

# **The last soldier to die in the Namibian Border War- Corporal Hermann Carstens, 1 Reconnaissance Regiment, 4 April 1989**



**Written by Tinus de Klerk and Leon Bezuidenhout**

**Copyright: Tinus de Klerk & Leon Bezuidenhout**

**THIS ARTICLE IS NOT FOR COMMERCIAL USE, OR TO BE SOLD IN ANY FORM**

**Renier Jansen reserves the copyright of all photos**

## **The short background: Introduction to 23 years of war**

South Africa administered the German colony of German South West Africa during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War from 1915. Initially, South Africa wanted to incorporate the territory as a fifth province of the country. The incorporation into South Africa however, never materialized, and from the 1960's, more and more people wanted to declare, the then South West Africa, an independent state, Namibia.

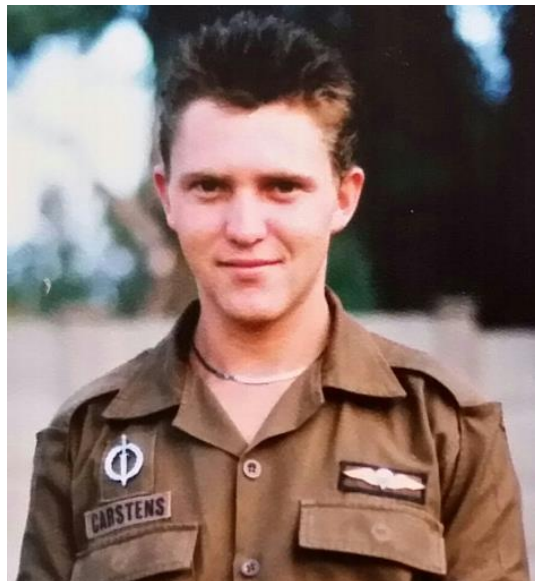
In 1966 Swapo, (the South West African People's Organization) through their military wing PLAN, started an armed insurgency against the South African administrators. The war would

last for 23 years, and eventually it would also escalate into Angola and for some time into Zambia.

The Namibian Border War became in essence, a Cold War by proxy. By the early 1970's, the United Nations Organization, adopted a resolution, Resolution 435, to lay the foundation for Namibian independence. By 1988 the Cold War drew to a close and the South Africans, the Cubans and the Angolans were ready to engage into negotiations, to withdraw their troops from the Namibian/Angolan border. These negotiations opened the way to Namibian independence.

One of the issues agreed upon in the trilateral negotiations, was that the South African troops had to be reduced to 1500 men, and that they would be confined to base. Swapo would have to withdraw to 150km north of the border. Resolution 435 however made it clear that Swapo, with the implementation of the Resolution, which was on 1 April 1989, would remain in their bases. If they had established bases on Namibian soil, then they also had to be confined to those bases. Swapo saw this as a loophole, and clandestinely planned a massive invasion for 31 March/1 April 1989. The sole intention was to establish bases in Northern Namibia.

The South Africans, however, did not trust Swapo, and even less the influx of foreign troops made up of the UN Untag Force. This force would supervise the transition period, and consisted of peacekeepers from a number of UN states. The Untag force would consist of troops from Finland, Britain, America, Pakistan and Kenya. South Africa continued operating their intelligence sources. The South West African Police (SWAPOL) and their Security Branch were tasked to keep up their system of informers and spies.



*Corporal Hermann Carstens, 1RR, Operators Badge and Wings on his chest*

To help monitor the situation and assist in gathering information, about 30 men from the South African Special Forces (Recce's), and a number of South African Military Intelligence operators,

were placed in SWAPOL. As part of the Recce contingent a number of Swahili speaking operators were included, to monitor the Kenyan soldiers of Untag. This military operation would be known as “Operation Saga”.

### **The Man: Herman Carstens**

Hermann Carstens was born on 30 September 1968. He was the son of a South African military officer. He went to Uniefees Primary School, 25km north of Pretoria. Later he attended Voortrekkerhoogte Hoërskool. The school consisted mainly of children from military personnel.



*Hermann as band major, Hoërskool Voortrekkerhoogte*

It was in this environment where the young Carstens soon proved himself as a man destined for a bright military career. He was amongst others, the band major of the school’s military band. As an athlete, he excelled in field and track. He was a very good long jumper.

After completing school in 1986, he joined the South African Army, like all young white men of that age. But he would not remain an ordinary soldier. He had a vision. He was driven. He wanted to be with the best. He volunteered for selection to the elite South African Parachute Battalion, and passed the course. But even that was not good enough, and when the Recce’s visited, he volunteered again.

This time he was among the big fish. Special Force's all over the world usually consist of older men. Not 18 or 19 year old soldiers. But here was one of the exceptions. Hermann passed the selection, continued with the course and passed the course. He was not even 20 years old.

When men from the Reconnaissance Regiments for Operation Saga were selected, it was decided that all of them would first complete an advance medical course, as this would have been their cover, being medical personnel. Hermann was too late, and did not do the medical course. He was sent later to join the others who had already been selected for the operation. This was fate, and he would be destined to be behind the exposed guns of a Casspir on 4 April 1989. The other Recce in the ambush that day was inside another Casspir- as the medic.

### **Operation Saga: Corporal Hermann Carstens**

Operation Saga, an independent Special Forces operation, was planned to be a long-term intelligence gathering operation in northern South West Africa/Namibia. This operation, and other combined ops was to have painted a real-time intelligence picture of events that were to unfold as the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) would arrive and so also the SWAPO exiles. Their cover also changed from being medical personnel to being SWAPO Security Police, as this would ensure more freedom of movement without raising suspicion.



