

**“There was simply too much water”:  
Exploring the Laingsburg Flood of 1981**

by

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## **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis provides a revised, inclusive, integrated, pre-and post-apartheid contextual presentation of the Laingsburg flood disaster of 1981, still widely regarded as one of the most devastating natural disasters in South African history. To develop and compile a balanced and comprehensive account of this catastrophe, multiple untapped primary and secondary sources were utilized. The memorialization of this event was also explored and care was exercised to address the lacuna created by the lack of contextual information and the exclusion of “non-white” flood survivors’ narratives. The aim of this thesis was thus broadly two-fold. As far as possible, it attempts to provide an inclusive, comprehensive, politically contextual account of the disaster and then to document the subsequent attempts to memorialize it via commemoration and commercialization.

## Opsomming

Hierdie verhandeling bied 'n hersiene, geïntegreerde voor en post-apartheid kontekstuele weergawe van die rampspoedige Laingsburg vloed in 1981 wat nog steeds as een van die mees verwoestende natuurlike rampe in Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis beskou word. Ten einde 'n omvattende en gebalanseerde ontleding daar te stel, is 'n verskeidenheid van voorheen onbenutte primêre en sekondêre bronne ingespan. Die wyse waarop die gebeurtenis in herinnering geroep is, is eweneens ontleed. Die fokus was onder meer op die leemtes wat ontstaan het as gevolg van die gebrek aan kontekstuele inligting en die uitsluiting van die narratiewe van "nie-wit" vloed oorlewendes. Breedweg was die doel van die verhandeling tweeledig. Dit poog om sover as moontlik 'n inklusiewe, omvattende en polities kontekstuele weergawe van die ramp te gee en dan om die daaropvolgende pogings om die gebeurtenis in herinnering te roep deur onder andere kommersialisering, te dokumenteer.

**Keywords:** Commemoration, Disasters, Floods, Laingsburg Flood, Memorialization, South Africa

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## **List of Abbreviations**

DVD (Digital Versatile Disc)

DRD (Dutch Reformed Church)

IRSJ (Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice)

JOC (Joint Operations Centre)

PDSA (People's Dispensary for Sick Animals)

SAAF (South African Air Force)

SABC (South African Broadcasting Cooperation)

SANTAM (South African National Trust and Assurance Company)

SADF (South African Defence Force)

SAVF (Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie)

SAPF (South African Police Force)

VLV (Vroue Landbou Vereniging)

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background to the Study

South Africa has experienced its share of natural and man-made disasters and in the aftermath thereof, various attempts at memorialization have been made. Albeit the case, post-apartheid era academic literature regarding memorialization in South Africa, has focused predominantly on atrocities associated with and the struggle against apartheid.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, there appears to be a gap in the South African historiography regarding the memorialization of other catastrophes, specifically natural disasters. This is the status quo, regardless of the recent spate of interest displayed in this phenomenon, both within and outside of the academe. This thesis is therefore an attempt to address the apparent lacunae in the South African historiography regarding natural disasters and its memorialization. It provides an integrated and comprehensive account of the Laingsburg flood of 1981, one of the most devastating natural disasters in South African history in terms of the resulting environmental damage and loss of life. Furthermore, this account of the flood includes the previously largely excluded narratives, namely that of non-white flood survivors and it discusses the ongoing impact of the flood on the town of Laingsburg, its inhabitants and its tourism sector. The remainder of chapter one provides a brief review of literature relevant to this study. It articulates the problem statement and focus, the methodology that was employed and it outlines the objectives of the chapters that follow.

#### Literature Review

A disaster refers to a sudden calamitous event that disrupts the functioning of a community and causes human, material and economic or environmental losses, which exceeds a community's ability to cope using its own resources.<sup>2</sup> Disasters are broadly

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<sup>1</sup> For literature in this regard, see S. Marschall: "The Memory of Trauma and Resistance: Public Memorialization and Democracy in Post-apartheid South Africa", *The Journal of South African and American Studies*, (11), (4), 2010, pp. 36-381.

<sup>2</sup> *What is a disaster?* <http://www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/disaster-management/about-disasters/what-is-a-disaster/> (21 September 2017).

divided into two categories, namely natural disasters and man-made disasters. Natural disasters can include epidemics, earthquakes, floods, droughts and, as in the case of this thesis, flooding.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, man-made disasters, also referred to as “technical threats” can include power plant accidents, wars and even acts of terror.<sup>4</sup>

South African historians have largely neglected the history of natural disasters. It is purported that an interest in historical disaster research only emerged during the 1990's, when researchers in France attempted to provide all-inclusive accounts of disasters, within a cultural studies context. They believed such an account should also include geographical, social, economic and cultural components. The German historian, Arno Borst, who conducted a pioneering study of the Carinthian earthquake of 1348, agreed with such comprehensive historical accounts of disasters. Contrarily however, he believed that this kind of analysis of disasters should include experience, interpretation, description, reaction, coping and memory<sup>5</sup>, a perspective that proved useful in the compilation of this thesis.

Arno Borst maintained that disasters, specifically natural disasters, are an important part of the social experience and that the historical documentation thereof is thus particularly important. In recent years, there is a reported growing trend by contemporary researchers to understand disasters from a historical perspective, supposedly motivated by the researchers' needs to satisfy their own interests. Regardless of their personal motivations, the value of providing comprehensive historical accounts of disasters is abundantly evident, especially when considering its role in shaping subsequent political and economic responses. An example hereof, is the researching of droughts and floods in specific geographical locations, since the insights gained, often significantly inform agricultural practices and infrastructural improvements, in anticipation of reoccurrence.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A. Jah, J. Barenstein, P. Phelps, D. Pittet & S. Senah (eds.): *Safer Homes, Stronger Communities: A Handbook for Reconstructing after Natural Disasters*, p. 340.

<sup>4</sup> G.J. Schenk: “Historical disaster research: state of research, concepts, methods and case studies,” *Historical Social Research*, (32), (3), 2007, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> G.J. Schenk: “Historical disaster research: state of research, concepts, methods and case studies,” *Historical Social Research*, (32), (3), 2007, p. 11.

It is hardly surprising, that almost immediately after the Laingsburg flood several publications emerged. They focused primarily on the flood and the impact it had on the community of Laingsburg. These publications include *Vloedramp*<sup>7</sup>, written by Wilhelm Kühne, *Die Burger* newspaper's main correspondent in Laingsburg after the flood. This provides a brief discussion of the flood, based on the articles which were published in *Die Burger* that year. Written for posterity, this publication only considered the immediate impact of the disaster, in the months following the flood. Furthermore, it did not integrate all the available sources, such as interviews, reports and articles published in other newspapers. Secondly, *Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*<sup>8</sup> contains Laingsburg residents' accounts of the flood. However, these accounts are mainly those of its white community resulting in an imbalance in the narrative. Additionally, the publication *Klimatologiese en geomorfologiese aspekte van oorstromings in Suid-Afrika, met spesiale verwysing na die Laingsburgramp*, in part explains the Laingsburg flood within a scientific context.<sup>9</sup> Finally the publication *Nog Laingsburgvloed* compiled by Carel van Wyk provides a more extensive and balanced account of the experiences of flood victims based on interviews conducted with those whose narratives were previously left out, namely the narratives of the coloured community of Laingsburg.<sup>10</sup>

### **Problem Statement and Focus**

Approximately 265 kilometres from the city of Cape Town, situated between the rugged hills and vast plains of the semi-arid Great Karoo, is the small town of Laingsburg. Known for its tranquility, it is not surprising to learn that travellers are often enticed by the quaint amenities and "stop to enjoy a cup of coffee on a sunny stoep, while idly contemplating life".<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the reason for the town's popularity is a

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<sup>7</sup> See W. Kühne: *Vloedramp*. Kaapstad, Tafelberg, 1981.

<sup>8</sup> See G.F. Marais: *Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*. Cape Town, G.F. Marais, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> See W.A. Niemann, J.T. Harmse & H.W.A. Ellmann: *Klimatologiese en geomorfologiese aspekte van oorstromings in Suid-Afrika, met spesiale verwysing na die Laingsburgramp*. Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch Universiteit, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> See C.A. Van Wyk: *Nog Laingsburgvloed*. Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch Universiteit, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> *Laingsburg Tourism*, <http://www.infolainburg.co.za/index.php?p=14> (13 March 2016).

natural disaster in the form of a flood<sup>12</sup>, which struck on Sunday the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1981, the horror of which belies its now picturesque landscape.

Although numerous publications of the 1981 Laingsburg flood exist, each publication has a specific focus, addressing different aspects of the flood, captured at different points in time. A single, coherent publication that merges and integrates all the available data, including the historically excluded narratives of non-white flood survivors was therefore necessary. Furthermore, from the commencement of this research enterprise the people who volunteered information stressed the importance of addressing what they referred to as inaccuracies and gaps in the existing accounts of the flood, which have reportedly made its way into the public domain. The curator of the Laingsburg Flood Museum could not sufficiently stress the importance of providing what she referred to as a “true and accurate account of events which unfolded and its impact on Laingsburg and its people.”<sup>13</sup> It also became clear that not everybody who could have contributed did so. These highlighted issues constitute the lacuna, which the current study attempts to address.<sup>14</sup> In order to incorporate as much previously excluded data as possible, this account integrates the available primary sources. This required carefully aligning and verifying all firsthand accounts. In this way, the various separate narratives were merged and by so doing, it satisfies in the best way possible, the broader community’s request that this account be accurate and inclusive.

## **Thesis Structure**

This thesis is comprised of six chapters. To appreciate the significance of the 1981 flood on this town and on the country, chapter two provides context. It does so via a brief historical overview of Laingsburg as one of the oldest towns in South Africa, with specific reference to the first European people who settled there and their reasons for doing so. It also includes historically documented information about the region’s climate. Then it provides an integrated narrative of the experiences of flood survivors, based on previously conducted and additional interviews, between 1981 and 2002.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Francis Van Wyk, lifelong Laingsburg resident, flood survivor and now curator of the Laingsburg Flood Museum. F. Van Wyk: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, Laingsburg, Western Cape, 22 June 2016.

<sup>13</sup> F. Van Wyk: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, Laingsburg, Western Cape, 22 June 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, since the Laingsburg flood occurred within the context of a combination of unique manmade, environmental, and meteorological conditions, the ways in which each of these conditions contributed to the disaster is also expanded upon.

Chapter three discusses the ways in which the disaster affected the lives of the Laingsburg residents and the destructive impact it had on the natural and built environment. Then, it elaborates on the immediate response of the Government to the disaster. Finally, this chapter highlights the significance of the highly-publicized nature of this event, demonstrating how the scores of newspaper articles and audio-visual footage recorded by the South African Broadcasting Cooperation (SABC)<sup>15</sup>, contributed significantly to the immense relief effort in the wake of the disaster. The record of these relief efforts includes the documentation of the consequent personal, monetary and other material responses of ordinary South Africans, the business sector and non-governmental organizations, discussed in a single account.

Chapter four focuses on the rebuilding process, highlighting how it was the cause of much controversy, especially regarding decision making at the time. It outlines its challenges and details the specific ways in which the Government, the residents of Laingsburg and other South Africans responded. Since the political context at that time, namely, apartheid, had a significant influence on various aspects of the disaster; it is incorporated into this chapter. Finally, chapter four also presents a discussion of what life was reportedly like for Laingsburg's flood survivors, especially while they were living in the temporary settlement, provided by the Government.

Chapter five focusses on memorialization and inclusion. In the wake of the Laingsburg flood, there were a number of commemorative ceremonies, ultimately aimed at memorializing those who died so tragically that day. However, given the political context at the time, the interviewing and recording processes were mostly not inclusive. The narratives of many so-called black and coloured residents were consequently excluded. This was the case for nearly two decades. Chapter five addresses this. In its focus on the memorialization of the Laingsburg flood, it also conveys the significance of commemoration and memorialization in the wake of disasters. It then

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<sup>15</sup> The author did not deem it necessary to consult the South African Broadcasting Commission (SABC) archives for footage of the flood, as all available footage was bought by the Laingsburg Municipality and copied onto a DVD, which proved useful in completing this research.

details the ways in which the Laingsburg flood has been commemorated and memorialized to date, highlighting the role of memorialization regarding inclusion and it explains why Laingsburg's tourism sector may be regarded as a vehicle for ongoing memorialization.

Chapter six is the concluding chapter of this thesis. It outlines its contributions and then provides a synopsis of the significance of the contributions each of the five preceding chapters made towards the compilation of this narrative. It concludes with a paragraph that distills the essence of what this study achieved.

## Methodology

The occurrence of the flood in an area which receives very little rainfall coupled with the fact that it caused so much devastation and loss of life, made it a highly-publicized event in South African newspapers. This account hence incorporates and integrates information from several newspaper articles, which were immensely valuable as a primary source, in the writing of this thesis. The consulted articles were published in popular Afrikaans and English newspapers such as and among others, *Die Burger* and *Rapport* as well as *The Cape Times* and *The Cape Argus*, respectively. According to John Tosh, the most important primary source of information is the press.<sup>16</sup> He puts forward three reasons why.

Firstly, the press records the political and social views, which made most impact at the time. Secondly, it provides a day-to-day account of events.<sup>17</sup> Newspapers that were consulted were hence important as they provided detailed accounts of the surrounding the Laingsburg flood, daily, for months on end. Lastly, newspapers from time to time also present the results of more thorough enquiries into issues that lie beyond the scope of routine news reporting.<sup>18</sup> However, and notwithstanding its value as a primary source, Tosh also maintains that newspapers as a source are not without fault as that they sometimes tend to only report on the matters that they deem important enough.<sup>19</sup> This became evident to the author of this thesis, via information gathered

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<sup>16</sup> J. Tosh.: *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

from first time interviewees. Much of this information did not find its way into the newspapers.

Although no official documentation regarding the flood could be found at the national and provincial archival repositories, the author located and consulted several other important primary sources archived at the Laingsburg Flood Museum. It included the minutes of the meetings of the Rebuilding Committee of Laingsburg. However, a significant drawback here was that the available Rebuilding Committee minutes were only available for two of the meetings that transpired in February 1981, as the rest could not be located.

The *Laingsburg Nuusbrief* or *Laingsburger* as it later became known as of 1982, subsequently served as an important primary source. Distributed between 1981 and 1983, it not only provided information regarding certain decisions that were made by the Rebuilding Committee, but it also provided a snapshot into the lives of Laingsburgers in their temporary settlement. Yet another important primary source at the Laingsburg Flood Museum was a Digital Versatile Disc (DVD) SABC footage of interviews conducted with the flood survivors by journalists, immediately after the flood. The dilemma that the researcher encountered regarding this source, was that it only contained the testimonies of white flood survivors. To counter this an important source containing the testimonies of the coloured community of Laingsburg was located and consulted.<sup>20</sup> Finally, a report based on the findings of an investigation done by the Department of Water Affairs, Forestry and Environmental Conservation also proved to be a valuable source, as it contained recommendations which were made for the rebuilding of Laingsburg.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, supplementary interviews were conducted with members of the South African Defence Force (SADF) and recruits in training at the Oudsthoorn Infantry School who were dispatched to Laingsburg in the wake of the disaster.<sup>22</sup> For the first time, they could share their testimonies of events. However, it has been pointed out

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<sup>20</sup> The publication referred to here is that of Carel Van Wyk, published in 2003, titled *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, in which the coloured residents of Laingsburg detail their experiences.

