe, is also used to describe this

²²⁶ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, pp 25 - 26.

mode, as well as direct cinema that developed in North America, which are similar styles with slight variation.²²⁷

With participatory mode, characters actively engage, ask questions, investigate and provoke action and dialogue before the camera. The most common interaction is the on-camera interview whereby characters speak for themselves directly to the viewer. Characters' commentary tends to carry more weight and become more central to the films argument in participatory mode than in expository mode. It also lacks the didactic tone of expository mode. It could be argued that the participatory mode is a form of collaborative filmmaking.²²⁸

Reflexive mode encourages viewers to see documentary for what it is; a constructed representation. Filmmakers often appear on camera revealing their own roles in constructing representations of reality and viewers might trust the process more. This mode of filmmaking challenges conventional assumptions of truth, order and authority.²²⁹

The poetic mode is concerned with exploring the aesthetic and emphasizes mood and tone. Its main feature is not to convey factual information or make strong arguments, and it is not ideal for portraying social messages. Poetic mode combines experimental and documentary elements.²³⁰

The performative mode emphasizes understanding and empathy and is less focused on making arguments and presenting factual information. Performative films tend to allow viewers to walk in the shoes of the characters. It is well suited for representing marginalized people or communities.²³¹

²²⁷ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 27.

²²⁸ Ibid, p 30.

²²⁹ Ibid, p 34.

²³⁰ Ibid, p 37.

²³¹ Ibid, p 38.

Captor and Captive contains elements of observational, participatory, poetic and performative modes of filmmaking. It was produced with a clear point of view and message without being didactic and allowed the content to speak for itself. At times the camera followed the characters, observed their emotions and let them play out in front of the camera without interference. The main characters' voices were heard throughout, they were given a platform to express their respective stories and it became the dominant narrative in the storyline. Some scenes in the film had to be reconstructed due to a lack of visual material available regarding the historical events which involved aesthetic principles, in addition to the archival film footage that was utilized as cutaways. Van der Mescht's story was presented with the aim of evoking empathy for his situation, and slightly manipulated.

The author met Van der Mescht in September 2007 to explore the possibility of making a documentary film about his experience as a POW, against the background of the Border War. It was decided to include the story and perspective of Van der Mescht's SWAPO captor Ashipala, to present a more balanced story of an incident that took place more than 30 years ago. On its own, Van der Mescht's story was not strong enough to carry a 52-minute historical documentary film. September 2007 marks the beginning of an exciting yet challenging project, stretching over a period of more than three years to completion of the film.

Kristin Pichaske, an American film academic, lecturer and documentary filmmaker notes that documentary films bear a particular significance for societies in transition; in terms of reclaiming history, redefining identities, and giving previously marginalized people a voice. The intention with the production of *Captor and Captive* was due to the author's personal interest in the Border War, to make sense of a troubled past in a transforming society and to tell a previously untold story within the context of the war. She aimed to show how innocent people are used by politicians as pawns in war situations, which is a global phenomenon and not exclusive to the Border War. Van der Mescht was given a platform to tell his side of the story not voiced before, and participate in the public discourse of the war which is currently very topical. The intention was to show that Van

der Mescht was wrongly accused of being a traitor through a rumor that was spread to cover the SADF's mistakes during the incident where Van der Mescht was captured. It was not intended to expose the SADF in a negative manner, although it transpired as such and matters were left to unfold. In contrast to the SADF's portrayal, PLAN featured as the heroic military force. It stems from portraying Ashipala as the victor who captured Van der Mescht successfully and the SADF not being able to find the captured soldier, a huge embarrassment for them at the time. This relates to one incident in a war that took place over a period of 23 years, and the respective armed forces' performance cannot be measured based on one incident, and should be seen within a wider context. Ashipala was also given a platform to present his version of the story. He was a proud and confident soldier and regarded as a national liberation hero in Namibia.²³² Ashipala naturally came across as the victor of the story and limited intervention was needed. *Captor and Captive* further aimed to bring old enemy soldiers together through the first time meeting between Van der Mescht and Ashipala more than 30 years after the incident that changed both of their lives. This was an idealistic attempt to contribute towards reconciliation and nation-building in the southern African context, after many decades of colonial oppression.

Documentary film continues to raise dialogue and debate about the relationship between truth and the filmic image, matters of representation, as well as matters of accuracy and objectivity when representing stories. A topic often discussed is whether documentary film directly represents reality, as opposed to describing it in text format. Early documentary filmmakers such as John Grierson, believed that it was their responsibility to record and interpret the world as they saw it. Grierson argued that you photograph the natural life but also create an interpretation of it.²³³ Nichols describes documentary film as a means by which pleasure and power, ideologies and utopias, subjects and subjectivities receive tangible representation. However, he notes that documentaries cannot fully capture the historical world and argues that filmmakers have an obligation to acknowledge their inability to do so. Film academic Jay Ruby argues that documentary filmmakers should attempt to produce documentaries that are subjective of nature rather

²³² Ashipala passed away in May 2010, a few months after filming was completed.

²³³ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 22.

than attempt to capture an objective truth.²³⁴ South African documentary filmmaker David Max-Brown is of the opinion that all films are created and filmmakers are interpreters of situations. “*Cameras do not make films, people do. There is no stopping viewpoints or perceptions coming to bear on the outcome of a film, and when filmmakers declare more openly what their viewpoint is then the product will be more trustworthy*”.²³⁵

If we assume that documentary film cannot perfectly capture reality in an objective manner, then filmmakers still have a responsibility to ensure that their films are as factually correct as possible through thorough research; as well as ethical consideration towards the individual, group or community that is represented. This will also ensure that documentary films are valuable sources of content with integrity. The manner in which people, cultures and ideas are represented through documentaries often becomes the norm and viewers tend to believe what they see. Filmmakers inevitably have a huge responsibility. With regards to documentary film of historical nature, matters of truth and objectivity are even more critical to consider, since the discipline of history has its own set of rules and conventions. Historical texts cannot be considered as completely objective or truthful as is the case with documentary film of any genre; and it depends on the perspective, ideology and viewpoint of the author or filmmaker.