*Hermann during Recce training*

In the beginning of February 1989, the Special Forces contingent, the majority being operators, arrived in Oshakati after spending a week preparing at the South West Africa (SWA) Security Police farm on the outskirts of Windhoek. They used the cover of Security Police and they received their police ranks. Another few days of preparation followed in Oshakati at the Security Police Headquarters before they were deployed. The 4 Reconnaissance Regiment (4 Recce Regt) group was deployed to the Kavango and Caprivi regions, while the 1 Recce Regt, supported by some operators and intelligence personnel from 5 Recce Regt, were deployed in the central and eastern areas. The 1RR and 5RR area of operations would stretch from Nkongo in eastern Ovamboland and west to Opuwa in the Koakoveld. The operators were posted at

Security Police bases. Constables (Corporals) Pieter du Plessis and Hermann Carstens were deployed to the Security Police base at Okatope in Ovamboland.

During March, under the agreed upon UN Resolution 435, the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) arrived in drips and drabs to become the interim authority on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April.



*Hermann in the Operational Area, Northern Namibia 1988*

On Friday, the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, Koevoet and SWA Security Police patrols were placed on alert along the border, in expectation of a possible Swapo invasion. Police informers brought information earlier regarding the execution of a Swapo invasion plan on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March.

On Saturday morning, 1 April 1989, events took a turn for the worse as heavily armed SWAPO insurgents began invading South West Africa/Namibia. The police were under pressure as heavy fighting broke out. Koevoet (The SWAPOL Counter-Insurgency Unit) took the brunt, as all the SADF units had either been sent home or were confined to base. For the time, before the army could be mobilized, the police used all hands on deck. Security Police teams also deployed on the 1<sup>st</sup>. For the next four days, the bloodiest fighting of the War, took place on Namibian soil. The Swapo groups were big, with up to 250 insurgents in a group. As the groups were attacked, they were scattered, and they splintered off into smaller units.

On the 4<sup>th</sup>, in the vicinity of Eenhana, Call Sign 21C, the Okatope Security Police team of which Pieter and Hermann were members, left their temporary base near the SADF's Okankolo base

just after 08h00 to patrol the area. Having not done the advanced medic course Hermann was appointed to be one of the car commanders which entailed manning the mounted machine guns while Pieter, in the absence of the team medic who was on leave, acted as the medic.



*One of the last photos ever taken of the young Recce - now with a beard.*

At approximately 11h45 four sets of tracks, about three hours old, were discovered and after following the tracks for a while, they noticed that more SWAPO's had joined bringing the total to more than 10.

The Security Police team entered a belt of thick vegetation, followed by grassland and then a mahango field and a kraal. About three kilometres south of Eenhana, SWAPO initiated an ambush with AK and RPG fire. Hermann's Casspir was the leading vehicle, and thus first in the ambush. He returned fire with the twin 30 Brownings, while the other Casspir raced forward and commenced to "maal"- the Afrikaans word for mill, this technique was used and perfected by Koevoet and was also used by the SWAPOL Security Teams and 101 Bn. It entailed that all the vehicles race forward and drive in different directions in the contact area so as to confuse the enemy while presenting a difficult target and engaging the enemy from every direction. Hermann's Casspir's right rear wheel was shot out, and the vehicle came to a stop.

Pieter remembers when the Casspir he was in drove past Hermann's Casspir; he saw Hermann slumped in the turret. In the ensuing contact nine SWAPO's were killed bringing the total for the contact to 12. Once the contact died down, after about three minutes, Pieter made his way over to Hermann, and saw he had a wound behind his ear, all his vital signs indicated that he was dead. Hermann's body and a walking wounded Special Constable was casevaced by helicopter. A Koevoet team arrived, reported the kills (by doing so effectively claiming the kills), and followed the tracks of the remaining SWAPO's who had escaped and later that afternoon killed another seven of them.



## **The legacy: The last man to die**

It took nine days to stop the treacherous Swapo incursion. When the last shot had been fired, more than 300 of the estimated 1500 insurgents were killed. Between the Army, which had since been released from their bases, and the initially under gunned and under strength policemen, 31 died. Lt. Els of the Special Service Battalion was wounded on 3 April. He died of his wounds on 4 April. A number of Namibian and South African counter-insurgency policemen would also be killed in action on 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1989. However, the last soldier to be killed in action, was the brave but rather unlucky Corporal Hermann Carstens. He was like most South Africans that died in that conflict, a very young 19 or 20 year old. But this young man was destined to be there. As a young man he set high standards, and against the odds became the Recce he wanted to be. Hermann Carstens was a man who chased his dream, and then started to live it.



*After his death, Hermann's fellow operators sent his boots, covered in gold, back to his parents. One of the boots is now in Duxford, England, with Renier Jansen, his close friend from high school. The bond between the two young men always remained. The other boot is with Hermann's father in Pretoria*

Hermann was buried with full military honours in April 1989, in the Heroes Acre at the Warmbad Cemetery. The town is now known as Bela-Bela. His bravery will be remembered forever by a special stone on his grave.



Hermann Carstens will be remembered at the running of the 13<sup>th</sup> Afriforum Springbok Vasbyt 10/25km Road Race in 2019, and his name be given a special place, amongst the previously unknown soldiers honoured by this event.

*Written by Tinus de Klerk, team leader of the 1RR detachment, during Operation Saga. Information obtained from the yet unpublished manuscript of the book "South African Special Forces" by Tinus de Klerk*

*Co-written and biographical data by Leon Bezuidenhout.*

*Photos supplied by Renier Jansen, Duxford, England*

*Eyewitness account by Pieter du Plessis, 1RR, as told to Tinus de Klerk*

*30 January 2019  
Pretoria*