<sup>21</sup> W.J.R. Alexander C.P.R. Roberts, "Department of Water Affairs, Forestry and Environmental Conservation Report on Buffels River Flood: 25 January, 1981." Located at the Laingsburg Flood Museum.

<sup>22</sup> The members of the SADF were contacted via social media, mainly through the Facebook page of the Oudtshoorn Infantry School.

that although memory remains an indispensable source of evidence at the historian's disposal, it is subject to error, conception, elision, distortion and elaboration.<sup>23</sup> Considering the amount of time that had lapsed, the researcher was mindful of the potential for possible lapse in memory following the disaster, and guarded against it.

With regard to the conducting of the interviews, physical distance posed a challenge. Most of the interviewees were located outside of the Western Cape, with one residing in the United States of America. This ruled out the possibility of face-to-face interviews, which is generally preferred when conducting in-depth interviews, as was the case in this study.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, most interviews were consequently conducted telephonically, or via e-mail. In the process of conducting interviews, certain challenges were also encountered. On numerous occasions, the telephone connection would be interrupted, resulting in questions having to be repeated. Some interviewees were also distracted by activity in the background during interviews, which interrupted their train of thought at times. Furthermore, several interviews were also conducted at nighttime, as some interviewees were still engaged in full time employment and could only participate in an interview after work. Exhaustion may have affected memory and the time it took to respond to questions.

Finally, language proved to be a challenge. Most of the interviewees were Afrikaans-speaking and therefore answered the questions in Afrikaans. Since this study was conducted in English, the transcribed feedback also had to be translated and care exercised so as not to change the meaning in the process. Although the author has a good working knowledge of Afrikaans, this proved to be a time consuming and demanding process. Also, secondary literature providing a comprehensive account of the disaster does not exist and since this is the first attempt at providing such an account, mostly primary sources were used. The secondary sources that were consulted, included literature pertaining to post-disaster rituals; commemoration and

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<sup>23</sup> M. Oelofse & D. Du Bruyn: "A Critical Evaluation of Memory as a Potential Source of Evidence for Oral History," *Journal for Contemporary History*, (30), (2), January 2005, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> A. Morris: *A Practical Introduction to In-Depth Interviewing*, p. 92.

memorialization; as well as literature regarding tourism in communities impacted by disaster.

*There was simply too much water.*<sup>1</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Destruction of a Karoo Town

#### Introduction

There are several documented accounts of how the little South African Karoo town of Laingsburg was nearly washed away in its entirety by the flooding of the Buffels River<sup>2</sup> on Sunday, the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1981. A single publication integrating this information and including the previously excluded narratives of coloured flood survivors does however not exist. This chapter addresses the issue. For contextualization purposes, it commences with a brief historical overview of the establishment of the town. Furthermore, drawing on both primary and secondary sources, it then provides a comprehensive and inclusive account of the day of the flood, including the scientific explanations offered at the time.

#### Laingsburg: Historical Background

Laingsburg's picturesque landscape makes for an ideal halfway station between Beaufort West to the East and Worcester to the West. The history of the area goes back as far as the early 1700's, when white European cattle farmers from the Cape decided to trek inland in search of farmable land. They encountered two major obstacles however, namely; the severe droughts and the supposed "marauding" San people who reportedly "looted and plundered" the area between the Nuweveld and Swartberg mountain ranges. The details hereof were included in reports submitted to the Circuit Courts nearly 100 years later in 1813. It is important to note that in addition to the documented challenges posed by droughts, there were contradictory reports indicating that the area also experienced flooding. In 1776, travellers to the region recounted the generally anhydrous state of the Buffels River, but they also noted that on occasion, it carried large volumes of water, especially after heavy rainfall. They

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<sup>1</sup> This quote was found ironic, since Laingsburg is notorious for its semi-arid conditions and a low annual rainfall. M. Keys: "Die Vloedramp," *Nutinus*, (11), November 1981, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> The Buffels River is also known as the Buffalo River. See map on p. 12.

observed that its banks, which were about 200 yards apart – just over 180 meters – overflowed regularly in such cases.<sup>3</sup>

Commissioner De Mist who also made notes about how the town's weather had changed since 1750 supports this:

Elderly folk remembered how half a century ago there was such a surplus of water that people could not visit each other because of these floods. In summer, it rained heavily every week, but for many years prior to 1800 the stormy weather had ceased.<sup>4</sup>

Although the area was reputed for its arid conditions, farmers settled here progressively during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1862, Stephanus Greeff acquired the first farm. He named it *Zoute Vlakte*, which translated to “salty flats” – a name derived from the brackish soil in the area. Regardless of the challenges this presented, it is maintained that he transformed this farm from ‘bare Karoo’ to an oasis in the desert.<sup>5</sup> The discovery of minerals such as diamonds and gold to the North as well as the fact that the Cape railway line reached the Buffels River in 1879, contributed equally to the establishment of a village as a halfway point between Worcester and Beaufort West. The first plots were sold on 1 April 1880 and houses built from wood and zinc were soon erected around the railway-halt as well as along the Buffels River. Plots were sold as water plots for £30 pounds and as dry plots for £15. This signaled the establishment of a hamlet named Nassau. It is worth mentioning that the plots which were sold as water plots were all located in Meiring and Krige Streets and that the four rows of houses located in these streets would later all be destroyed during the flood, 101 years later.<sup>6</sup>

The area developed quite rapidly, making the establishment of a town imminent. However, this was temporarily halted by a stipulation maintaining that a road measuring 800 feet in width, should be built to provide passage through the town. To the relief of the residents, the width of this servitude was subsequently reduced to 150 feet – 45 meters. It resulted from the intervention of the Commissioner of Crown Lands,

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<sup>3</sup> G.F. Marais: *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Thomas Laing. Because of his intervention, the townsfolk expressed their gratitude by changing the name to Laing's Town. However, farmers – who were mostly of Dutch descent – comically pronounced the name *Linkstoon* meaning “left toe”. The town consequently underwent yet another name change to Laingsburg. Since then, the town has experienced much growth, particularly as a farming region, reputed as one of the best mutton and fruit producing regions in South Africa.<sup>7</sup>

### **Scenes from “The Day of the Buffalo”<sup>8</sup>**

What commenced as a seemingly typical Sunday morning in Laingsburg, which traditionally would have included attending the weekly church service followed by family lunch, unfolded as real life horror that no one could have predicted. Within just a few hours on Sunday, the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1981, Laingsburg experienced the greatest disaster in its history and one of the most devastating natural disasters in the history of South Africa.<sup>9</sup> The town received incessant rain, commencing two days earlier on Friday the 23<sup>rd</sup>, eventually causing the Buffels River to flood, which in turn flooded the town, located adjacent to it. It caused millions' of rands' damage to infrastructure in the process. Overshadowing the infrastructural damage however, was the loss of 104 lives. To compound the trauma of certain flood survivors, to this day, 72 bodies remain unfound. The account that follows, resulted from a careful piecing together of recollected scenes of what happened on the day of the flood, obtained through interviews conducted with flood survivors.

The school principal of Laingsburg High School at the time, Carel van Wyk, whose house was located closest to the Buffels River, remembered the persistent rain which the town received on Saturday, 25 January 1981. So much so, that by about one o'clock that afternoon his routine task of irrigating the school's rugby field became unnecessary. The rain reportedly continued late into that night and by eleven o'clock, it was pouring down in torrents. The following morning, from about six o'clock, water could be heard flowing down the usually parched Buffels River and just two hours later, the reeds which grew within meters of his property, were completely submerged.

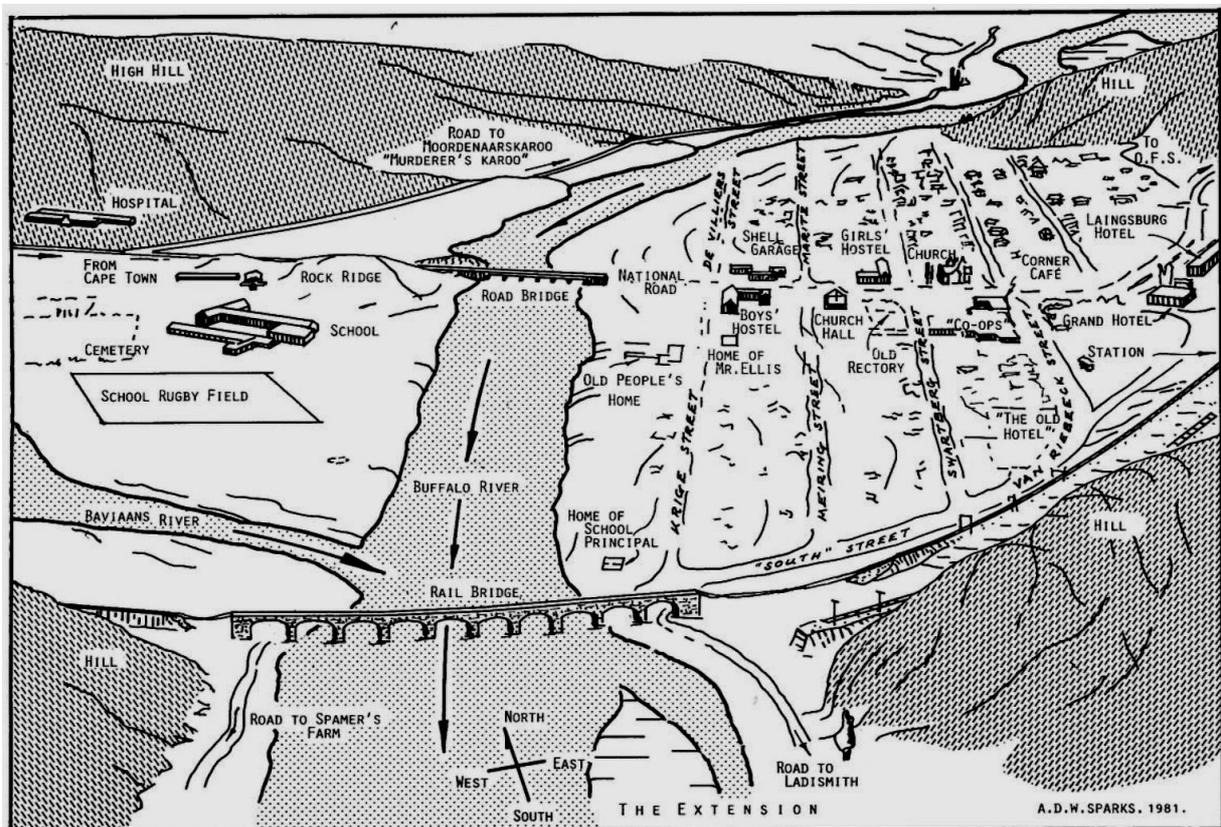
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<sup>7</sup> G.F. Marais: *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> “The Day of the Buffalo,” comes from the title of the first book by G.F. Marais, which contains eyewitness accounts of the flood, published in 1981.

<sup>9</sup> “A town washed away,” *The Cape Times*, 27 January 1981, p. 2.

However, since the river had also been in flood in November of the previous year, he did not make much of it. As was his custom, he departed from his home, at the usual time, to attend the church Sunday morning church service. He recalled being “afraid of the river for the first time” - especially upon his arrival back home.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 1:** A Map of Laingsburg before the flood disaster.<sup>11</sup>

Around the time that Carel van Wyk left for church, several other residents became aware that the Buffels River was in flood. At that point, the town clerk at the time, Nico Mans, was informed of these developments by his neighbor. He was informed that water was already making its way onto residents' properties and into the houses located in Krige Street which was located closest to the Buffels River. Unalarmed by this, he consequently only sent out a warning at half past ten that morning, informing the residents in Krige Street to be alert and to prepare for the possibility of having to evacuate their houses.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> C. Van Wyk as quoted in G.F. Marais, *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> G.F. Marais: *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> N. Mans as quoted in G.F. Marais, *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, p. 63.

The rapidly rising, moving water however soon compelled the residents of Krige Street to take more serious precautions. Boetie Smit remembers that at eleven o' clock that morning, his wife told him that the Krige Street residents started blocking their doorways using sandbags, a precautionary measure which proved effective the previous year.<sup>13</sup> Trusty Jordaan, who also resided in Krige Street at the time recalls her son also making her aware of this that Sunday morning. She then telephoned her neighbors, the Viljoens, who were already aware of what was happening and decided to go to their aid since the water was already making its way onto their premises. Having decided not to go to church that morning, she continued to help her neighbor by getting some of her household items to safety and attempting, in vain, to sweep water out of the Viljoen residence, which was soon flooded, forcing them to evacuate it.<sup>14</sup>

By that time, water was entering Trusty's residence. Assisted by another resident, she placed sandbags before her house's front and back doors, but to no avail. The Jordaan residence was consequently evacuated. Navigating their way down Krige Street, Trusty became acutely aware of the strength of the then three feet deep current, making its way down the street. She sought shelter in the house of Stienie Marais, in Swartberg Street, located two streets away from Krige Street. The dwelling's high ceilings and its location, further away from the Buffels River gave its distressed occupants the impression that it would make the ideal haven.<sup>15</sup> This would however prove not to be the case, as the water levels kept rising rapidly.