When filmmakers set out with a clear point of view and seek subjective truths, the content might be more authentic, as opposed to trying to sell it as being the absolute objective truth. Documentary film that is objective have no authors; only reporters who present the ‘who, what, when, where and whys’ of the truth.²³⁶ News reporting is factual and unbiased, and presents the facts and detail in an objective manner, devoid of emotion. In contrast, documentary film takes a position on an event and expresses a point of view on the situation. Making subjective films allows documentary filmmakers to present their

²³⁴ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 23.

²³⁵ David Max-Brown, email questionnaire, March 2013.

²³⁶ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 66.

own opinions and having their own voice. However, filmmakers' have a duty to declare or make clear the position taken and not disguise it as the only truth.²³⁷

South African documentary filmmaker Mark Kaplan says: "*I seek out subjective truths. As to objectivity, I seek to make it clear what my standpoint is as the filmmaker so that audiences are clear to make up their own minds*".²³⁸

The author's approach with *Captor and Captive* is similar to that of Kaplan's. She has a clear point of view, present different perspectives and wish for viewers to have their own opinion. The content of *Captor and Captive* is considered to be subjective truth and the aim is to present well researched content with verification of factual information as far as possible. One of the key priorities throughout the process was consideration of ethical matters and respect towards the characters.

Pichaske suggests that the intent, integrity and approach of filmmakers are important for representational accuracy. She identifies three factors that are critical to accurate and ethical representation. This includes representing the filmmaker's point of view as opposed to objective representation of pure facts; building of meaningful relationships between the filmmaker and characters, with a level of understanding and empathy towards the characters; collaboration between filmmakers and characters to a degree where characters have input towards their representation, as opposed to outside storytelling.²³⁹

When documentary film is character driven and the narrative sourced primarily from characters' stories, filmmakers should ideally spend ample time with characters to get to know them and win their trust; and ultimately get as much content from interviews as possible. This inevitably means entering characters' personal lives and space and forming close relationships. It asks for a subtle approach from filmmakers who need to set

²³⁷ SPARK Documentary Workshop Handbook, compiled by Kevin Harris (veteran South African documentary filmmaker), 2011, National Film and Video Foundation of South Africa (NFVF).

²³⁸ Mark Kaplan, email questionnaire, March 2013.

²³⁹ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p iii.

boundaries for both parties in the process, as well as ethical responsibilities towards their characters. Pichaske's conclusion from her experience as a documentary filmmaker and doctoral dissertation notes that the existence of a meaningful, long-term relationship between filmmaker and filmed is the single most reliable determinant of ethical documentary practice, and has positive aesthetic implications.²⁴⁰ In addition, characters often use the opportunity as a cathartic process through reliving their stories and memories which might be painful and traumatic, but emotionally helpful in the end.

With regards to the relationship between filmmaker and characters, filmmakers generally hold the balance of power through the control of the production process, and are able to manipulate the content to suit their point of view. The concept of representation, meaning who has the right to represent whom and in what fashion creates ethical challenges and responsibilities for documentary filmmakers. There is no single correct approach or clear set of ethical guidelines available. In feature films the characters are actors and in documentary films the characters are social actors whose real lives are revealed on screen. Documentary filmmaking touches on disciplines of art, journalism and social science and each has their own ethical considerations. Artists using people for their aesthetic creations generally have greater artistic freedom than is the case with documentary film. Investigative journalism has set a precedent that justifies the practice of damaging reports about individuals or communities without their consent and without taking responsibility for the impact that it might have on the individual or community.²⁴¹

The most powerful and effective elements of documentary film include drama, conflict, suspense and emotion; elements which might require intervention from filmmakers or exposing the characters in vulnerable moments. This situation can lead to exploitation of characters, but it could also be treated subtly without any harm done towards characters, depending on filmmakers' approach.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 69.

²⁴¹ Ibid, pp 44 – 45.

²⁴² Ibid, p 51.

There seems to be a perception that it is glamorous to be characters in documentary film and appear on television, and therefore characters often willingly and eagerly agree to participate in documentary film. It is important for filmmakers to have access to characters for their stories, in order to make their films. Most often, characters don't understand the full consequences and scope of the work, being unfamiliar with the film process, which often leads to unrealistic expectations. It is therefore important that filmmakers explain the process to characters as thorough as possible. Broadcast law requires informed consent either in the form of a signed contract referred to as release forms or acknowledgement on camera. This meets the legal responsibility that filmmakers have towards their characters and the various screening platforms. The ethical question however remains if this meets the moral responsibility filmmakers have towards their characters. Filmmakers decide how much to reveal to characters about their intentions and plans and sometimes have to withhold information for better access.

The general practice in global documentary filmmaking regarding payment towards characters' participation is that they do not get compensated financially. However this is the general consensus and not a fixed rule; situations differ and each film has its own unique demands. When there is extreme poverty as is often the situation when filming in Third World or developing countries, exceptions are often made. Filmmakers often contribute towards food parcels or work in conjunction with and donate funds towards social organizations active in poverty stricken communities. It sometimes happens that characters make unrealistic demands towards filmmakers for telling their stories. Documentary films often take years to finish and the initial discussions, negotiations and circumstances could change with time and characters sometimes make demands after consent has been given. Filmmakers are dependant on characters for their stories and finishing their films, and the situation could potentially challenge film production processes.

