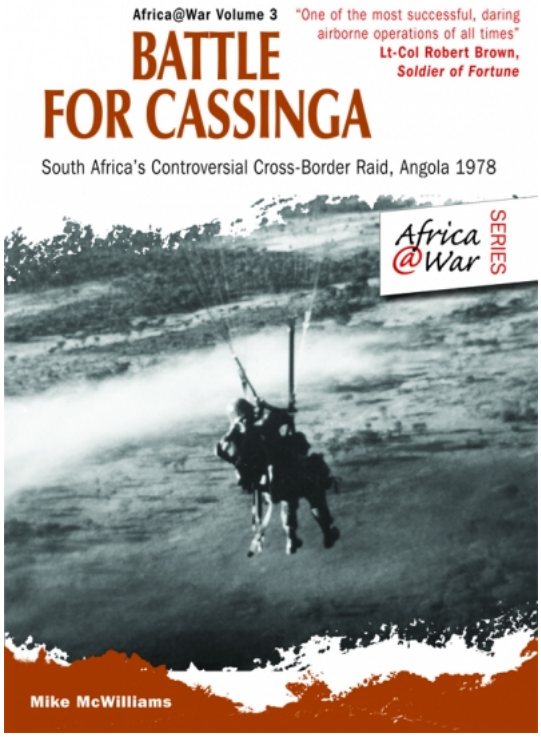

“Battle for Cassinga” is the third in a new series on African conflict, “Africa@War”, and examines South Africa's still-very controversial cross-border parachute raid in Angola in May 1978.

This controversy relates to the ongoing “battle of history” in Southern Africa. In George Orwell’s novel, “1984”, the motto of the Ministry of Information proclaimed "He who controls the present, controls the past. He who controls the past, controls the future." To this one can add the observation of Frederik van Zyl Slabbert in his “The Other Side of History” (Jonathan Ball, Jeppestown, Johannesburg, 2006) that "One thing the 'old' and 'new' South Africa have in common is a passion for inventing history. History is not seen as a dispassionate inquiry into what happened, but rather as part of political mobilisation promoting some form of collective self-interest.”

Cassinga is a text book case of such myth-making and the result, today, is two parallel sets of fervently-held history. McWilliams was one of the Citizen Force paratroopers that dropped on the People's Liberation Army of Namibia's base at Cassinga on May 4. A rifleman (private) he was assault commander Colonel Jan Breytenbach's official photographer and in addition to all his equipment, ammunition and medical kit carried several cameras (some his own) and a cine camera. The result is some spectacular pictures, including many colour shots, taken during the parachute drop, the battle in the base and in its immediate aftermath. The cover picture may be the most jaw-dropping: Taken by photographer Sergeant Des Steenkamp it shows McWilliams himself half out of his parachute harness, pulling himself up the left lift web of his “pumpkin” parachute.

The author records the Air Force misdropped the 210 attackers (the paltry number was dictated by the amount of helicopters available to evacuate them. Breytenbach wanted 450 to take on up to 3000 insurgents on the ground) and he was drifting towards the Culonga River

and would likely splash down it it. This was no-where near his allocated drop zone...

The “Battle for Cassinga” is spirited account of the events that day. If one is seeking a concise, concrete, educational but readable source on the attack on Moscow base, as PLAN called Cassinga, this is it.

Mike McWilliams
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