At about midday that Sunday things took a turn for the worse. The water had now also made its way into the house of Carel van Wyk and it was flowing down Krige Street at a dangerously rapid velocity causing various objects to drift out of his garage. Along with his wife and daughter, they too tried, in vain to prevent more water entering their house, by blocking the gaps in the doors with towels and plastic bags. However, they too were forced to evacuate their house between one and two o' clock, as a pool of

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<sup>13</sup> B. Smit as quoted in by Carel van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburg Vloed*, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> T. Jordaan as quoted in G.F. Marais, *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

rapidly rising water measuring about two feet already occupied their house and endangered their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, the residents in Maritz Street, the northern extension of Meiring Street and the second street parallel to the river, had to evacuate their houses around that time too. This is according to the accounts of Hester Slier and her husband – who managed to narrowly escape the floodwaters by climbing onto the roof of their house.<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, Kobus Maritz, his wife and their 17-month-old baby found themselves trapped in their now waterlogged flat, fighting for their lives. Their battle to stay alive amidst the rising water level lasted for four hours, before they were rescued.<sup>18</sup>

The raging water eventually made its way down Swartberg Street, the third street parallel to the river, which was something that no Laingsburger had ever experienced. At this point, many Laingsburgers were desperately trying to stay alive, by temporarily seeking shelter in trees and on the rooftops of half-submerged houses. Such was the case of Jozef le Roes, who found himself climbing to safety in a tree in Swartberg Street, along with five other residents before the rapidly rising water forced them to seek solace on the roof of a nearby house, which soon collapsed, resulting in the residents being swept into the current. Miraculously, Jozef le Roes survived the 15-kilometre journey downstream in the tumultuous waters. Unfortunately, none of the others survived.<sup>19</sup>

Forced to take shelter from the water, in a tree top, in Swartberg Street, Johan Groenewald and his youngest son, had to fend off live electrical wires. They also had to divert dangerous floating debris until the water level dropped later that evening, enabling them to make their way out of the tree. They then waded their way through the now silt filled street, in the direction of Van Riebeeck Street and were subsequently rescued.<sup>20</sup> Also in Swartberg Street, Annie le Roux and her sister-in-law, Joey, found themselves trapped in a house, after a failed rescued attempt to pull the two of them across the street using a rope. Seeking shelter in the loft and later making their way onto the roof, she recalled the frightening sight of houses being unable to withstand

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<sup>16</sup> C. Van Wyk as quoted in G.F. Marais, *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> H. Slier as quoted in G.F. Marais, *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> "As een gaan, gaan ons almal," *Rapport*, 1 Februarie 1981, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> J. Le Roes as quoted in G.F. Marais, *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> J. Groenewald as quoted in G.F. Marai, *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsuburg Flood*, p. 61.

the pressure of the water, collapsing because of it and its remains being transported downstream with the current. They remained stuck there for hours before being rescued at six thirty that evening, when the debris, which was blocking the arches underneath the railway bridge, gave way, resulting in a drop in the water level.<sup>21</sup>

However, few stories, which emerged, were as tragic as that which played out at the old age home, which housed Laingsburg's elderly.<sup>22</sup> It was there where the most loss of life occurred, including the lives of those trapped there and those who tried to save them.<sup>23</sup> Fortunately, with the help of Willem Destroo and his sister, 11 elderly people were loaded onto his truck and brought to safety. Willem Destroo and his sister would however also be declared missing the following day as they were swept downstream after having gone back to save more people.<sup>24</sup> This preceded the valiant attempt of Reverend Jacobs and Andries van Wyk among others, to get the rest of the panic stricken and disoriented elderly to safety by pulling them into the ceiling and onto the roof. Unfortunately, 28 people drowned when the building later collapsed. Most of them residents of the old age home. Reverend Jacobs and several staff employed at the old age home also lost their lives. However, Andries survived. The waters swept him 20 kilometres downstream into the Floriskraal dam.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> A. Le Roux as quoted in G.F. Marais, *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>22</sup> "Laingsburg devastated," *The Cape Times*, 27 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> "Heroic battle to save elderly," *The Cape Times*, 2 February 1981, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> "We know my father went as he had lived," *The Cape Times*, 29 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> A. Van Wyk as quoted in G.F. Marais, *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, pp. 25-28.

<b>10:00</b>	Water flows down Krige Street
<b>12:00</b>	Water floods the old age home
<b>13:00</b>	Water reaches Volkskas
<b>15:15</b>	Water flows into the Lounge Tea Room on the corner of Voortrekker and Van Riebeeck Street; According to reports the water level rose steadily between 13:00 and 16:00, reaching its peak at 17:45
<b>17:45</b>	Water reported to be 5m deep at the school boys' hostel, reaches its highest mark at the Lounge Tea Room Café and at Standard Bank
<b>18:50</b>	Only an island visible in Voortrekker (Main) Street
<b>19:00</b>	Maritz family rescued at the Lounge Tea Room

**Figure 2: A Timeline of the Flood.**<sup>26</sup>

Sitting on the roof with the elderly, watching how the houses were disintegrating under the force of the water, was Brenda Ameels. She recalls how the water rushed through the old age home and even worse, how everyone was forced to fend for himself or herself after the home had collapsed taking with it those who were unable to do so. Along with her husband and Reg Taylor, they managed to find refuge in a nearby tree, uprooted after an hour, forcing them into the debris filled current. As was the case with a few other residents, her terrifying journey downstream ended in the Floriskraal dam.<sup>27</sup> There, she was also reunited with her husband Paul, who himself survived the journey downstream.<sup>28</sup> Along with eight other people who were also washed

<sup>26</sup> W. Kühne, *Vloedramp*, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> B. Ameels as quoted in G.F. Marais, *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, pp. 15-19.

<sup>28</sup> "Victim of a river's wrath," *The Argus*, 27 January 1981, pp. 1-3.

downstream into the dam, they were rescued by a SADF helicopter the next day and taken to the Laingsburg day hospital for treatment, where the Ameels family was also reunited with their four children, who had believed that they would never see them again.<sup>29</sup> Accompanied by “logs, trees, drums, furniture, large tanks, animals and the occasional human being” Reg Taylor also survived the journey into the dam. Upon arrival, he managed to build himself a makeshift raft using driftwood, where he spent the cold Sunday night. Two farm laborers pulled him to safety the next day.<sup>30</sup>



**Figure 3:** Residents attempt to rescue two passengers in a passing vehicle on the flooded road bridge.<sup>31</sup>

Passing through Laingsburg on his way to Oudsthoorn that day, a certain Louis Zukmann remembers making his way across the already overflowing road bridge that afternoon, but with great difficulty. As he and his passengers were entering Main Street the water forced them to turn back and exit the town towards Cape Town. Floodwater had already made the street impassable. Having decided to park his car on a nearby hill to observe what was happening, the water that rapidly surrounded the hill, forced him to spend the night there until help arrived the following day. This gave him a good vantage point, to witness with impotence, how the river consumed and flooded most of Laingsburg.<sup>32</sup> His experience is hence worth quoting at length:

<sup>29</sup> “Laingsburg devastated,” *The Cape Times*, 27 January 1981, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> R. Taylor as quoted in G.F. Marais, *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>31</sup> J. Coetzee: “Karoo ramp: Die drama, hartseer en vreugde,” *Huisgenoot*, 5 Februarie 1981, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> “Vasgekeerdes vertel van nag saam met die dood”, *Die Burger*, 30 January 1981, p. 8.

Dit was verskriklik. Ons het daardie paar uur op Lainsburg saam met die dood geleef. Ons moes magteloos toekyk terwyl angsbevange mense soos kurkproppe deur die water meegesleur word – met die wete dat dieselfde tot ons enige oomblik kon tref. Die angs van die mense wat vasgekeer was, is iets wat 'n mens nie werklik kan beskryf nie. Dit sal my die res van my lewe bybly. Ek het gesien hoe die water die huise eenvoudig opfrommel. Dit was verskriklik om te sien hoe volwassenes en kinders van die een hoek van die dak na die ander hardloop terwyl die water nader kruip. Mense wat krampagtig aan die brug se reelings vashou totdat hulle nie meer [kon] nie en dan onder die water verdwyn. Oral in die watermassa het yskaste, stowe en motors gedryf. Deur die hele nag was daar die verskriklike geluide van goed wat in die vloedwater kraak en kreun. Teen ligdag het ons eers die werklike omvang van die water gesien. Daar is feitlik niks van die dorp oor nie.<sup>33</sup>

Louis Zukman's recollected the events on the day as an outsider, literally positioned on higher ground, looking from the outside in and from the top down. His account is almost the equivalent of watching a movie unfold. His recollection of the observed powerlessness, fear, dread, anxiety and terror, almost channels the voices and emotions of those whose lives the floodwaters claimed. Furthermore, his reference to the noises generated by the washing away of the people's homes and possessions, captures an important aspect of the broader narrative, namely that of the destructive and erasing nature of the floodwaters. People were literally, washed away, along with the structures that were their homes and the objects around which their daily lives revolved, which, constituted the fabric of Laingsburg. Such vivid accounts enable one to appreciate why this natural disaster is regarded as one of the most traumatic natural disaster events in the country's history. The water subsided and the ground eventually dried, but many of the survivors remain flooded - with trauma.

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<sup>33</sup> "Vasgekeerdes vertel van nag saam met die dood", *Die Burger*, 30 January 1981, p. 8.

## The Narratives of the coloured residents

Many stories of heroism later emerged, to such an extent that certain white individuals were honored by the Government for their contributions to the rescue effort during and after the flood.<sup>34</sup> Although Laingsburg's coloured residents who were involved in rescuing others were not officially recognized by the Government for their efforts, the media highlighted those rescues which were carried out by them. Such as the case of Neil April, a teacher from Oudtshoorn, who was visiting the town that weekend and saved a nine-year-old boy and a baby from drowning.<sup>35</sup> In another account, residents have referred to a so-called black resident, known as George, who helped carry people out of the Floriskraal Dam to safety on Sunday evening and Monday morning.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, this man was identified as Elliot George, who told of how he pulled a number of residents to safety out of the Floriskraal Dam, including Lawrence Hart, Paul Ameels and his wife Brenda Ameels.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the coloured people were treated with hostility and there were threats by the police that they would be shot, after some were accused of looting what remained of the belongings of the white residents of Laingsburg.<sup>38</sup> There were white residents who questioned the presence of coloured people in Laingsburg and the fact that they received assistance from the SADF, as the assumption was that coloured residents were not as badly affected as white residents were.<sup>39</sup> As a result, coloured residents were barred from entering Laingsburg unsupervised for the duration of the cleanup operations; and were only allowed into the town to buy food at the local shopping market. Although the coloured township largely escaped flood damage given its location on the outskirts of the town and on higher ground, there were several residents who lost children and family members - most of whom had died trying to rescue residents in the white residential area where many were employed.<sup>40</sup>

The high-water level of the usually parched Buffels River became quite a spectacle that Sunday afternoon and this proved to be an attraction to many curious Laingsburg

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<sup>34</sup> "Rescuer and social worker honoured," *Rand Daily Mail*, 20 April 1982, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> "Bruin redder," *Rapport*, 1 Februarie 1981, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> "Disaster town's men of courage," *The Argus*, p1., p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> E. George as quoted in C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, p. 48-49.

<sup>38</sup> "Threat to shoot looters," *The Argus*, 29 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> "Blacks died giving aid," *The Argus*, 4 February 1981, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> "Anger over order to stay out," *The Argus*, 29 January 1981, p. 4.

residents, children included, who rushed to the road bridge to witness it. Many young and old never made it back home as the raging Buffels River flooded the road bridge, sweeping many with it downstream. Such was the case for the eleven-year-old Johnny Pretorius who drowned after being swept off the bridge and whose body was never recovered.<sup>41</sup> Jan Louw also recalls how his then thirteen-year-old brother, April Solomons, drowned along with his friend, Jan Kammies, after they attempted to help George Horne remove a bus out of the water, by way of a tow-truck.<sup>42</sup>



**Figure 4:** Curious Laingsburg residents gathered on the road bridge.<sup>43</sup>

The death of twenty-eight-year-old Grace Johannes, who was also swept off the bridge, is also worth highlighting here. Her body was discovered two weeks later and her sister commented on the gruesome experience of having to go to the local police station to identify her body and the subsequent trauma her death brought the family:

My ma en pa is toe af na die polisie stasie om die lyk uit te ken. Ek wou nie gaan kyk nie, want ek wou my suster ontou soos toe sy nog lewendig was. Mamma het toe ook nie ingegaan nie, maar sy het dae en nagte omgehuil oor haar kind.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> A. Kleinbooi as quoted in C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, p. 20.

<sup>42</sup> J. Louw as quoted in C van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> C. Van Wyk: *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> E. Pieterse as quoted in C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, p. 12.

Other tragic cases include that of Nella Steenberg's nine-year-old daughter, Margaret Bergh, who was visiting with her aunt Margaret at the old age home where she worked. They both drowned later the afternoon when the water inundated old age home collapsed, resulting in them being swept away by the current. Nella's daughter's body was never recovered and her sister's five children were orphaned, Nella raised two of the children their paternal grandmother raised the remaining three.<sup>45</sup> Katrina Fortuin, who worked at the diner owned by the Nortier family also recounted her traumatic experience. Tasked with getting Hester and Johannes Nortier's three children to safety, among them a five-month-old baby, she witnessed the water wash away Hester and Johannes, instantly orphaning the Nortier children.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, eighteen-year-old Anita Balie and twenty-year-old Magdalena Lottering, both of whom worked at the old age home, were also among the residents who perished here, after a desperate attempt to rescue some of the aged was thwarted by the rising water level.<sup>47</sup>

Many coloured families who resided on farms in the area were left destitute and displaced in the wake of the disaster, due to the destruction caused to those farms. These families were later flown into Laingsburg by the SADF to receive meagre rations of food and various items of ill-fitting items of clothing donated by the public. Additionally, in cases where farms were destroyed, families had to seek employment and housing elsewhere on their own and received little to no support or compensation from the Government for the goods, which they had lost.<sup>48</sup> A case worth pointing out here is that of Frans Diko. At the time of the flood, he resided on a farm downstream from the Buffels River, just below the Floriskraal Dam. That day he lost nine of his family members, among them his wife, five-year-old daughter, his mother and his sister.<sup>49</sup> The only form of compensation he received included a box of food, an oversized pair of shoes and some items of clothing, as well as R600 to replace his other personal belongings.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> N. Steenberg as quoted in C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, pp. 20-21; C. Nel as quoted in C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, p. 21.

<sup>46</sup> K. Fortuin as quoted in C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, p. 46.

<sup>47</sup> A. De Bruyn (mother of Anita Balie) as quoted in C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, p. 35; A. Lottering (sister of Magdalena Lottering) as quoted in C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, p. 25.

<sup>48</sup> "Wrong clothes," *The Argus*, 31 January 1981, p. 13; Interview with Frans Diko conducted by Ashrick Pietersen, 28 October 2017.

<sup>49</sup> F. Diko as quoted in C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, pp. 40-42.

<sup>50</sup> F. Diko as quoted in Ashrick Pietersen, Laingsburg, 28 October 2016.

When interviewed for the first time in 2002, Frans recalled the impact of his traumatic experience:

Onderkant die plaas is 'n kloof met regaf kranse bo-oor die rivier. Eendag het ek soontoe geloop en gesien hoe die rivier laer alles net weggevat het. En ek het verlang na my mense en was hartseer sodat ek dae lank nie 'n druppel kos geëet het nie. Toe ek so bo op die kranse staan, het die gedagte my opgekom om maar my lyf net vooroor te gooi by die kranse af. Net toe maak iemand keel skoon naby my. Ek draai om en sien 'n jong meisiekind omtrent so ses jaar oud. Ek wil darem nie hê die mense moet later lelik van my praat en sê ek het daar afgespring nie. Ek dink toe ook aan my pa en dat ek hom nog meer hartseer sal gee as ek so maak. En so sit ek nou nog hier.<sup>51</sup>

It is abundantly clear that non-white people experienced additional vicarious physical and psychological trauma. The discrepancy in how their losses and pain was treated compared to the town's white inhabitants is sad. It is interesting to note that this account of the flood history not only repositions their stories but also provides an opportunity for acknowledgment and catharsis. The telling of these stories was important. It appears to have provided much needed healing for people who did not receive adequate support at the time.<sup>52</sup> The documentation of history is a living enterprise. In this instance, it acknowledged people who were previously disregarded. It also gave dignity to narratives that were initially treated indignantly. Remembering the past in the present is healing and reparative. This is particularly significant within the South African context where a great deal of work still needs to be done about the healing of memories.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> F. Diko as quoted in C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, p. 42.