Consideration of pace and rhythm is important when editing a film.²⁴³ Whilst watching a film, there is no time to stop in order to read or watch again, as opposed to written text. In order to make a film appealing to potential audiences, many factors including the style, the pace, the visual treatment, the message, the angle, the factual correctness and verification of facts need to be considered, in order to produce a credible product.

The production of historical films is complex and need multiple skills in order to execute. Challenges encountered in the production of *Captor and Captive* includes: condensing a comprehensive piece of work into a 52-minute film; explaining the background of the Border War within the Cold War context, and various role players involved to viewers with no background knowledge; ensure factual correctness since the film deals with historical matters; consideration of audience and commercial appeal, and accommodating a wide range of expected target markets; dealing with a traumatized character Van der Mescht and his family's demands and expectations; wearing many hats and conducting many roles within the process due to budget constraints; little access and time spent with Ashipala, due to locating him late in the process with negotiations to gain film access regarding SWAPO's involvement; budget constraints impacted on quality of product, was only able to use one camera and at times needed two, for instance where Van der Mescht and Ashipala met for the first time in 30 years, the moment was so powerful and more than one camera would have captured a better reality, often had to film in harsh sun or dusk situations without filters and lights to ensure quality footage, filmed without a sound technician which impacted on sound quality, had little time to film in Namibia after Van der Mescht and Ashipala met and had to travel long distances with crew and characters.

Van der Mescht, Cheryl and their two daughters, who became sub characters and part of the process, were very keen on the idea of a documentary film about his experience as a POW and the impact it had, and still has on their lives. They agreed to share their story, participate in the film and allow the author into their lives. They were also keen to meet

²⁴³ The term editing refers to structuring the film footage into sequences to form a storyline. Editing allows modification of events on screen, shortening or lengthening of sequences and rearranging the chronology.

Van der Mescht's SWAPO captor and the prospect of visiting the site of his capture at the waterhole in the north of Namibia. The family hoped that it would bring closure to a painful chapter in their lives.

The process was started by spending time with Van der Mescht and his family to get to know them and document his side of the story, initially without a camera. Logistical access was easy since the author and Van der Mescht both lived in Gauteng. Months were spent at the Documentation Centre of the Department of Defence in Pretoria to obtain official records of Van der Mescht's capture, imprisonment and release. The documents were classified as secret and the bureaucracy involved for declassification prolonged the process. Van der Mescht had vague memories of what has happened to him. His story had many gaps and had to be filled by official documents and information from former SADF personnel serving at the time of his capture and imprisonment, as well as his captor Ashipala. The information was shared with Van der Mescht and his family who knew little of the incident apart from what Van der Mescht could vaguely remember. It was the first time that they learnt what has really happened during the attack and thereafter, and how the negotiations to release him were conducted. It was also the first time since the incident that Van der Mescht was confronted with the realities of what has happened to him between 1978 and 1982. Cheryl related that the filming process was a difficult time for her husband to relive the memories and talk about it. When he returned from Angola he shut down emotionally, seldom spoke about the incident, carried on with life, and as a result little healing and acceptance took place over the years. The filming of *Captor and Captive* was an opportunity for Van der Mescht to find closure and peace.

The process of production of *Captor and Captive* was supported by Louis Bothma who performed his national service during the period that Van der Mescht was captured. In fact, he saw Van der Mescht at Elundu, a few days before the capture took place, since 32 Battalion was active with cross-border patrols in the area. Bothma played a vital role in giving emotional support to Van der Mescht and his family, as a fellow soldier who understands the trauma and context. In addition, the Van der Mescht family was offered professional psychological support during the process, but did not accept. Van der

Mescht was also invited to join informal meetings held by the Engineering Corps (Sappers) who formed a support group for former Sappers, and did not accept the offer either.

There was limited information available about SWAPO's role in the attack and upon embarking on the project it was unknown who the captor was. Obtaining the information was a lengthy process due to limited funds and resources to make the film, as well as a general distrust between former enemy forces, that still prevailed at the time. Only in September 2009, official contact was made through a military network with SWAPO in Windhoek. It was important to follow correct procedures and diplomacy to gain filming access to the right people. A former officer commander of 32 Battalion, Eddie Viljoen, who communicates with former PLAN commanders, facilitated the process which led to a meeting in Windhoek with the Minister of Defence, Charles Namoloh. He held a senior position in the operation where Van der Mescht was captured and introduced the author to PLAN soldiers, including Ashipala, who participated in the operation. It was the first time that the SWAPO version of the incident became officially known. Access to SWAPO's archive SPARC was arranged through Per Sanden who manages the facility. The opportunity was used to interview and film Ashipala who was very willing and eager to participate in the film.



Research visit to meet SWAPO in Windhoek, October 2009, facilitated by former 32 Battalion soldiers.

From left to right: Danger Ashipala, Rina Jooste, Charles Namoloh, Louis Bothma, Martin Shalli, Gert Jacobie.



Filming an interview with Ashipala in Windhoek, October 2009.

To substantiate on Van der Mescht and Ashipala's stories and set the context for the war, two so-called experts were interviewed to present the SADF and SWAPO's respective ideologies and reason for participating in the war. Both former soldiers, Ep van Lill and Martin Shalli, participated in the battle discussed in the film, held senior positions at the time and could therefore comment from a point of authority. However they cannot be held accountable for representing the absolute truth about their respective organizations.

With reference to *Captor and Captive*, the narrative forms the backbone, and supporting visuals and text records complete the film. A variety of elements were combined to construct the film. This included interviews with the characters, sub characters and two experts; archive film footage; still photos; text records from archives; newspaper clippings; cutaways and re-enactments. Very often, factual information does not have supporting visual footage because everything cannot be filmed, especially in historical films. That is when re-enactments or creative treatment of existing footage are used. Talking heads, a term referring to experts being interviewed, can become monotonous when there are no cutaways to use. Filmmakers have to ensure availability of enough appropriate visual stimulation for audience attention.

