

ONGULUMBASHE: WHERE THE BUSHWAR BEGAN

Paul J. Els

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290 pages

Index, list of abbreviations, 200 photographs, maps and illustrations. *Prologue* by Gen. J.V. van der Merwe, former Commissioner of the South African Police and *Epilogue* by Gen. J.J. Geldenhuys, former Chief of the South African Defence Force.

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Retired Warrant Officer First Class, Paul J. Els, South African Corps of Signals, is a veteran of the so-called 'Bush War'. He did his first 'stint on the Border' (p. v) in 1968, participated in Operation Savannah during South Africa's intervention in the Angolan civil war in 1975/76 and subsequently served in the South African Special Forces as long-distance radio operator for 5 Reconnaissance Commando. His first book, *We Fear Naught But God: The Story of the South African Special Forces* (Covosday: Johannesburg) appeared in 2000, followed by *Ongulumbashe: Die Begin van die Bosoorlog* in 2004, which he has now translated into English under the title above. The English edition adds nothing of significance to the original Afrikaans text, but makes his work available to a wider audience. The epilogue by Gen. J.J. Geldenhuys, which was added to the English edition, is an almost verbatim translation of parts of Geldenhuys's foreword to the new edition of his own book *Die Wat Gewen Het: Feite en Fabels van die Bosoorlog*. (Litera Publikasies: Pretoria 2007).

Ongulumbashe: Where the Bushwar Began, comprises 18 chapters and tells the story of *Operation Blouwildebees*, the joint South African Defence Force/South African Police attack on the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) base at Ongulumbashe on 26 August 1966, which is generally accepted as the beginning of South Africa's 23-year 'Bush War' in South West Africa (SWA)/Namibia and Angola. The first five chapters sketch a haphazard background

to the beginning of the 'Bush War', dealing with the origins of South Africa's involvement in SWA/Namibia, the establishment of SWAPO and the latter's insurgent activities up to August 1966, including the establishment of their base at Ongulumbashe. Chapters 6 to 11 describe the South African security forces' reconnaissance of the SWAPO base, their preparations for Operation Blouwildebess and the course of the battle at Ongulumbashe. Chapter 12 then interrupts the discussion with a superficial account of the sequence of events after the battle at Ongulumbashe up to the independence of Namibia in 1990. Chapter 13 jumps back to the consequences of Ongulumbashe, followed by a loose potpourri comprising discussions on the personae dramatis (Chapter 14), monuments/memorials (Chapter 15), a collection of photographs and newspaper clippings (Chapter 16), a conclusion (Chapter 17), an unnumbered epilogue by General J.J. Geldenhuys and an elucidation (Chapter 18) comprising explanations of force compositions, equipment used, particular incidents, etc.

Els is not a professional historian and this is not a scholarly work. His sources are mostly secondary and his reference system is vague and ineffective. His story lacks focus, cohesion, logic progression and sober reflection, and he often wanders off on irrelevant sidetracks, of which German intelligence activities in South Africa and South West Africa during the Second World War and the story of Robey Leibbrandt (Chapter 1) is one of numerous examples. The language and style is less than satisfactory, while typing errors and sloppiness undermine the technical quality of the book. The table of contents, for instance, states that the source list commences on p. 286, whereas it actually begins on p. 285 and then starts all over again on p. 286.

Having said all this, the book was obviously not written for a scholarly audience, but for the popular market, for laymen with an appetite for popular military history and entertaining 'war stories'. From that perspective, it contributes to South African literature on the so-called 'Bush War' and increases the available knowledge on Operation Blouwildebess, because the author accessed hitherto untapped primary sources by conducting interviews with historical participants and by gaining access to some unpublished manuscripts. In terms of length, this is also the most comprehensive account of the events to date.

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