<sup>52</sup> C. Wielenga: "Shattered stories: Healing and reconciliation in the South African context," *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 34, 1, January 2013, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> S. Field, *The Politics of Disappointment: Trauma, 'healing' and regeneration in post-apartheid South Africa*, <http://www.riehr.com.ar/archivos/Investigacion/PoliticsofDisappointment.pdf> (5 June 2017).

## Explaining a Flood in the Karoo

Bearing in mind Laingsburg's location in the notoriously dry and arid Great Karoo<sup>54</sup>, the question of how a flood disaster of this magnitude could take place here and whether the community could have been better prepared, is permissible. Community members have attempted answering it by suggesting that the course of the river was changed. They maintained that the river once naturally flowed where the houses in the residential area was built, which meant that a heavy flow of water would cause the river to take its original course again.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, a local council member believed if his suggestion to deepen the riverbed and using the excavated material to build retaining walls was heard, the damage and loss of life could have been reduced.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, engineers and scientists alike have since provided several explanations. Dereck Sparks, professor of Civil Engineering at the University of Cape Town at the time, maintained that the unusual weather patterns over the Karoo caused an erratic sequence of rain patterns.<sup>57</sup> Dr. Roberts, Civil Engineer and Dr. Alexander, Hydrologist, provided a similar explanation. They maintained that the weather pattern, which had developed over the southwestern part of the country during the weekend of the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of January, known as a black south-easter, was responsible for the rain received that weekend.<sup>58</sup>

As opposed to the usual dry and moist Cape Town south-easter, the Black south-easter is cloudy and moist. In the case of the Laingsburg flood, this is the explanation put forward by the experts, at that time. A low-pressure system developed over the central Karoo while a high-pressure system developed over the South Atlantic - the former rotating clockwise in the interior while the latter rotates anti-clockwise. Eventually the sea air reaches the coast bearing moist air from the ocean as it continues to move around the coast. The clockwise circulation of the low-pressure system in the interior caused more moist air over the interior causing clouds to develop, accompanied by thundershowers. According to a meteorologist at the Cape Town

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<sup>54</sup> D.J. Potgieter & T.C. Du Plessis, *Standard Encyclopedia of South Africa*, pp. 306-307.

<sup>55</sup> "River's course was changed," *The Cape Times*, 31 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> "Council ignored request," *The Cape Times*, 2 February 1981, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> C.P.R. Roberts & W.J.R. Alexander: "Lessons learnt from the 1981 Laingsburg Flood," *The Civil Engineer South Africa*, (24), (1), March 1982, p. 18.

Weather Bureau, the weather conditions were quite normal, however, the rain fell further north-west than usual.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, it is purported that if the rain fell along the coastal belt, which has dense vegetation and a topography suited for heavy rainfall, the disaster would not have happened. Laingsburg's semi-desert topography, sparse vegetation and mountainous surrounds was unable to provide any natural obstacles to the flow of water to slow its momentum.<sup>60</sup>

The sudden rainstorm received on Sunday 25 January, which covered large portions of the catchment areas of the Buffalo, Baviaans and Wilgehout Rivers collectively co-created the conditions conducive to flooding. Additionally, the hillsides in the catchment areas also contributed to the disaster in two ways. They are quite steep which increased the speed of the runoff rainwater and secondly, the lack of vegetation in the area allowed the runoff rainwater to flow faster over the presoaked soil, into the three rivers, which then flowed to Laingsburg.<sup>61</sup>

While the Black south-easter was responsible for the precipitation received that weekend, the location of Laingsburg played a major role in facilitating how much damage resulted. The town is situated in a flat basin between two East-West ridges of hills. The natural valley between the hills in the Southern Ridge downstream of the town, acted as a constriction for the water that day. The railway bridge situated across this Southern outlet also contributed to the damming effect of the water, given the fact that there was quite a bit of debris, which blocked its expanses. However, there is the view that even if a railway bridge had not existed the natural narrowing of the valley would have sufficed to cause a damming effect, pushing the water back into Laingsburg, causing extensive damage and loss of life.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, the convergence of the Wilgehout and Baviaans River with the Buffels River at Laingsburg also contributed to the disaster. The largest river, the Buffels River, flows North-South through the town while the Wilgehout and Baviaans Rivers converge before joining forces with the Buffalo River making its way under the railway bridge at the South end of the town.<sup>63</sup> Sparks and Alexander were also of the opinion

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<sup>59</sup> "Black south-easter to blame," *The Argus*, 26 January 1981, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> "Nature's slight miscalculation," *The Argus*, 31 January 1981, p. 13.

<sup>61</sup> G.F. Marais: *The Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

that the combined effects of all three rivers and the constriction at the poort accounted for much of the damage caused between Swartberg Street and the Buffalo River.<sup>64</sup> Hydrologists have estimated that water flowed through Laingsburg at 8 meters per second and reached a speed of 30 kilometres per hour.<sup>65</sup> This might not seem like a phenomenal speed, but when one bears in mind that the water contained an enormous amount of debris and silt, one becomes aware of just how hazardous the water was and that the combination of these two factors significantly reduced the chances of survival. Those who managed to escape to safety in time or survived, regardless of the current sweeping them away, were truly fortunate.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter briefly narrated the establishment of Laingsburg, vicariously highlighting the unlikelihood of it being destroyed by water. Furthermore, it wove together previously separate accounts of the flood disaster, ensuring that the historically excluded narratives of Laingsburg's non-white flood survivors were included. Finally, it highlighted the main causes of this natural disaster. It done so by demonstrating that the combination of natural, meteorological and man-made phenomena contributed to the town being washed away by floodwater. Additionally, it demonstrated that a delay in rapid response from and preventative measures taken by the community also significantly contributed to the loss of life, as by the time many decided to act, it was too little too late. The next chapter will highlight the immediate impact of the flood as well as the ways in which the Government and the public responded to the disaster.

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<sup>64</sup> C.P.R. Roberts & W.J.R. Alexander. "Lessons learnt from the 1981 Laingsburg Flood," *The Civil Engineer South Africa*, (24), (1), March 1982, p. 19.

<sup>65</sup> W. Kühne: *Vloedramp*, p. 17.

*By the powers invested in me, I hereby declare the floods in the managerial districts of Laingsburg, Ladismith, Worcester, Montagu, Robertson and Swellendam during the period 23 January 1981 to 25 January 1981 to be a disaster.<sup>1</sup>*

## CHAPTER THREE

### **“We will do everything in our power to help”<sup>2</sup>**

The first reports of the flood emerged after the SADF Super Frelon Helicopters flew over the town at nine o'clock on Monday morning the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1981. Accordingly, it was apparent that the damage that the floodwaters caused was devastating. The bottom half of the town had reportedly been washed away in its entirety and it was estimated by authorities that the damage caused would cost millions to repair.<sup>3</sup> What was left of Laingsburg, its people and their belongings, was now buried beneath tons of silt. Amongst the chaos, bewildered flood survivors desperately tried to salvage what they could of their belongings.<sup>4</sup> While newspapers across South Africa published articles on the flood for months, local and international radio and television broadcasters as far afield as London, also reported on the devastation and loss of life.<sup>5</sup> Local newspapers contained images of visibly distraught and despondent residents; corpses being dug up and removed by civil service departments, including the SADF and the South African Police Force (SAPF); the near complete destruction of the town; and of families overcome with emotion when reunited, after having been missing for hours and thus presumed dead. This chapter outlines the overall impact of the flood as well as the response from the Government and the public.

### **The Government Responds**

The Government responded swiftly. Just a day after the flood, assistance was extended to the inhabitants of Laingsburg. In a statement issued by the office of then Administrator of the Cape Province, Gene Louw, it was announced that the SADF was

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<sup>1</sup> An official announcement made by the state president, Marais Viljoen, concerning the flooding. *Government Gazette*, 27 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> This was the response of the Prime Minister of South Africa at the time, Pieter Botha. “The deadly course of disaster,” *The Cape Times*, 27 January 1981, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> “190 Feared dead,” *The Argus*, 26 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> “Laingsburg lê in modder-puin,” *Die Burger*, 26 Januarie 1981, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> “UK Press Headlines,” *The Argus*, 27 January 1981, p. 3.

already working with the local authorities to provide emergency assistance.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, a separate special cabinet committee was established and chaired by the Minister of Health, Welfare and Pensions, Dr. Lourens Munnik. Its purpose was to deal with effects of the disaster in all affected areas. He maintained that one of the first orders of business was to send out a team to the disaster affected areas to assess the loss and damages caused.<sup>7</sup>

An agricultural flood disaster committee was also swiftly established. Its task was to evaluate the extent of the damage caused to farms in the affected areas. It was found that damage was especially amplified on the farms which bordered the Buffels River and that a total of 1200 farms had been damaged. Consequently, the Government collaborated with the private sector to devise and implement a restoration program for these farms. Officials from the Departments of Agriculture and Fisheries, Water Affairs, and Forestry and Environmental Conservation, were also commissioned to conduct surveys and report on the damage.<sup>8</sup> In a subsequent statement by the South African Agricultural Union, it was maintained that the greatest damage occurred in farming regions and was endured by the farmers. Furthermore, the Union also established the Agricultural Disaster Fund in aid of affected farmers, who were urged to keep a record of their losses and damages, so that they could be compensated accordingly.<sup>9</sup>

After General Magnus Malan, then Minister of Defense and Dr. Munnik conducted an aerial helicopter inspection of Laingsburg the day following the flood, Laingsburg was officially declared a disaster area. On the same day, the Government responded by dispatching at least 14 helicopters from the South African Air Force (SAAF) to the disaster areas to rescue people who remained trapped on the roof tops of their houses. In addition, soldiers and policemen were dispatched to Laingsburg to further assist with cleaning up operations and with the recovery of bodies.<sup>10</sup> The restoration of essential services was prioritized, including the national road running through

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<sup>6</sup> "Pledge of sympathy, help – Louw," *The Argus*, 26 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> When referring to disaster affected areas, the author alludes to all the other areas which also received a substantial amount of rain that weekend and flooding as a result. These areas include Robertson, Montagu, Ladismith, Worcester and Swellendam. However, here damages and destruction was miniscule when compared to Laingsburg. "Pledge of sympathy, help – Louw," *The Argus*, 26 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> "Survey of farm damage," *The Argus*, 4 February 1981, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> "Aid plans for farms in flood area," *The Argus*, 5 February 1981, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> "Vloedramp eis 150," *Die Burger*, 27 Januarie 1981, pp. 1- 5.

Laingsburg, the railway bridge and communication systems, as well as the water and sewerage systems.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 5:** The houses in Meiring, Swartberg and Van Riebeeck Streets submerged in silt following the flood.<sup>12</sup>

Other immediate measures that were taken by the provincial administration included putting all state employed doctors, nurses and other medical personnel on standby to be air lifted by the SADF upon notification.<sup>13</sup> Although most of the people could be treated at Laingsburg hospital, which had largely remained unscathed, some affected residents were flown to Eben Dönges Hospital in Worcester and another health care facility in Caledon to receive treatment there.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, additional blankets and medical supplies were flown to the area from the Oudtshoorn military base.<sup>15</sup> The Red Cross organization also played a significant role in the initial immediate relief effort, by immediately sending four emergency teams to Laingsburg, including six qualified nurses who specialized in civil emergencies.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Pledge of sympathy, help – Louw," *The Argus*, 26 January, pp. 1.-3.

<sup>12</sup> The Laingsburg Flood – 25 January 1981, Available Online: <http://saweatherobserver.blogspot.co.za/2009/10/laingsburg-flood-25-january-1981.html> (8 September 2017).

<sup>13</sup> "The deadly course of disaster," *The Cape Times*, 27 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> "Laingsburg patients taken to Worcester," *The Argus*, 29 January 1981, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> "The deadly course of disaster," *The Cape Times*, 27 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> "Grim search in death town," *The Argus*, 27 January 1981, p. 1.

Although very effective, the initial effort to recover bodies was poorly coordinated. This may be attributed to the fact that 1981 was also the year in which the SADF carried out some of its biggest operations as part of the South African Border War (1966-1989). By implication they were geared towards border and external operations. They therefore had no standard set of guidelines detailing what to do in the event of a flood even more so, regarding the associated rescue missions.<sup>17</sup> To restore a semblance of order to the town the Action Committee was formed under the chairmanship of a local policeman, Brigadier Genis. Their task was to oversee the temporary functioning of the town, whilst cleanup operations were taking place. The Action Committee in turn consisted out of several sub-committees. They included a committee for tent-housing, water, electricity and sanitation, food distribution, welfare, financial and medical assistance.<sup>18</sup>

A few days after the flood, the Cape Province Administrator, Gene Louw, along with other members of the Executive Committee for the Cape joined and supported by representatives from other state departments visited Laingsburg to meet with local municipal officials. As a result of this visit, the Laingsburg Disaster Committee was established. It was comprised of local community leaders, outside experts and representatives from the administration and various Governmental departments. This committee worked in conjunction with the Action Committee. At the time they were also responsible for coordinating rescue, recovery and other emergency actions. It was also made clear that the houses which were destroyed during the flood would be rebuilt elsewhere in Laingsburg.<sup>19</sup> To commence with the rebuilding of the town as soon as possible, the Department of Water Affairs, Forestry and Environmental Conservation was instructed to conduct a hydrological assessment of the Buffels River, focusing on its course and water levels. Based on these findings and those contained within a report on the state of Laingsburg compiled by the Department of Community Development, the necessary funds would be made available for the rebuilding of houses and infrastructure.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> J. Wright: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 23 February 2017.

<sup>18</sup> "Flooded town may be moved," *The Cape Times*, 28 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> "Grim future for town – Louw," *The Cape Times*, 29 January 1981, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> "Water study part of plan to rebuild Laingsburg," *The Cape Times*, 31 January 1981.