With reference to *Captor and Captive*, there were many challenges regarding the availability of enough cutaways and visual material. Film archive footage was sourced from various sources however there were limitations due to budget constraints. No visual footage of the attack on the waterhole and capture of Van der Mescht by Ashipala were available. Re-enactments were not an option due to the chosen style of the film, in

addition to it being a costly exercise. The film's editor Margaux Truter worked through 50 hours of available film archive footage to reconstruct an attack and capture scene. Visual material of soldiers, ammunition and the geographical location where Van der Mescht was captured were used effectively, coupled with emotive music and sound effects. This option requires a skilled and creative film editor.

There was no film footage available of Van der Mescht whilst in prison, and filming in Angola at the Sao Paulo prison where he was held was not an option. The old fort prison in Johannesburg was filmed as a credible visual alternative and used effectively as cutaways. There was no film footage available of the family at home during the period of Van der Mescht's imprisonment, except for a few still photos. To support Cheryl's interview, specifically where she talks about the loneliness whilst her husband was in prison, a blonde girl playing with a doll was filmed, depicting isolation and loneliness, suggesting their daughter Chantal. A street scene and block of flats in Boksburg were filmed to depict where they lived and the footage was treated to suit the period of the 1970's. This editing technique is referred to as grading, which means adjusting the color of the visual material. There was no film footage available of the spy swap and dramatized footage was obtained that depicted the scene. The footage was graded to suit the period. There are many more examples throughout *Captor and Captive* where limited or no film footage was available to use within scenes and the film editor had to make many creative plans.

With regards to matters of objectivity and truth, Van der Mescht received more screening time than Ashipala. This was not the intention but emotional, logistical and geographical factors transpired into more time spent with Van der Mescht. Limited official information was available about the spy swap where Van der Mescht was exchanged for a Russian spy alongside eight Western spies. The primary source was Van der Mescht who is not an accurate source. A request for information was made to the former Director-General of the NIS, Niël Barnard, who was responsible for leading the negotiations that led to the eventual release. The request was denied and alternative former NIS channels and sources were blocked. The same applies to information requested about former Special

Force soldier Wynand du Toit. Requests were made to the Department of Defence, Documentation Centre and Special Force channels without success. It seems as if the information is not accessible to the public or evidence has been destroyed, despite the PAIA established for this purpose.

There are many editing techniques available to manipulate and reconstruct footage and narration to suit selected viewpoints or take films in different directions. With reference to *Captor and Captive*, selected sequences of the film was manipulated, mainly the portrayal of Van der Mescht as a main character. Van der Mescht is traumatized and emotionally closed. The filmed footage was slightly manipulated, based on ethical considerations to protect Van der Mescht; sales and distribution considerations and considering viewers emotions to feel empathy towards the main character. It seems as if the method succeeded since the general feedback of the film is mostly that of empathy towards Van der Mescht, except for feedback from the Afrikaner market.

The method used to manipulate Van der Mescht's portrayal as a character was to focus on Cheryl's emotions, using it as a thread throughout the film. The portrayal of Cheryl's character was not manipulated and she was represented as close to reality as is possible when capturing characters through documentary film. Portraying his wife as the supportive and loving person she is, diverted the focus from an angry Van der Mescht and assisted in empathy towards his situation. To further support this method, a loving family man, father and husband was emphasized.

The treatment of the second main character Ashipala posed less challenges except the limited access which mostly transpired into issues of filmic quality. The filmed interview with Ashipala in Windhoek after meeting him for the first time necessitated the service of a local Oshivambo speaking cinematographer for political reasons. With limited choice in selecting a suitable candidate the result was footage of poor quality not meeting broadcast standards. At the time as much footage as possible had to be filmed to ensure getting maximum exposure. The fact that very little time was spent with Ashipala before he was filmed for his first interview, contributed to less content and emotion as was desired,

coupled with the use of a translator. Ashipala's home language was Oshivambo and he was not fluent in English. The following solutions were made: creative use of limited cutaways to conceal the poor cinematography during his interview; use of an English voice over to narrate Ashipala's dialogue as opposed to using English subtitles and thereby concealing the lack of emotion and language barrier. The choice of the tone and emotion used in the voice served to portray Ashipala as the strong and proud soldier that he was. Limited manipulation was needed to obtain the desired results.

The manner in which Van der Mescht and Ashipala were portrayed and played off against each other when they met for the first time and traveled to the place of capture was represented as close to reality as possible, and no intervention was intended or needed. Ashipala treated Van der Mescht in a very respectful manner with a patriarchal approach. He naturally came across as the victor of the story without any intervention.



First time meeting between Ashipala and Van der Mescht, Windhoek, December 2009. Photos courtesy of Eugene Loggenberg.



Ashipala explains to the Van der Mescht family how the capture took place at the waterhole, Elundu, December 2009.

Photo courtesy of Eugene Loggenberg.

There is a perception that documentary filmmaking is a glamorous enterprise. On the contrary, it is very hard work in often hostile environments and landscapes with limited funding possibilities in a very competitive and over saturated market with filmmakers often having to conduct various roles to save on overheads. Documentary filmmaking is an expensive enterprise and access to funds remains a constant struggle for the most successful filmmakers. Possible funds include access to global film funding bodies as well as commercial broadcast and distribution channels. This means that documentaries ideally have to appeal to the largest audience possible. Documentary films, funded by film funding bodies or commissioned by broadcasters, are subject to certain expectations and criteria. The pressure of the commercial marketplace necessitates consideration of the balance between ethics and aesthetics.



Late afternoon filming at the waterhole, Elundu, waiting for sunset golden hour. The day started at 04h00 in the morning for both crew and characters due to logistical matters.



**Filming in Ovamboland from left to right: Rina Jooste, Kamati ka Elio, Louis Bothma, Danger Ashipala.
Photo courtesy of Eugene Loggenberg.**

According to Pichaske, study after study shows that audiences generally watch films to be entertained, rather than being educated. Textbooks on the craft of documentary filmmaking focus on the following elements to make a good documentary film: a plot with a simple three-act structure, engaging and colorful characters relating to basic archetypes, conflict and resolution and above all simplicity. Films should not have too many facts, figures and detail.²⁴⁴ The criteria also apply to the access of funding from the South African national film fund, the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF).

Documentary film doesn't appeal to the mass market as opposed to feature and dramatized films of entertainment value, and plays to a much smaller market which translates into little revenue. It seldom shows return on investment, not considered

²⁴⁴ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 52.

commercially profitable, and therefore cannot rely on commercial investors. In the South African context, this situation is accelerated by the limited domestic and fragmented market and filmmakers are continuously seeking international funding, distribution and markets. This means consideration of different demands and expectations of both domestic and international audiences, and funding bodies. Stories are often simplified to make sense to audiences with limited knowledge of South African culture and history and thus oversimplifying it for domestic audiences.²⁴⁵ The lifetime of a film also has to be considered, since film festival circuit criteria are usually restricted to three years after date of production, and broadcasters also have their own criteria in this regard.

South African documentary filmmaker Mark Kaplan says: “*We have toiled to make documentaries that we want to be seen as widely as possible. To do so we have had to satisfy broadcasters in ways that has altered and shaped the way in which the story is told, the style, the length and so on. We are told to make our films presenter driven and influenced by reality television. This has been a form of tyranny but it is changing fast because broadcasters no longer have the financial clout they had. Funding is getting harder but there are new ways emerging and this means that there are new film forms emerging on new platforms*”.²⁴⁶

With reference to *Captor and Captive*, the film struggled to attract funding and the author and Bothma decided to invest in the film themselves. The cinematographer, editor and post production team offered their service on a pro bono basis. Filmmakers refer to this practice as a passion project and often it is a great learning experience not to be repeated as funds are seldom recouped. Traveling to Namibia with the Van der Mescht family and accommodating Ashipala and his group in the north of Namibia inflated the expenses. After completion of *Captor and Captive*, the NFVF paid towards a grant which enabled payment for the pro bono services. Working without a broadcast commission or film fund gives filmmakers a degree of carte blanche although one still has to seriously consider potential markets and distribution platforms.

²⁴⁵ Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*, PhD Thesis, Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, 2009, p 53.

²⁴⁶ Mark Kaplan, email questionnaire, March 2013.

With reference to *Captor and Captive*, the expected target audience falls within a wide scope since the film touches on many universal elements including war, love, betrayal, redemption and reconciliation. The film was screened at the following film festivals and platforms: Bioscope independent theatre in Johannesburg (2011); AfricAvenir screening in Windhoek (2011); Luxor African Film Festival in Luxor (2012); Cape Winelands Film Festival in Cape Town (2012); Al Jazeera International Documentary Film Festival in Doha (2012); Baghdad International Film Festival in Baghdad (2012); International Images Film Festival for Women in Harare (2013). Sales were made to the SABC and the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). According to feedback received from the SABC, the film was well received by the black middle class. At a local film market in Johannesburg, it was screened to a class of mostly black film students who appreciated the historical content and the perspectives that they are not often presented with, and specific mention was made towards the reconciliation effort. It was also screened to a class of mostly black film students in Cape Town who echoed the same sentiments as their counterparts in Johannesburg, and requested to see more films with similar themes.

The film was well received by white progressive and liberal English and Afrikaans speaking viewers. Having screened at three film festivals in the Middle East and considering the high profile of the Al Jazeera film festival, it seems as if the film attracted interest in the Arab world in the wake of the Arab Awakening following the revolt that broke out in Egypt in February 2011. The conclusion is made that the theme of reconciliation and a story from the African continent is the point of interest.

According to feedback received from the NBC and AfricAvenir film organization in Windhoek, the film was received with great excitement and satisfaction by the SWAPO supporting public, with requests for more screenings. It was expected considering the portrayal of Ashipala as a national liberation hero and it was the first time that he received public screening time in Namibia and that his story was told. In addition, SWAPO who became the ruling party in Namibia after independence is portrayed as a heroic military force.



**AfricAvenir screening of *Captor and Captive* to a sold out audience, Windhoek 2011.
Photo courtesy of AfricAvenir.**



**Questions and answers facilitated by Martin Shalli and Charles Namoloh.
Photo courtesy of AfricAvenir.**

The above feedback and conclusions is not based on an organized survey, and thus difficult to measure. It is literally based on feedback received from the respective broadcasters and close observations from attending film festival screenings, audience reactions followed by question and answer sessions, and correspondence at times. It is thus very limited in its assumed conclusions, but do however shed some light on audience appeal and public reaction.