## Rescue, Recovery and Trauma

Approximately two hours east from Laingsburg, at the Infantry School in Oudtshoorn, soldiers were in training, in preparation for the South African Border War which they were to join in the ensuing days.<sup>21</sup> However, they were instead loaded onto civilian trucks late on Sunday evening, with no knowledge of what was happening, nor where they were heading. The excitement some reportedly felt at the prospect that the monotony of life at the Oudtshoorn Infantry School was being disrupted by what they perceived to be an adventure, soon waned as they were to face an unfathomable devastation.<sup>22</sup> Since the main road between the two towns had been flooded, cutting off direct access to Laingsburg, the trip took several hours to complete as the military convoy was forced to take a detour through the town of Prince Albert. They eventually reached Laingsburg on Monday morning, the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1981, with more men arriving in the afternoon and even more by midweek.<sup>23</sup>

Finding themselves in a town unknown to many of them, they were astonished by the degree of devastation they observed. Many of them vividly remember the dejected manner in which surviving residents embarked on their own desperate searches for missing family members and friends, personal belongings and their property, which now lay in ruins underneath tons of silt.<sup>24</sup> Upon arrival the Oudtshoorn Infantry contingent was immediately tasked with the search for surviving residents, who might have found themselves trapped on the roofs of what remained of some houses or underneath debris.<sup>25</sup> A nineteen-year-old infantry soldier, Gert Olivier recalled assisting the police in a desperate search for bodies which were believed to have washed up on the banks of the Buffels River.<sup>26</sup> He also vividly remembers the laborious task of cleaning the church building of mud and silt, which had become a muddy adhesive that held the dislodged church pews together. This task proved to be

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<sup>21</sup> W. Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War: 1966-1989*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> G. Olivier: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 21 March 2017.

<sup>23</sup> R. Barnard: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 13 March 2017.; J. Wright: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 23 February 2017; H. Smith: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 16 March 2017.

<sup>24</sup> E. Cloete: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 14 March 2017.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> G. Olivier: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 21 March 2017.

so challenging that a Bobcat excavator was reportedly transported into the church to complete it.<sup>27</sup>



**Figure 6:** A body is recovered by the SADF and Metro Rescue team.<sup>28</sup>

The SADF was hailed as the backbone of the relief effort in Laingsburg, in a rescue operation deemed by many senior officers to have been the biggest one it had to conduct. By using 14 Allouette and Super Frelon helicopters, the SADF could ferry supplies and relief workers to the area. They also availed medical teams which included psychologists, to provide trauma counselling to residents. To provide the homeless flood survivors of Laingsburg with shelter, they erected 115 tents on the rugby field and a cooked meal was provided by their mobile kitchens, three times a day.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the SADF set up a water purification system on the banks of the Buffels River, to provide water to the then homeless inhabitants of the town.<sup>30</sup> As part of an interim solution to the problem of homelessness, the Government announced that caravans and portable houses would be sent to Laingsburg, once the roads were restored.<sup>31</sup>

To effectively carry out rescues and recovery missions, the local police station acted as the Joint Operations Centre (JOC).<sup>32</sup> From there, representatives from the local

<sup>27</sup> G. Olivier: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 21 March 2017.

<sup>28</sup> A body is recovered from the debris by the SADF and the Metro Rescue team, *Die Burger*, 27 January 1981, p. 4.

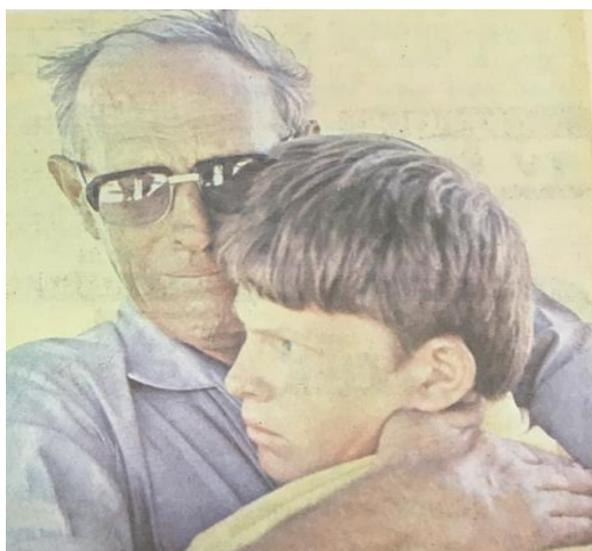
<sup>29</sup> "SADF is backbone of flood relief," *The Argus*, 28 January 1981, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> "Business pledges R80 000 to victims," *The Argus*, 30 January p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> "Flood area the focus," *The Argus*, 31 January 1981, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> H. Smith: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 16 March 2017.

police, divers from the South African Police, the SADF - the Southern Cape Command, the Infantry School and the SADF Medical Services were able to coordinate operations.<sup>33</sup> The sickbay made use of the services of two doctors, a clinical psychologist, a pharmacist and a health officer as well as ten additional medical professionals from 2 Military Hospital in Wynberg. At the time, several cases of diarrhea were reported, resulting from the consumption of contaminated water<sup>34</sup>, as well as cases of sinusitis resulting from being washed downstream.<sup>35</sup>



**Figure 7:** Antonie Botes is reunited with his father on Monday the 26th of January, after being swept downstream the previous day.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, the operations that were planned, were carried out in phases. The first being the immediate rescue of those who were trapped on rooftops the day following the flood. Members of the SADF arrived enmasse in Laingsburg as of the day after the flood. Within two days they had managed to set up camp on the rugby fields.<sup>37</sup> James Erlank, from the Oudtshoorn Infantry School rescue detachment, maintained that the rescue phase included bringing injured and stranded survivors to safety and providing them with medical assistance. Additionally, during this phase they were also to conduct searches for survivors within collapsed buildings, along the river banks and

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<sup>33</sup> J. Wright: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 23 February 2017.

<sup>34</sup> "Diarree kom voor op rampdorp," *Die Burger*, 31 Januarie 1981, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> "Vrou siek ná 15km in vol rivier," *Die Burger*, 31 Januarie 1981, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Die Burger*, 28 Januarie p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> J. Erlank: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 15 March 2017.

on the silt islands which were formed after the water level had dropped, as well as on the periphery of the Floriskraal Dam. Rescue operations were concluded by the 28<sup>th</sup> of January signaling the commencement of part two of the first phase, namely recovery, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January.<sup>38</sup>

The recovery phase included the clearing of important buildings such as the school and the church as well as the guarding of valuable and tempting assets such as the bank and bottle store, respectively. It also included the most gruesome and heart-wrenching aspect of the first phase, namely the search for and recovery of flood victims' bodies. This was done in cooperation with the SAAF who provided helicopters to assist with the mission. The task was significantly hampered by the silt and debris which had settled over Laingsburg, covering what remained of it.<sup>39</sup>

A 12-man search team from the South African Navy, who, armed with four rubber boats, continued the search for bodies in the Floriskraal Dam, since it was believed many people were swept downstream and into the dam, where they drowned. With the debris again posing a challenge here, members of the Navy had to place thunder flash grenades in the muddy water which exposed the bodies upon detonation. By then, most of the bodies had started to decompose and as a result a putrid smell reportedly hung over Laingsburg.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, according to the district doctor, J.P. Swart, the partially decayed recovered corpses could no longer be identified by their physical features, but only by their clothing.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, an 80-man team from the SAPF searched the banks of the Buffelsriver and the dam.<sup>42</sup>

Most of the relief efforts were effectively and swiftly executed by those involved. Within two weeks, homeless residents were set up in tents which were provided by the SADF.<sup>43</sup> The SAAF was also very instrumental during the first phase and their duties extended beyond mere rescue and recovery missions. James Erlank, who recorded 15 hours of flying time in six days, remembers also flying out medical and food supplies to farmsteads which were surrounded by water, preventing them from accessing

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<sup>38</sup> J. Wright: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 23 March 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> J. Erlank: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 15 March 2017.

<sup>41</sup> "Gesoeek na lyke in dam moelik," *Die Burger*, 6 Februarie 1981, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> "Troops pour in to help," *The Cape Times*, 28 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> "n Droë dorp verdrink," *Rapport Ateljee*, 1 Februarie 1981, p. 4.

Laingsburg by road.<sup>44</sup> During the SAAF's first week at Laingsburg, an average of 64 missions were authorized per day while pilots recorded an average of five hours' flying time per day, with some pilots executing as many as 45 landings per day.<sup>45</sup> The control room of the SAAF which was set up on the rugby field, was soon dismantled and it is maintained that there were 14 casualty evacuations and they were instrumental in recovering 21 bodies.<sup>46</sup>



**Figure 8:** Soldiers unload supplies from an Air Force helicopter in Laingsburg.<sup>47</sup>

The SADF also started withdrawing from Laingsburg at this point, signaling the end of the first phase of operations. However, some troops who were tasked with the restoration of essential community services such as schooling, were to remain in Laingsburg until the normalization thereof. This also signaled the commencement of the rebuilding phase, which was to be handled by the Provincial Administration.<sup>48</sup> An additional Air Force helicopter also remained while Metro, the Cape Peninsula

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<sup>44</sup> J. Erlank: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 15 March 2017.

<sup>45</sup> "From the sky - angels of mercy," *The Argus*, 2 February 1981, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> "Search in flood area scaled down," *The Cape Times*, 5 February 1981, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> The SADF delivering supplies to Laingsburg, *The Cape Argus*, 28 January 1981.

<sup>48</sup> "SADF to leave flood area," *The Argus*, 4 February 1981, p. 4.

Ambulance Service Rescue Team, had in turn also left the area as their services were no longer required.<sup>49</sup>

The team of psychologists were sent to Laingsburg to provide therapy to those who survived this traumatic ordeal. Having assessed the situation, it was maintained that survivors would experience a phenomenon known as “commemorative syndrome”, long after the flood, during which they would respond emotionally in some or other way around the anniversary of the disaster. Furthermore, they also predicted that this syndrome would be experienced by those who visited the town in its devastated state, especially the news reporters and soldiers, who were immersed in the flood stricken area interacting with and assisting residents, respectively, for weeks on end.<sup>50</sup>

Additionally, it was maintained that the loss of so many lives, also had a great short term impact on those who survived, causing great sadness which in the longer term could lead to depression. There were also cases where people blamed God for what had happened and as a result distanced themselves from Him, while others claimed that the event had brought them closer to God. There were also those who felt guilty that their lives were spared while some questioned whether they could have done more by attempting to rescue family members and friends where possible.<sup>51</sup>

Dr. Eleanor Nash, a psychiatrist, visited Laingsburg for a week, accompanied by a team of trauma counsellors to provide counselling to the survivors. Their visit was concluded with the publication of a report which detailed additional, immediate and possible long term impact of the disaster on those who survived as well as those who were called in to assist, in addition to outlining recommendations on the ways in which their trauma should be dealt with.<sup>52</sup> It was reported that the response of the survivors to the disaster could be ascribed to be characteristic of “Disaster Syndrome” and that physiological symptoms thereof would include sleeplessness and tremors while the psychological symptoms would be in the form of anxiety and possibly depression. Additionally, she maintained that survivors experienced psychic numbing. This was evident in the fact that survivors could tell their distressing stories without a trace of

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<sup>49</sup> “Search in flood area scaled down,” *The Cape Times*, 5 February 1981, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> “Die sielkunde van die ramp,” *Rapport*, 8 Februarie 1981 p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> E. Nash: “Report on visit to Laingsburg,” 1981, p. 1.

sadness. Some appeared apathetic while others kept themselves so busy that they did not allow themselves to experience their feelings or work through their losses.<sup>53</sup>

Now an educational psychologist, Mirna van Wyk, who was just 16-years-of-age at the time recalls the long-term impact the disaster had on her as well as the immediate impact it had on those around her:

Ek self was maar 'n tiener van 16 jaar oud in 1981. My eie geheue aan die gebeure is een van emosionele afstomping. Ek kan my tog herinner dat hier en daar by geleentheid sou iemand dan amper 'n emosionele ontploffing beleef, asof die inkamping van die trauma nie langer terug gehou kon word nie. Ekself het die klassieke simptome van nagmerries en angstigheid ondervind. Ek kon wel agterkom dat my hele lyf simptome van angs ervaar wanneer ek die gebeure oorvertel het. Die reuk van klam, warm, vrottende modder kan my steeds onmiddellik terugruk na 'n onlogiese angstigheid.<sup>54</sup>

During the interviews however, it was also maintained that although available, there were many survivors who did not make use of the services provided by the psychologists. Reasons presented included: being too busy with rebuilding their lives and immediate physical environments or alternatively, that they wanted to avoid therapy altogether due to the stigma attached to seeing a psychologist.<sup>55</sup> It was also observed that those who helped in Laingsburg reacted physically and psychologically to what had happened. Some experienced the same reactions as the survivors, which interfered with the efficiency regarding their attempts to assist.<sup>56</sup> Ironically, for many of the young military personnel, this was their first experience of death, which proved to be an emotionally overwhelming ordeal for which they were not prepared, nor assisted in coping with via the provision of counselling services.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> E. Nash: "Report on visit to Laingsburg," 1981, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> M. Van Wyk: Personal Correspondence, Laingsburg Flood Museum Archives.

<sup>55</sup> F. Van Wyk: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, Laingsburg, Western Cape, 22 June 2016.

<sup>56</sup> E. Nash: "Report on visit to Laingsburg," 1981, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> R. Barnard: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 13 March 2017.

Rudi Barnard recalls his traumatic experience as a teenage conscript in Laingsburg:

Ons land was in daardie stadium in 'n oorlogsituasie gewees en jy kry jou sielkundig reg daarvoor vir 'n onbekende vyand wat dalk op jou sal skiet, jy sal dalk moet skiet. Wie weet? En nou skielik is jy in hierdie situasie wat totaal anders is. En ek dink... Na al die jare raak 'n mens maar steeds emosioneel. Die natuur het nou skielik 'n ramp veroorsaak en jy moet dit net hanteer. Jy is neentien jaar oud, so jy is nog nie reg vir sulke dinge nie... Daar was nie hulp vir soldate na die vloed nie... Dit was van jou verwag dat jy dit moet kan verwerk... Twee weke later is ons weer op die voertuie terug Oudtshoorn toe en toe moet ons grens toe asof niks gebeur het nie.<sup>58</sup>

Numerous other interviewees who were involved in the relief effort also commented on the emotional scarring inflicted upon them resulting from what they observed and experienced, despite their prior psychological preparation to face death. It is impossible to imagine the trauma with which many Laingsburgers - who did not make use of offered therapy immediately after the flood or who might not have sought to do so later - had to and are still living with. Further investigation into the psychological impact of the disaster may prove useful, especially regarding the effectiveness of the therapy which was only available briefly after the flood.

### **Counting the Dead and Assessing the Damage**

The most gripping aspect of the flood was the loss of life. The day following the flood numerous newspapers reported that more than 100 people had gone missing. There were also reports that many people had spent the cold Sunday evening trapped on the rooftops of houses, waiting in vain to be rescued as the national road into the town had been flooded, preventing emergency rescue teams from entering by road. Furthermore, communications had also been disrupted, cutting the town off from the outside world while the substations were flooded, leaving the town without any electricity. Houses were destroyed, leaving many people homeless and with nowhere to go.<sup>59</sup>

Each day that passed saw an increase in the then rapidly rising body count in Laingsburg, while details emerged of those who were missing in lengthy lists

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<sup>58</sup> R. Barnard: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 13 March 2017.

<sup>59</sup> "100 mense vermis op Laingsburg," *Die Burger*, 26 Januarie 1981, pp. 1-2.

continuously updated and published in newspapers.<sup>60</sup> Initially, the majority of the names were those of the elderly folk who resided at the old age home and who were swept away by the flood water, but in some cases the names of entire families appeared, many of whom were married couples.<sup>61</sup> Within just four days the number of dead and recovered bodies totaled 15, the desperate search for others continued<sup>62</sup> and within a week a total of 28 bodies had been recovered.<sup>63</sup>

Relatives of those who were declared missing, travelled to Laingsburg to join the search for their family members. Such was the case of Kobus Laine, who travelled from Port Elizabeth in the hopes of finding his parents alive. Sadly, he dug through the mud and sludge which covered his parents' motorcar, in vain. They were later presumed dead.<sup>64</sup> By the 30th of January it was declared that 95 people were missing. Any hopes that they would be found alive buried underneath the debris was dwindling among recovery personnel.<sup>65</sup> In the end, 104 people were declared missing and only 32 bodies were recovered and identified. Furthermore, an additional 16 bodies which were recovered, could not be identified.<sup>66</sup>

The end of January also marked the end of the search for bodies. Although the original graveyard was damaged beyond repair during the flood<sup>67</sup>, a mass funeral presided over by the Reverend Dr. Scholtz was held one week later and both the identified and unidentified bodies were buried in newly dug graves.<sup>68</sup> Coffins were generously donated by two of the country's largest funeral undertaking firms at the time, namely Avbob and Human and Pitt.<sup>69</sup> Also present at the funeral was psychiatrist Dr. Eleanor Nash who maintained that a prolonged period of mourning was to follow.<sup>70</sup> After this event, a semblance of normality started to return to Laingsburg, marked by the first

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<sup>60</sup> "Missing people," *The Cape Times*, 29 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> "25 bodies found: 113 still missing," *The Cape Times*, 29 January 1981, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> "Missing," *The Argus*, 29 January 1981, p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> "28 flood bodies recovered so far," *The Cape Times*, 2 February 1981, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> "Tragedy of search for lost ones," *The Argus*, 29 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> "95 still missing in Laingsburg," *The Argus*, 30 January 1981, p. 1.-p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> "Net een graf vir Laingsburg," *Rapport*, 1 Februarie 1981, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> "Susan se goeie werk," *Rapport*, 1 Februarie 1981, p. 8.

<sup>69</sup> "Free coffins offered," *The Argus*, 28 January 1981, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> "Laingsburg grieves for the flood dead," *The Argus*, 2 February 1981, p. 13.

church service held on the first Sunday of February, in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), which had been cleared of the mud and restored in record time.<sup>71</sup>

Additionally, a memorial service was held the following Thursday and attended by 600 people. Governmental officials in attendance included the Minister of Health, Dr. Munnik and the Minister of Defense, Magnus Malan. Following proceedings, Dr. Munnik commented that the service officially marked the end of the first phase of recovery from the floods, namely seeing to the survivors in terms of clothing, shelter and food. He maintained that the second phase was now being ushered in, referring to the reconstruction phase of Laingsburg and re-establishing its community life.<sup>72</sup>



**Figure 9:** Residents attend the memorial service.<sup>73</sup>

The immediate impact of the flood on the built environment proved devastating and the process of assessing the damage caused, commenced. The most extensive damage caused, was to the residential area, which under the laws of the Apartheid Government, was demarcated as an exclusively white area. Although 21 houses withstood the floodwaters<sup>74</sup>, 184 houses were destroyed and buried underneath silt - of which 121 were built below the flood line. Additionally, seven buildings housing local businesses were damaged minimally, while 23 businesses as well as the old age home, were swept away. The Minister of Community Development estimated that

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<sup>71</sup> "200 at flood service," *The Argus*, 2 February 1981, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> "Laingsburg told: 'Time to rebuild'," *The Argus*, 6 February 1981, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> "Laingsburg – Die hele dorp rou," *Die Burger*, 6 Februarie 1981, p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> W. Kühne, *Vloedramp*, p. 20.

damage to residential properties in all the affected areas would cost R10 million to repair, while damage caused to residential properties in Laingsburg alone, would cost R5 million.<sup>75</sup>



**Figure 10:** A Laingsburg resident stands on the spot where his bedroom was located merely hours before.<sup>76</sup>

Road and rail access to and from Laingsburg was completely disrupted and had to be temporarily halted<sup>77</sup>, while those who were travelling to and from Cape Town, via Laingsburg were provided with alternative routes and means to do so.<sup>78</sup> SAAF helicopters flew officials along the Touwsriver and established that approximately 44 kilometres of railway line was also damaged between Touwsriver and Ladismith.<sup>79</sup> Those who wanted to reach the town could only access it by helicopter, or wade their way across the Buffels River if they needed to. The road bridge incurred a substantial amount of damage and its approaches from both the north and south sides were completely washed away. A few hundred meters downstream, the railway bridge stood, similarly damaged. Its only ties with the banks on either side were, sagging sets of rails covered with driftwood and debris transported down with the Buffels River as it smashed the approaches away.<sup>80</sup> As a result, passengers travelling through the area

<sup>75</sup> "R5 miljoen skade aan huise in Laingsburg," *Die Burger*, 10 Februarie 1981, p. 1.

<sup>76</sup> J. Coetzee: "Karoo ramp: Die drama, hartseer en vreugde," *Huisgenoot*, 5 Februarie 1981, p. 14.

<sup>77</sup> "Rail traffic embargo," *The Cape Times*, 27 January 1981, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> "Roads still blocked," *The Argus*, 27 January 1981, pp. 1-3.

<sup>79</sup> "Flood smashed 44km of line," *The Argus*, 4 February 1981, p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> "A town washed away," *The Cape Times*, 27 January 1981, p. 2.

by train had to be transported by bus.<sup>81</sup> In the meantime progress had been made with restoring communications and this was completely restored between Laingsburg and Cape Town merely two days later.<sup>82</sup>



**Figure 11:** The railway line which runs through Laingsburg stands in ruins.<sup>83</sup>

After visiting and having conducted an aerial tour of Laingsburg, with a team of senior railway managers and engineers via helicopter, to assess the extent of the damage, Dr Loubser the General Manager of the South African Railways, held an impromptu press conference. He maintained that there were 21 wash-aways along the railway line in Laingsburg and that the worst wash-away occurred at the Laingsburg railway bridge, where a “massive repair job” would have to be carried out. Furthermore, considerable damage was found at the Skelding, Baviaan and Viskuil Station areas, where at many places the rails were hanging in the air. Special flights, offered at a reduced rate, were arranged for those who wished to travel between Laingsburg and Cape Town via rail, before the Saturday after the flood, but who were unable to due to the damage caused to the main line.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, railway officials estimated that more than 2000 truckloads of gravel would be required to fix the damaged 230 km railway line in the Karoo. This enormous task would require more than 500 workers divided into five teams comprised of 103 members, to fix the railway line between

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<sup>81</sup> “Trains running by the weekend”, *The Cape Times*, 28 January 1981, p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> “Spoorverbinding Maandag herstel,” *Die Burger*, 28 Januarie 1981, p. 16.

<sup>83</sup> “Path of terror,” *The Cape Argus*, 27 January p. 23.

<sup>84</sup> “Trains running by the weekend”, *The Cape Times*, 28 January 1981, p. 2.

Laingsburg and Touwsrivier and it was estimated that it would take them twenty 16 hour shifts to do so.<sup>85</sup>

### South Africans Respond

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of January, Gene Louw announced that a central relief fund had been set up by Government for the victims of the floods in the Karoo, known as the Disaster Relief Fund.<sup>86</sup> Financial assistance from South Africans and businesses for the victims of the flood was prompt and overwhelming.<sup>87</sup> People from all over South Africa got involved in several ways. Some offered their homes to those who were left without one, farmers offered the proceeds of their upcoming harvests, while others contributed food and clothing or travelled to Laingsburg to volunteer their help.<sup>88</sup>

In addition to the Disaster Relief Fund which was established by the Government for all the areas which experienced flooding over that weekend, *Die Burger* announced that it had established a separate disaster relief fund, aimed exclusively at assisting the community of Laingsburg. *Die Burger* and Checkers supermarket chain were among the first organizations to make donations of R10 000, each. *Die Burger's* sister newspapers *Beeld*, *Die Volksblad* and *Oosterlig* followed suit by making additional monetary donations<sup>89</sup> and on the first day, a total of R40 000 was donated.<sup>90</sup> Post and telecommunications staff also subsequently made a generous contribution of R100 000.<sup>91</sup> In addition to this, numerous other Laingsburg flood disaster relief funds were established at local municipal level, such as the Karoo Flood Relief Fund, announced by Cape Town Mayor, Louis Kreiner.<sup>92</sup>

Newspaper articles concerning the donations made to *Die Burger's* disaster relief fund for Laingsburg, served as a continuous update to the public. Donations could either be made out to one of the two established funds namely, *Die Burger's* Disaster Fund or the Karoo Flood Relief Fund.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, an internal fund-raising effort was also

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<sup>85</sup> "Blitsvloed verwoes dorp," *Suid-Afrikaanse Oorsig*, 30 Januarie 1981, p. 10.

<sup>86</sup> "Flood relief fund," *The Cape Times*, 28 January 1981, p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> "Flooded town may be moved," *The Cape Times*, 28 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> "Hulp stroom in ná ramp," *Die Burger*, 28 Januarie 1981, p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> "Kragtige aksie kan spruit uit die droewige ramp," *Die Burger*, 28 Januarie, p. 12.

<sup>90</sup> "Rampfonds kry R 40 000 in een dag," *Die Burger*, 28 Januarie 1981, p. 1.

<sup>91</sup> "R100 000 from PO staff," *The Argus*, 4 February 1981, p. 4.

<sup>92</sup> "First donations for City Fund," *The Cape Times*, 28 January 1981, p. 2.

<sup>93</sup> "Almost R2m for flood fund," *The Cape Times*, 31 January 1981, p. 2.

organized by the SAPF for those who fell victim to the floods.<sup>94</sup> So generous were the donations made by individuals, organizations, businesses, churches and communities throughout the country, that by the 29<sup>th</sup> of January, merely four days after the floods, a total amount of R 250 000 had already been donated.<sup>95</sup> Not too long thereafter donations were nearing the R 2 million mark and kept increasing. *Die Burger's* Disaster Relief Fund eventually reached the R 2 million mark by the 13<sup>th</sup> of March. It was significantly bolstered by an amount of R 156 347 donated by the City of Cape Town's Karoo Flood Relief Fund.<sup>96</sup>

The Disaster Relief Fund contributions also transcended political affiliations. Monetary contributions were received from different sections of communities. Donations made by the English-speaking population and urban businesses were as generous as those made by the Afrikaans-speaking community and rural businesses. It was also maintained that there were substantial contributions made from within the coloured community.<sup>97</sup> In just over two months *Die Burger's* Disaster Relief Fund closed with a total of R2 381 084, 42 in donations.<sup>98</sup> However, the flood of donations continued pouring in and the fund was finally closed in May totaling R 2 524 864, 28.<sup>99</sup>

Non-governmental organizations were amongst the agencies that got involved such as REACT, which helped to restore communications with Laingsburg. They set up a radio relay station on Sir Lowry's Pass and were handling calls from relatives, some of whom called from as far as Johannesburg, who were referred to them by the Post Office. They would then connect to CB operators in the affected areas and to the police station at Laingsburg.<sup>100</sup> Meanwhile, tertiary institutions like Stellenbosch University and the University of Cape Town got involved in the relief effort by making funds available to prospective students whose families suffered financial losses due to the flood and who were consequently unable to pay for their tuition.<sup>101</sup> Thirty students at Stellenbosch University were further assisted by the public and other businesses. A

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<sup>94</sup> "Funds pour in for victims," *The Argus*, 30 January 1981, p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> "Flood fund: Donations top R 250 000 mark," *The Cape Times*, 29 January 1981, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> "Fonds verby R2 miljoen," *Die Burger*, 13 Maart 1981, pp. 1-2.

<sup>97</sup> "Rampfonds kry R 40 000 in een dag," *Die Burger*, 28 Januarie 1981, p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> "Rampfonds sluit op R2,3 miljoen," *Die Burger*, 27 Maart 1981, pp. 1-2.

<sup>99</sup> "Nog R33 455 ontvang: Burger-Rampfonds vandag gesluit," *Die Burger*, 4 Junie 1981, p. 2.

<sup>100</sup> "Keeping in touch with CB radios," *The Cape Times*, 28 January 1981, p. 2.

<sup>101</sup> "Flood: University aid for victims' children," *The Cape Times*, 4 February 1981, p. 2.; "Hope for students hit by floods," *The Argus*, 5 February 1981, p. 4.

bookstore offered to provide them with the books they needed while various other businesses made generous donations to pay for their tuition. Additionally, residents and lecturers opened their homes temporarily to these students.<sup>102</sup>

There were other organizations which also contributed material and other goods to the people of Laingsburg and the other affected areas. Such organizations included the Save the Children Fund who appealed for children's blankets and clothes, tinned and powdered milk as well as baby food which was to be distributed via a collaboration with the Red Cross.<sup>103</sup> Other generous offers included those made by a business called Harveytile, which donated all the roof tiles required to rebuild the old age home, estimated at R5 000. Other donations for the old age home came from Lions International, that offered to build the new old age home free of charge.<sup>104</sup> Clicks stores further assisted in the effort to rebuild the old age home by donating R10 000 to the Lions International Laingsburg Restoration Fund, while two other companies namely Illumina and Plates Glass donated the light fittings and glass, respectively.<sup>105</sup> Additionally, cattle farmers were supported by the Piketberg Farmers Union, that donated tons of fodder.<sup>106</sup> While these organizations cared for the people of Laingsburg, the Animal Anti-Cruelty League in Pretoria turned its attention to the plight of the animals in the flood stricken area, by launching a disaster fund to assist in this regard. Known as Operation Rescue, South Africans were urged to donate generously.<sup>107</sup> Additionally the, People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) also spent four days in Laingsburg treating and feeding rescued animals at a mobile clinic set up on the rugby field.<sup>108</sup>

Additionally, various other initiatives were organized in aid of the flood survivors of Laingsburg by ordinary South Africans and certain organizations alike. There was a call from teachers to donate their pending bonus payout at the end of April to the Laingsburg residents, in aid of rebuilding the town.<sup>109</sup> For an entry fee of R2, South Africans participated in a 4-kilometres fun-run organized by the city of Cape Town and

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<sup>102</sup> "Maties oorval met hulp ná ramp," *Die Burger*, 23 Februarie 1981, p. 2.

<sup>103</sup> "Disaster fund set up in city," *The Argus*, 27 January 1981, p. 13.

<sup>104</sup> "Money, materials boost flood," *The Argus*, 5 February 1981, p. 4.

<sup>105</sup> "Cash pours in for old-age home," *The Argus*, 24 February 1981, p. 17.