It was expected that the main target audience in South Africa would be conservative Afrikaners with a political preference towards the rightwing, a group that Van der Mescht feels comfortable with. However, no interest or support was received from this segment of the public. A number of DVDs was sold to a shop managed by Radio Pretoria, an independent Afrikaner radio station with rightwing leanings. No interest was shown, nor was any DVDs sold to date. Radio Pretoria presenter Friedel Hansen invited the author for an interview about *Captor and Captive*, with the intention to raise publicity. The film starts with a two minute introduction explaining the Border War to set the context of what is to follow; explanatory text is combined with Border War footage. Hansen made mention of the following text that appeared in this section: *Young white men were conscripted to the SADF to fight in South West Africa. Young SWAPO freedom fighters gave their lives willingly to liberate their country.* He mentioned that it is factually incorrect to use the terminology of conscript in the context of the war when so many PF soldiers actively and proudly participated. He further mentioned that it is wrong to use the terminology of freedom fighters to describe a bunch of terrorists whose armed force was ineffective and referred to PLAN as a bunch of “flentergatte”, without military teeth.²⁴⁷ He added that his listeners would agree with his comments. Hansen strongly critiqued the fact that according to him, a junior officer, namely Van Lill, was interviewed to represent the SADF who was portrayed in a bad light.²⁴⁸ Hansen didn't once ask about the wellbeing of Van der Mescht before, or after the filming took place and never mentioned the humanitarian and reconciliation effort of the film. In addition to disregarding the main character of the film by not once mentioning or enquiring about him, Hansen made a derogative statement about Ashipala, the only commentary towards the second main character of the film. Negative comments and critique concluded an interview with no positive feedback. The interview was a live transmission and it seemed pointless to argue or try and defend the film's intention and point of view with a presenter who had an obvious agenda beforehand.

²⁴⁷ “Flentergatte” directly translated: a group of disorganized, spineless people.

²⁴⁸ Ep van Lill was in command of the Ratel infantry combat vehicles and employed in a senior position during the follow-up operation to find Van der Mescht in Angola.

It is interesting to note how the politics plays out around the content of *Captor and Captive*. An interview conducted by SA-FM, a radio station owned and managed by the SABC, also with the intent to raise publicity for the film had a complete different approach. The focus of the interview was mainly on the reconciliation and humanitarian effort, applauded the portrayal of Ashipala and SWAPO and sympathized with Van der Mescht.

Afriforum, a civil rights organization and subsidiary of the trade union Solidarity, whose aim is to protect the civil rights of Afrikaners, agreed to give publicity to *Captor and Captive* in their widely circulated newsletter where the DVD was advertised. The CEO of Afriforum was positive that the publicity would create interest and showed support in this regard. Not a single request for a DVD sale or information about the film was received through this medium. It seems unbelievable, given the current interest in the Border War.

The Afrikaner establishment did not support *Captor and Captive* either, but this could have been expected since the SADF was portrayed in a negative light, which wasn't the intention upon embarking on the film, but naturally transpired. The Heritage Foundation, working in close conjunction and association with the Voortrekker Monument and located at the same premises, promotes the preservation of the heritage of the Afrikaner. During the planning phase of the film, support in the form of finance, endorsement or marketing assistance was requested from the Heritage Foundation. The request for support was based on the fact that the film contributes towards the history of the Border War, features the story of an Afrikaner and contributes towards nation building. The Managing Director of the Heritage Foundation is a former SADF general and member of the Afrikaner establishment and employs former SADF members. The request was denied and any further attempts for support were also denied. The Heritage Foundation has a retail outlet that sells Afrikaans language publications including books and digital media. Occasionally they also stock English publications of relevance. After numerous requests, the shop declined to sell DVDs of the film and the reason given was that it contains too much English language. The language used in the film comprise of 40% Afrikaans, 40% English and 20% Oshivambo, and the main character is an Afrikaner,

mainly using Afrikaans dialogue in his narrative. This attitude again underlines the opposing emotions and viewpoints involved regarding the Border War; as well as the negative attitude towards Van der Mescht. *Captor and Captive* was submitted for a possible sale to KykNET, whose target market is exclusively for Afrikaans speaking people, and was also declined. In summary, all the various attempts to find support for *Captor and Captive* from the Afrikaner camps upon the first phase and towards completion of the film failed dismally.

It is interesting to note that the documentary film *Betrayed* (2007), following the lives of three former 32 Battalion soldiers, produced and directed by the author, received a very positive feedback from Afrikaners across the political spectrum. In addition it also received wide acclaim from a wide range of South Africans from various political, economical and language divides. The dominant message concluded that white males who participated in the Border War is trying to make sense of a seemingly pointless war and feels that the NP government sold them out to the ANC. Despite this message which is not entirely positive towards the Afrikaner establishment or the SADF, it was received in a positive light, completely in contrast to the reaction towards *Captor and Captive*. It seems as if the derogative, negative attitude and lack of support towards *Captor and Captive* which stems from the Afrikaner market is indicative of the attitude towards Van der Mescht with reference to being a bad troop who was a traitor. It is however difficult to measure and one can only assume that this is part of a complex situation, regarding the current debates about the Border War. It seems as if the Afrikaner establishment that maintained the rumor of Van der Mescht being a traitor for their own benefit, again played a role in ensuring that *Captor and Captive* is not brought to the attention of the Afrikaner public, because it portrays the SADF in a bad light.

In addition to the negative reaction received from the Afrikaner market, attempts to find distribution and sales agents struggled, and limited interest in this regard was received at film markets globally. This fact has nothing to do with the local Afrikaner dynamics and it seems as if *Captor and Captive* is not of great interest to the global market. It also underlines the fact that documentary film does not have a mass appeal and distribution

platforms are very limited and over saturated. Again, it is difficult to measure and a complex scenario. It was however expected that the film would receive local support from a certain sector of the Afrikaner market which did not materialize. In summary, *Captor and Captive* performed badly in the market place, but due to its historical nature the situation might change as trends in the global film market change and there might be interest shown in the future. It remains a valuable historical product with a strong message.

Van der Mescht was under the impression that he received bad treatment from the SADF and NP government which is only partly true. He did not realize the extent and complexity of the negotiations to release him and perceived the SADF and NP government as the enemy who kept him in prison for over four years, not attending to his or Cheryl's needs. Official SADF documents states that Cheryl received his salary whilst he was imprisoned, and upon his return, he received backdated salary from the SADF in a lump sum, equal to the period that he was imprisoned.²⁴⁹ Cheryl relates how the welfare officer, Major van Wyk, who was specifically tasked to look after their emotional and financial welfare, took special care of her and Chantal, and how she appreciates it, to this day.²⁵⁰ The situation was both uncomfortable and complex with Van der Mescht held as a POW for over four years in a hostile country, lack of information and communication about his future whilst he was there, when he returned home he was looked upon as a traitor by fellow soldiers and the public, to this day. He never enquired about anything, made assumptions and shut down emotionally.

Van der Mescht completed the filming process in December 2009, and it turned out that the Van der Mescht family perceived the project as glamorous and a potential capital gain. After much deliberation, the agreement concluded with the family resulted in a once off payment and further financial remuneration in the event of *Captor and Captive* reflecting profit. Without this agreement, *Captor and Captive* would not have been

²⁴⁹ Personnel file, Ref Army HQ (82) CF 02.03.76 – 19.05.82 Van der Mescht G.J. 71511430 BT, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.

²⁵⁰ MVV, Group 5, Box 73, Ref MV/62/14, Welfare report 4 May 1981, Documentation Centre, Department of Defence.
Cheryl van der Mescht, interview, 2007 – 2009.

released. However, to date the film has not made a return on its investment and reflects considerable debt. According to psychologists who deal in PTSD, it seems as if Van der Mescht hasn't found closure after the filming process, despite the many efforts.²⁵¹ His story remains a tragic one, leaving lasting scars.

People's circumstances differ and they react in different ways to situations exposed to in life. Since the Anglo Boer War, South African soldiers were held as POWs, and the circumstances are different in each war, with many similarities as mentioned in the study. Van der Mescht's situation as a POW is not unique, and he is one of many unfortunate soldiers who got captured during the ugly business of war. However, Van der Mescht was indeed given hostile treatment by the SADF and NP government and its public as discussed at length in the study. He conducted his compulsory national service and subsequent camps and followed the laws and regulations as was expected from SADF conscripts at the time. During his last camp his only duty as a Sapper soldier was to ensure that the soldiers operating in the area has access to clean drinking water. The infantry soldiers responsible for his security could not provide for his safety on the night of the attack. Van der Mescht was the unfortunate person at the wrong place at the wrong time which led to much misery and trauma in his life.

Sadly, Ashipala passed away in May 2010, shortly after the filming was completed. He never had the opportunity to see the finished product of *Captor and Captive* which is tragic since he was looking forward to the end result. Ashipala thoroughly enjoyed the filming process and was proud to appear in the film. *Captor and Captive* is fortunately able to leave a positive legacy of Ashipala to his family and the people of Namibia, as well as demystify the rumor that Van der Mescht was wrongly accused of being a traitor. The hope remains that the film will still be relevant and attracts more attention in years to come.

²⁵¹ Psych X and various anonymous psychologists, interviews, 2007 – 2012.

Conclusion

The main focus of the dissertation is an analysis of the representation of history through film, with reference to the documentary film *Captor and Captive*. It further provides a comprehensive overview of the historical event that *Captor and Captive* is based upon, mainly through interviews with primary sources, supplemented by archival records.

The conclusion was made that the genre of film holds a strong position in its representation of history, and filmmakers around the world especially in developing countries are contributing to the phenomena. Films based on historical events are able to represent an informative picture of the past and an alternative manner to inform people not interested or able to read historical text. It can potentially reach a wider audience. Films are however more limited than historical text to deal with comprehensive and complex information. It is challenging to condense content including ideas, viewpoints and ideologies into a limited time frame, as opposed to historical text which can be elaborated on. Historical text is able to provide more in depth information and arguments which allows for critical thinking. However, both historical text and film has a unique role to play in preserving historical events, each with their own set of rules and conventions and can either stand alone or complement each other. In a constantly changing and dynamic world, a multi-disciplinary approach is inevitable.

Documentary filmmakers dealing with historical events have a responsibility to represent the past as accurately as possible. It is advisable that they consult with historians to ensure credible content. Historical text and documentary film of any genre is not considered absolutely objective or truthful; and depends on the perspective, agenda, ideology and viewpoint of the author or filmmaker. When filmmakers set out with a clear point of view and seek subjective truths, the content might be more authentic, as opposed to trying to sell it as being the absolute objective truth.

The historical incident regarding the capture of Van der Mescht by Ashipala discussed in the dissertation took place during the Border War (1966 – 1989). Propaganda films were

produced during the war by the South African authorities, to popularize and defend the war to its public. Filmmakers and organizations opposing the war produced a limited number of films which was usually banned and didn't reach its intended South African audience. After the war, there was an initial silence which is common with most wars, since it usually takes 20 years after a war before participants' start talking and venting out. Literature, film and theatre about the Border War are currently very topical and evolving. The latest book by military historian Leopold Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966 – 1989*, published in 2013, was written many years after the war ended for the sake of historical perspective, the dust to settle and for official documentation to become available through various archives and institutions.