<sup>106</sup> "Karoo-boere kry gratis ru-voer," *Die Burger*, 6 Februarie 1981, p. 5.

<sup>107</sup> "Disaster fund to aid animal flood victims," *The Argus*, 29 January 1981, p. 6.

<sup>108</sup> "Animal mercy team returns," *The Argus*, 2 February 1981, p. 11.

<sup>109</sup> "Skenk verhogings aan Laingsburg," *Die Burger*, 6 Februarie 1981, p. 12.

the proceeds were generously donated to Laingsburg.<sup>110</sup> Zealous South Africans from all walks of life attended the event, including some of the most popular sports personalities such as then Western Province cricketer Garth le Roux and the former captain of the national rugby team, Morné Du Plessis.<sup>111</sup> A total number of 452 people entered and completed the race which in the end yielded an amount of R1 000.<sup>112</sup> Additionally, several other sports personalities also got involved in raising funds for the residents of Laingsburg. Professional golfer, Gary Player, zealously committed to donating all his prize money from the South African Masters tournament to *Die Burger's* disaster fund.<sup>113</sup> To raise funds for and awareness of the plight of Laingsburgers, the South African marathon walking athlete, Okkie van Sensie walked to from Cape Town to Laingsburg covering 272 kilometres within 4 days.<sup>114</sup>

At another event, several vintage wines were auctioned off in aid of Laingsburgers at the Nederburg Wine Estate. Amongst the selection of wines was the oldest bottle of red wine in South Africa at the time which dated back to 1940, as well as six bottles of port – the former which sold for R1 300 and the latter R4 500, in total.<sup>115</sup> Laingsburgers themselves got involved in collecting money. Paul and Brenda Ameels, the owners of the hotel, sold T-shirts bearing the words “Laingsburg bo” and contributed R 512, 85 as a result.<sup>116</sup> To further assist the victims of the flood, several tertiary institutions got involved. The University of Stellenbosch committed to making funds available for those students whose parents would otherwise have been unable to pay for their tuition because of the flood disaster.<sup>117</sup> In addition to the funds set aside by the university, the Student Council further established a committee to raise funds in aid of these students.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> “Flood run,” *The Argus*, 31 January 1981, p. 1.

<sup>111</sup> “Morné draf vir fonds,” *Die Burger*, 4 Februarie 1981, p. 9.

<sup>112</sup> “452 draf vir fonds,” *Die Burger*, 5 Februarie 1981, p. 14.

<sup>113</sup> “Gary Player sal vir Rampfonds sweet,” *Die Burger*, 12 Februarie 1981, p. 1.

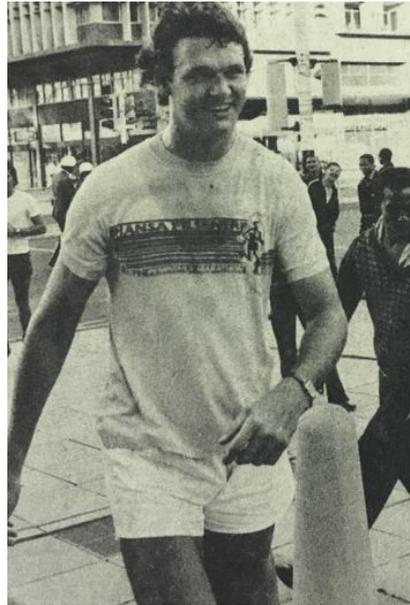
<sup>114</sup> “Sy stap help ná ramp,” *Die Burger*, 26 Februarie 1981, p. 10.

<sup>115</sup> “1890-Port geskenk vir fonds,” *Die Burger*, 6 Maart 1981, pp. 1-2.

<sup>116</sup> “Laingsburg dra self by,” *Die Burger*, 26 Maart 1981, pp. 1-2.

<sup>117</sup> “US sal student help ná ramp,” *Die Burger*, 4 Februarie 1981, p. 9.

<sup>118</sup> “US-rampfonds vir studente,” *Die Burger*, 17 Februarie p. 12.



**Figure 12:** Former Springbok Rugby captain, Morné Du Plessis, completing the fun run in aid of Laingsburg flood victims.<sup>119</sup>

Religious organizations were very meaningfully involved in making donations too. The involvement of the DRC was inevitable, since most of the flood victims were members of the DRC. In a statement issued by the DRC, congregants were encouraged to make generous financial and other donations in aid of the flood victims.<sup>120</sup> The Welfare Committee of the DRC's Western Cape Synod, acted as the central agency which would distribute donations to Laingsburg and other affected areas. Additionally, the Free State Synod of the DRC contributed R10 000 towards the Western Cape Synod's Disaster Fund. The Council of the Protestant Association of South Africa donated R500 while the executive council of the Western Province Baptist Association appealed for a special collection to be taken up at all Baptist churches in the province, on Sunday the 8th of February – in aid of all the victims.<sup>121</sup> The Jewish organization B'nai Brith International set up its own disaster relief fund, aimed at helping those in the areas which were affected by the floods.<sup>122</sup> Then there was the Vroue Landbou Vereniging (VLV) organization which aimed to help Laingsburgers deal with the shock and subsequent trauma caused by the flood. These efforts were aimed specifically at

<sup>119</sup> "US-rampfonds vir studente," *Die Burger*, 17 Februarie p. 12.

<sup>120</sup> "NGS vra vir gebede vir gebiede," *Die Burger*, 30 Januarie 1981, p. 8.

<sup>121</sup> "Donations pour into disaster fund," *The Argus*, 28 January 1981, p. 3.

<sup>122</sup> "R5000 for flood fund," *The Cape Times*, 2 February 1981, p. 3.

the women. They included writing down their experiences of that day, singing, crochet workshops, film screenings as well as participating in physical exercises.<sup>123</sup>

News of the disaster also spread internationally. The President of West-Germany responded with a sympathetic telegram to the people of the flood stricken areas in South Africa.<sup>124</sup> A similar token of sympathy was extended by the Magistrate of the district of Yilan, in Taiwan, who had been part of the delegation that visited the country the previous year.<sup>125</sup> Soon there were donations from as far afield as France, made by the company, Richelieu Et Cie which donated R1 600, 38.<sup>126</sup> Additionally, although small, a cheque with the value of R300 was sent from Belgium to assist those in Laingsburg<sup>127</sup> while an elderly person reportedly sent a 5 pound cheque from Britain.<sup>128</sup>

Although food was provided by the SADF, other businesses and organizations got involved in this regard, too. Non-profit organization, Golden East Round Table located in the East Rand donated 1000 loaves of bread which were flown to Cape Town by the SADF, where it was collected and transported to Laingsburg by the Red Cross. Furthermore, Pick n Pay supermarket chain donated a 7-ton truck of food to the value of R 10 000.<sup>129</sup> Yet another relief operation was established by the Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie (SAVF) aimed at assisting those affected. Dr. R Venter, then president of the organization, appealed to other women's organizations to assist by donating money or tinned foods, sweets and chocolates. In South West Africa, several organizations also contributed by way of financial contributions, as well as the donation of blankets and clothing.<sup>130</sup>

The donations of food were so generous that it had to be warehoused and supplied on demand. The Western Cape region of the South African Red Cross Society, which was one of the organizations that became a collection point for food and clothing, prepared 5000 cartons of goods, which equated to two to three per affected person.

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<sup>123</sup> "Rampdorp se VLV wil andere help," *Die Burger*, 10 Februarie p. 2.

<sup>124</sup> "Wes-Duitsland toon meegevoel," *Die Burger*, 31 Januarie 1981, p. 8.

<sup>125</sup> "Meegevoel uit Taiwan," *Die Burger*, 4 Februarie 1981, p. 9.

<sup>126</sup> "Fonds kry stewige bydrae uit Parys in Frankryk," *Die Burger*, 21 Maart 1981, p p. 1-2.

<sup>127</sup> "Ramphulp selfs uit verre Brussel," *Die Burger*, 17 Februarie 1981, p p. 1-2.

<sup>128</sup> "Bejaarde Brit stuur 5 pond vir fonds," *Die Burger*, 24 Februarie 1981, pp. 1.-2.

<sup>129</sup> "Firm sends 7-ton truck of food to stricken area," *The Argus*, 29 January 1981, p. 6.

<sup>130</sup> "Donations pour into disaster fund," *The Argus*, 28 January 1981, p. 3.

Tons of food and clothing continued to be collected, a lot of which was not going to be used. As a result, the excess goods were auctioned and the money channeled into the central disaster fund, to be used during the rebuilding phase of Laingsburg. It was suggested that these funds be allocated to assist small businesses which suffered significant losses, families who needed to start afresh and the refurbishing of homes.<sup>131</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Laingsburg flood had a devastating impact on the immediate environment and resulted in the deaths of 104 people, most of whose bodies were never found. This chapter outlined the immediate response of the Government in the days following the flood and it highlighted the individual and collective efforts of individuals and organizations. It also attested that assistance to the flood stricken area was swift and that it came from several Governmental and non-governmental organizations. The role that the South African media played in the wake of the flood, regarding awareness creation amongst South Africans of all walks of life was also discussed. Resultantly, what followed was one of the biggest relief effort in South African history, in which several religious institutions, businesses, charitable organizations and tertiary institutions got involved. Collectively they were responsible for the generous monetary, material and other donations which were made.

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<sup>131</sup> "Flood need is money-not food or clothing," *The Argus*, 5 February 1981, p. 1.

*No wonder the world loathes the very word apartheid, with which, whether we subscribe to it or not, we are all associated.*<sup>1</sup>

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Rebuilding in a politically volatile context

#### Introduction

The devastation of lives and the destruction of the built and natural environment resulting from the Laingsburg flood disaster received a great deal of media coverage, especially in South African newspapers. It is therefore not surprising that the process of rebuilding the town enjoyed as much newspaper coverage. Given the absence of official documentation pertaining to the rebuilding of Laingsburg, the newspapers proved to be an invaluable primary source of information. In keeping with the intention of this thesis, this chapter also presents a more inclusive and comprehensive flood narrative. It achieves this by merging and integrating the various accounts obtained from different primary sources. These sources include newspaper articles, a report published by the Department of Water Affairs, Forestry and Environmental Conservation the minutes of the Rebuilding Committee meetings and information contained within the *Laingsburger* newsletter. Furthermore, the challenges that arose during the rebuilding process, the attempts to address it and the eventual outcomes are also incorporated.

#### The Rebuilding Plan

As already indicated, the flood severely traumatized many of the town's residents. Given the scale of the destruction, they deemed successfully rebuilding the town an improbable outcome. Consequently, several residents permanently relocated elsewhere, while others, including the mayor, Koos Ellis, did so temporarily.<sup>2</sup> Following his visit to Laingsburg, the Administrator of the Cape, Gene Louw, ensured that a Disaster Committee was established, chaired by Dr. Munnik. The Disaster Committee collaborated with the relevant Governmental departments regarding the planning,

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<sup>1</sup> "Help for Laingsburg, but no roof for squatters," *The Cape Times*, 13 August 1981, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> "Rampdorp se inwoners wil nou trek," *Die Burger*, 29 Januarie 1981, p. 20.

financing and rebuilding of Laingsburg.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, insurance companies such as the South African National Trust and Assurance Company (SANTAM) flocked to Laingsburg to assess the damage caused to insured properties and to commence the processing of payouts.<sup>4</sup>

While a rebuilding plan was devised, the work which the Government had already done in Laingsburg, was clear merely days after the flood. Reconstruction work to the severed national road, which runs through the town, proved so effective that it reopened for use by light traffic. In the meantime, the telephone lines were repaired and a system was devised to provide flood survivors with three meals daily, while transporting ample fresh water to the town via rail and road. Additionally, a welfare office had been established where both psychological support and material assistance was available.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 13:** Members of the SADF busy with cleanup operations while residents look on.<sup>6</sup>

By the first week in February, the temporary municipal offices transformed into a hub from which senior officials and town planners from the Department of Community Development mapped out the new Laingsburg.<sup>7</sup> They were so efficient that the

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<sup>3</sup> "Besluite oor dorp lê nou voor," *Die Burger*, 29 Januarie 1981, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> "Versekerers werk haastig in rampgebied," *Die Burger*, 29 Januarie 1981, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> "Nuwe begraafplaas vir rampdorp," *Die Transvaler*, 31 Januarie 1981, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> The SADF cleaning up Laingsburg while residents look on, *Die Burger*, 3 Februarie 1981, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> "Laingsburg herrys stadig uit modder," *Die Burger*, 6 Februarie 1981, p. 5.

Director of Community Development announced merely days later that a special committee had been formed to oversee the rebuilding of Laingsburg. Guided by professional town planners and engineers, the committee subsequently worked in cooperation with members of the Laingsburg town council and other community members to ensure meeting the needs of the town.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the Government's rebuilding plan also outlined the financial assistance it was to make available to those in the flood affected areas. In article published in *Die Burger*, it was maintained that an amount of R82 million would be allocated to these areas. Of this amount, R66 million was made available to farmers in the form of ex-gratia payments, loans and subsidies. An amount of R12, 2 million was set aside for the repairing and rebuilding of waterworks. Finally, R15 million was made available to repair damages to buildings, state property, personal belongings and cleanup operations in Laingsburg and the other affected areas.<sup>9</sup> However, apart from the R2 million, which was donated to Laingsburg by *Die Burger's* disaster relief fund, the Government maintained that the bulk of the R15 million was to be spent on rebuilding Laingsburg.<sup>10</sup>

Initially, there was some confusion as to whether Laingsburg residents could rebuild in the area, which flooded. Following a visit to the town by the then provincial administration, which included its administrator, Gene Louw, the relevant authorities decided that residents should build elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, the Department of Community Development and State Auxiliary Services announced its intention to complete the rebuilding process within a year. This would later prove not to be the case.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, important decisions were made in anticipation thereof. Firstly, since the floodwaters destroyed the buildings constructed beneath the original flood-line, a new elevated flood-line was established. Secondly, it was determined that the Department of Community Development and State Auxiliary Services should purchase those properties which were located below the new flood-line, at a price to be agreed upon between the department and the owners. Additionally, this department was to

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<sup>8</sup> "Govt. Forms special committee to help rebuild Laingsburg," *The Argus*, 13 February 1981, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> W. Kühne, *Vloedramp*, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> "R15,5 m. van staat na rampgebied," *Die Burger*, 28 Februarie 1981, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> "Province to advise residents," *The Argus*, 29 January 1981, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> "State to buy flood danger areas," *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 March 1981, p. 4.

buy the vacant properties, situated above the new flood-line to ensure the maximum use thereof. These properties were divided into smaller plots and the owners had first choice upon the distribution of the new, smaller properties.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, at a meeting held in April 1981, it was decided that financial assistance would be based on the intrinsic value of a destroyed house. This meant that if a resident owned a three-bedroom house before the flood, they would be entitled to a new three-bedroom house, paid for by the Government.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in cases where buildings and houses were restorable, the owner could seek guidance from the department on how to go about it, while plots were availed to those who lost their houses. In cases where there were more than one request for a property, the matter was resolved using a lottery system. Finally, within the plans provision was made for new community and other facilities including a new old age home, school hostel, a centre for commerce and industry as well as a memorial garden.<sup>15</sup>

Upon completion of outlining the proposed plans, the rebuilding process commenced. The land, which was located under the new flood-line, was speedily expropriated and in June already, it was being cleared for a proposed state of the art sports complex, which included facilities for rugby and athletics as well as a tennis court.<sup>16</sup> As a team of 15 men used excavators to clear the town of the mounting silt in preparation for rebuilding, Laingsburg residents had a final opportunity to sift through the rubble in the hopes of locating some of their belongings.<sup>17</sup> In January of 1982, the Minister of Health and Welfare, Dr. Munnik, reported that much money had already been spent during the rebuilding phase, including R2,3 million for payouts; R3,7 million for temporary housing; and an additional R7 million for the building of new houses. By then, the tenders for the rebuilding project received approval.<sup>18</sup> Signs of the new Laingsburg slowly emerged from the dust. In October 1982, the sounds emitted by rebuilding equipment replaced the sounds emitted by the machines used to clear the area of the silt and rubble.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Govt. plan for new flood-safe Laingsburg," *The Cape Times*, 14 March 1981, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> "Regering sê hoe hy help," *Die Burger*, 15 April 1981, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> "Sports complex plan for Laingsburg," *The Argus*, 4 June 1981, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> "An emotional treasure hunt," *The Argus*, 3 June 1981, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> "Miljoene al bestee aan herstel," *Die Burger*, 15 Januarie 1982, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> "Nuwe Laingsburg uit die puin," *Die Burger*, 19 Oktober 1982, p. 11.