The SADF perceived Communism as one of the threats to the safety and security of its public and it is argued that the Border War was waged within the broader context of the Cold War to keep the Communists at bay. The South African authorities used Communism as one of the main reasons to defend the Border War. Young conscripted men were killed, captured or injured in neighboring Namibia and Angola and the public was uncomfortable with the situation. The NP government was dependant on its public to remain in power and had to defend its position. Today, many years after the war, there are various opposing viewpoints about the causes of the war debated within the public sphere and the media. A valid argument is that the cause for the war should be found outside of the parameters of the Cold War and Communist threats. It suggests an exploration of the war within a wider historical context, starting with the annexation of Namibia by Germany in 1884. The first clash between South African forces and the Ovambo people was in 1917, and not in 1966, stated as the official start of the Border War. The various opposing viewpoints are indicative of the varying emotions involved in the aftermath of the Border War, and are mostly voiced in the media in reaction to reviews on publications of the war. Comments are mostly restricted to the opinions of former conscripts and PF soldiers who romanticize the war and defend any criticism towards it; former conscripts who tries to make sense of the war and suffer from war trauma, who asks if it was worth it, question why they had to fight in a war, and feels betrayed by the NP government whom they feel sold them out to the ANC; and lastly the

liberal voices who objected to national service and criticize the Border War as a matter of principle.

The historical event discussed in the dissertation took place within a period of complex political dynamics and conflict in southern Africa, with various role players involved, against the backdrop of the Cold War. In the middle 1970's, SWAPO embarked on a strategy to counter the military strength of the SADF, and increased its guerilla activities in northern Namibia and southern Angola. A decision was made to capture SADF soldiers and use them as propaganda material to further the cause of SWAPO within the global anti-apartheid community. This led to the successful capture of Van der Mescht in February 1978, who subsequently became a valuable propaganda item as a POW of SWAPO. It turned out that Van der Mescht became Ashipala's trophy and he became a legend within SWAPO and a hero for the struggle for liberation; partly because of his soldiering skills and partly because of his capture of Van der Mescht. Ashipala wanted South Africans to remember him for saving the life of an enemy and emphasized that Van der Mescht was kept alive during the attack and subsequent retreat to Angola until he was handed over to the SWAPO commanders.

Shortly after the incident, a rumor developed within the SADF that Van der Mescht was a traitor that walked over to join the enemy, and that the capture was a smoke screen. The story is still prevalent today, and he is often referred to as a bad troop by former SADF officers and troops. The capture of Van der Mescht was both a shock and embarrassment to the SADF which perceived PLAN as a guerilla army without discipline and military teeth. Yet PLAN managed to successfully capture Van der Mescht approximately 10 kilometers from the Angolan border inside Namibia. The rescue operation including trained infantry soldiers, paratroopers, aircraft and mechanized motor convoys failed to find Van der Mescht. The capture made news headlines in South Africa and abroad, and highlighted the possibility of young men getting killed and held captive in Angola and it became increasingly difficult to hide from the public. The NP government needed the public's vote to remain in power. It seems that it was easier to put the blame on a troop

without rank and of low social standing with little use for the SADF, than to accept responsibility for the incident.

Limited information is available on South African POWs held captive during the Border War; partly because the war was secretive, and partly because the issue of young men held captive in Angola was a political embarrassment to the authorities. The first record of POWs dates to 1975 and 1976 during the period of Operation Savannah when eight SADF soldiers were captured inside Angola, during different incidents. They all got released in 1978, shortly after Van der Mescht became a POW. The next available record is that of Special Force soldier Wynand du Toit who was captured in 1985 in Angola, and held as a POW by MPLA for a period of two years and four months. He was captured during a secret mission to sabotage the oil refinery in Cabinda. Du Toit, a PF soldier was tortured because he had access to valuable intelligence information, in contrast to Van der Mescht who was a conscript and of no value to the enemy regarding intelligence.

There are both similarities and differences in the circumstances in which Van der Mescht and Du Toit were captured, imprisoned and released. They were captured by different enemy forces during different periods in the war, resulting in different political dynamics to their respective circumstances. It is clear that Du Toit received a better welcome when he returned home and became a national hero whilst Van der Mescht was branded a traitor. Class division that stems from a historical Afrikaner perspective on class played a role in the manner that Van der Mescht and Du Toit were treated and perceived by their government and public. Du Toit was considered of a higher social standing because of his educational and military credentials as opposed to Van der Mescht who was considered working class. However, both men suffered severe trauma being held prisoner in a foreign hostile country, irrespective of class or social standing.

Audience and public reaction towards the screening of *Captor and Captive* is discussed in the dissertation. It is not based on an organized survey, complex to measure and limited in its assumed conclusions, yet it does shed some light on the matter. In South Africa, the film was well received by progressive and liberal viewers across the cultural

divide. The film was very well received by the Namibian public, referring specifically to SWAPO supporters. *Captor and Captive* screened at three film festivals in the Middle East and seems as if the film attracted interest in the Arab world in the wake of the Arab Awakening, following the 2011 revolt that broke out in Egypt. The conclusion is made that the theme of reconciliation of a story from the African continent is the point of interest.

Various attempts to find support from the Afrikaner market for *Captor and Captive* since inception of the project towards completion failed dismally. The lack of support and negative attitude is indicative of the attitude towards Van der Mescht with reference to being a bad troop who was a traitor. One can only assume that this is part of a complex situation, regarding the current emotional debates about the Border War. It seems as if the Afrikaner establishment that maintained the rumor of Van der Mescht being a traitor for their own benefit, again played a role in ensuring that *Captor and Captive* is not brought to the attention of the Afrikaner public.

Van der Mescht's situation as a POW was not unique. He is one of many unfortunate soldiers who got captured during the ugly business of war. However, Van der Mescht did indeed receive hostile treatment by the SADF and NP government. During his last compulsory military camp which he dutifully attended to, his duty as a Sapper soldier was to ensure that soldiers have access to clean drinking water. The section of nine infantry soldiers responsible for securing the waterhole and safety of the two Sapper soldiers could not secure his safety on the night of the attack, which led to much misery and trauma in his life.

Captor and Captive and the supplementing dissertation are able to leave a positive legacy of Ashipala who passed away shortly after the completion of the film; demystify the rumor that Van der Mescht was wrongly accused of being a traitor; and contribute towards the historiography of the Border War collection.

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