## Taking Preventative Measures

The fact that a natural disaster of this magnitude could take place in Laingsburg came as a great shock to its residents and South Africans alike. However, although scientists had pointed out that Laingsburg had flooded six times prior to the 1981 flood, its biggest earlier flood remained three times smaller than that of 1981.<sup>20</sup> This inevitably raised questions as to whether another flood was possible in Laingsburg. As a result, there were calls for sounder municipal planning while public works were encouraged to keep abreast of the latest technologies, given the prospect of similar emergencies in the future.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, two years prior to the flood, a governmental think-tank group predicted in a report that a “comprehensive” flood disaster in the Karoo was imminent. The erosion of farmland in Laingsburg formed the bases of their conclusion. A boom occurred in the sheep farming industry at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, resulting from the high demand for wool and causing the problem of overgrazing. The consequent erosion of farmland reportedly led to an increase in runoff. Furthermore, they were also of the opinion that farmers in the area were not convinced of the impending danger and hence adopted no precautionary measures. To combat the further negative impact of erosion on the environment, they suggested the Karoo’s runoff be controlled using low-level technology, requiring the building of small weirs or dams, which could control a rush of water.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, to ensure that the new Laingsburg would not suffer the same devastating fate in the case of another flood, the Government commissioned the Department of Water Affairs to investigate the possibility for a flood of the same devastating magnitude re-occurring. To this end, they conducted a hydrological assessment and considered factors such as the course of the Buffels River including its water levels over the years.<sup>23</sup> The report outlined several measures aimed at managing flooding and its impact. The most effective measure outlined was to zone the new residential area as far away from the Buffels River as possible. They also suggested that the

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<sup>20</sup> “The town that needn’t have died,” *The Star*, 3 July 1981, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> “Laingsburg lessons,” *The Sunday Times*, 2 August 1981, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> “Laingsburg: Why it died,” *The Argus*, 4 February 1981, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> “Water study part of plan to rebuild Laingsburg,” *The Cape Times*, 31 January 1981, p. 2.

rubble from the demolished buildings be incorporated in constructing a levee close to the river-bank and to plant drought resistant indigenous trees in the levee. This would help to contain minor floods and allow for the deposition of the sediment in vicinity of the levee, rather than in the residential area, when higher floods occur.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, it was determined that although the railway bridge was far less of an obstruction than the road bridge, its location between a narrow constriction in the valley downstream of the town meant that it could present itself as a significant hazard in the case of a higher flood. Therefore, it was suggested that a new national road bridge should be built at a higher elevation with wider spans and shorter approach embankments.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the building of flood control dams was also advocated to reduce peak discharges of moderate return period floods. The establishment of a flood warning system in Laingsburg was also deemed necessary. This would ensure that residents were informed timeously of the rising water level of the Buffels River. Furthermore, the use of a radio transmitter to allow for the broadcasting of information and instructions on F.M. radio was strongly advised to be included in the warning system. Ensuring that the Water Control Officer at the Floriskraal dam was in constant communication with the Civil Defense radio network would further bolster this system.<sup>26</sup> It is however unclear whether the suggested improvements were implemented, including the adoption of the new technologies by the municipality and the promotion of the new farming methods in the wake of the flood. Furthermore, if the advice was followed, it is unclear to what extent it was successful in reducing the impact of increased runoff on the environment.

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<sup>24</sup> W.J.R., Alexander & C.P.R, Roberts: "Report on Buffels River Flood: 25 January 1981," Department of Water Affairs, Forestry and Environmental Conservation, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 14:** The Buffels River in full spate in 2014.<sup>27</sup>

If precautions were implemented in the wake of the disaster, one could argue that they were not sufficient. The Buffels River once again flooded its banks in January 2014, after the catchment area received continuous rain. As a result, some of the farms situated adjacent to the river were flooded, compelling some residents to evacuate their houses, while the N1 road which runs through the town had to be closed for several hours, too. The Central Karoo Disaster Management team and farmers launched a joint operation to assist residents apace.<sup>28</sup> Several rescue resources including helicopters were made available<sup>29</sup> and as many as 15 people had to be airlifted to safety.<sup>30</sup> In a subsequent statement made by Disaster Management, it was maintained that further infrastructural damage was caused to the sewerage plant as well as a water pipeline, roads, fences, power lines and electric cables.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> "History of Laingsburg," Available Online: [http://www.karoo-southafrica.co.za/?page\\_id=1856](http://www.karoo-southafrica.co.za/?page_id=1856) (12 September 2017).

<sup>28</sup> "Vloed herinner aan 1981," *Die Burger*, 9 Januarie 2014, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> "Laingsburg floods hit," *The Cape Times*, 9 January 2014, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> "Disaster Assessment: Province weighs up flood damage," *Cape Times*, 13 January 2014, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> "It will cost millions to repair Laingsburg," *The Argus*, 12 January 2014, p. 5.

## Life in “White Soweto”<sup>32</sup>

In the wake of the flood, things looked bleak for Laingsburg and its residents. As most residents were scavenging through what remained of their houses and desperately attempting to salvage some of their belongings, the SADF labored tirelessly to clear the town of the remaining silt. Other residents were less optimistic about the ability of the town to recover. The only remaining business infrastructure included a supermarket, a restaurant, the bank and two hotels. Besides the few houses that were left undamaged, the church, police station and Magistrates Court were among the only other remaining buildings.<sup>33</sup> The graves, which were dug in anticipation of bodies, which were yet to be recovered, stood unoccupied only to be slowly filled by dust.<sup>34</sup>



**Figure 15:** A resident in one of the tents provided by the SADF.<sup>35</sup>

However, the continuous work, which was done in Laingsburg proved effective, as a month after the flood, Laingsburg, began displaying signs of recovery, evident in the commencement of certain essential services.<sup>36</sup> Among the layers of powdery silt removed by thundering bulldozers and clouds of dust filling the air, Laingsburgers themselves also got involved in the cleanup process. Primary and secondary school

<sup>32</sup> This is what some Laingsburg residents termed their temporary prefabricated housing complex. The author found this ironic, since the housing of residents in Soweto would most probably have been incomparable to that of the temporary housing complex of Laingsburg. *Day of the Buffalo: The Laingsburg Flood*, p. 99.

<sup>33</sup> “Smiles, apathy and plans in Karoo flood town,” *The Cape Times*, 9 February 1981, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> “Line upon line of empty graves,” *The Cape Times*, 27 February 1981, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> W. Kühne, *Vloedramp*, p. 47.

<sup>36</sup> “Skool kry nuwe vere ná ramp,” *Die Burger*, 28 Februarie 1981, p. 11.

goers assembled at the battered secondary school building merely weeks after the flood and helped prepare the building so that it could be occupied again. Their tasks included the cleaning of what remained of the teaching apparatus as well as restoring furniture where possible.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, new school uniforms were donated to the learners, who also resumed attending school.<sup>38</sup> With limited resources at their disposal, all learners received instruction in the cleared out secondary school building, the entire first floor of which, was destroyed during the flood. Orders for new furniture and equipment was placed and Hugo Lambrechts, then provincial director of education, promised that it would be speedily provided.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, temporary accommodation was arranged for the learners who made use of the hostel.<sup>40</sup>

In February 1981, the Minister of Health, Welfare and Pensions, Dr. Munnik, the residents of Laingsburg would be living in temporary housing units provided by the Government, by month end.<sup>41</sup> This did not go according to plan however, as the deadline for the temporary housing units shifted to the end of March.<sup>42</sup> While some residents resided in prefabricated, fully furnished temporary housing units in the weeks that followed, most residents continued living in and sharing tents provided by the SADF.<sup>43</sup> Others sought shelter with family elsewhere, unsure of their return.<sup>44</sup> By the second week in April, about 100 families had moved into fully furnished temporary housing<sup>45</sup> and by May Laingsburg had been completely transformed into a temporary town consisting of 120 prefabricated houses.<sup>46</sup> Each house comprised of three bedrooms, a kitchen and lounge. Additionally, each housing unit received essential services<sup>47</sup> such as potable water and electricity.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> "Lesse tussen stof en sluk: Leerlinge in tuig by ramp-skool," *Die Burger*, 7 Februarie, 1981, p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> "Skool kry nuwe vere ná ramp," *Die Burger*, 28 Februarie 1981, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> "Laingsburg se skool gou binne vernuwe," *Die Burger*, 8 Februarie 1981, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> "Laingsburertjies gou weer hok toe," *Die Burger*, 11 Februarie 1981, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> "100 tydelike huise kom gou – R 10 milj. vir rampgebied," *Die Burger*, 12 Februarie 1981, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> "Laingsburg – 100 houses ready soon," *The Cape Times*, 2 March, 1981, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> "Laingsburger gehuisves: Eerste vier huise vir haweloses," *Die Burger*, 9 Februarie 1981, p. 2.; "Die hartseer le nog vlak in Laingsburg," *Die Vaderland*, 12 March 1981, p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> "Laingsburg dizzy and dazed but not finished," *The Cape Times*, 27 February 1981, p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> "Laingsburgers kom weer op voete," *Die Vaderland*, 15 April 1981, p.9.

<sup>46</sup> "Laingsburg se herstel in vier maande ná ramp: 'n dorp staan uit die modder op," *Die Burger*, 25 Mei 1981, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> Meeting of the Laingsburg Rebuilding Committee Minutes, 17 February 1981, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> "Laingsburgers kom weer op voete," *Die Vaderland*, 15 April 1981, p.9.



**Figure 16:** A Laingsburg family outside their temporary house.<sup>49</sup>

The people of Laingsburg were assured that the town would be rebuilt by the end of 1981.<sup>50</sup> The new flood-line had been drawn roughly down the center of the town, while the plots which flooded, were bought by the Government to be rezoned as gardens. The new houses were to be rebuilt on the Cape Town side of the river, on the old industrial site, while the new industrial area would be rebuilt where the existing sports field was located. Furthermore, the building of a new old-age home was also proposed.<sup>51</sup> In a process presided over by Rebuilding Committee member, Isak van der Merwe, residents had the opportunity to draw lots for their new plots, which ranged between 600 and 1400 square meters. Their names were written on bits of paper and placed in a drum. To ensure that the process was impartial, Nico Keys, the local magistrate did the draw. The sequence in which someone's name was drawn, determined that person's position in the queue to choose a plot. If the prospective owners were not satisfied with their plots, they could exchange plots among themselves.<sup>52</sup>

This system caused much tension among residents. The name of the person, which was drawn first, had the advantage of choosing the plot of their liking. The rest in the

<sup>49</sup> "Flood victims shrug off heat and dust," *The Argus*, 24 February 1981, p. 17.

<sup>50</sup> "Nuwe geboue begin oor 3 mde. verrys," *Die Burger*, 25 Mei 1981, p. 11.

<sup>51</sup> "Laingsburg may be rebuilt by Christmas," *The Cape Times*, 10 April 1981, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> "Chance for Laingsburg residents to pick up plots," *The Cape Times*, 23 July 1981, p. 3.

queue had to make do with the plots that remained. Nevertheless, residents had the opportunity to choose a plot by 4 August 1981<sup>53</sup>, after which the Department of Community Development presented them with a selection of rebuilding plans to choose from.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the Government also helped farmers generously, and they had until the 31<sup>st</sup> of August to claim ex-gratia compensation for damages caused to their land.<sup>55</sup>

The rebuilding process had not gone according to plan, however. As year-end approached, very little construction had taken place and people were forcing residents to settle for life in the dusty, semi-desert Karoo plains in their mobile homes for longer than anticipated.<sup>56</sup> The few signs of attempts to reconstruct evident in the awarding of plots and tuition for learners resuming, was not enough to quell the dissatisfaction of the community at the lack of progress.<sup>57</sup> During the month of August, the Minister of Health and Pensions also visited Laingsburg, to listen to their disputes and needs. He subsequently reported to parliament to generate a solution.<sup>58</sup> In October of 1981, assurance was provided that all the affected people of Laingsburg would be in their new houses by April the following year, as the people of Laingsburg had only made known what their needs were, by the end of September in 1981.<sup>59</sup>

During that time, there were also attempts to inject a measure of excitement into the temporary settlement. The shifting of building deadlines and residents' dwindling confidence in the Government's ability to rebuild their town necessitated this. To this end, the contributions of the public proved very useful as it extended beyond immediate financial and material contributions in the weeks following the flood. It included the provision of free, much needed entertainment. For example, on 17 February 1981 the meeting of the Laingsburg Rebuilding Committee, announced a free concert.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> "Ye shall divide land by lot," *The Cape Times*, 24 July 1981, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Meeting of the Laingsburg Rebuilding Committee Minutes, 17 February 1981.

<sup>55</sup> *Laingsburg Nuusbrief*, 31 Augustus 1981.

<sup>56</sup> "Laingsburg looks back in anger," *Sunday Express*, 11 October 1981, p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> "Nuwe Laingsburg verrys vyf maande ná vloed," *Die Burger*, 25 Junie 1981, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> "Minister oor Laingsburg," *Die Vaderland*, 26 Junie 1981, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> "L'burg se huise in April voltooi," *Die Burger*, 28 Oktober 1981, p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> Meeting of the Laingsburg Rebuilding Committee Minutes, 17 February 1981.

The Laingsburg community enjoyed the continued support of South Africans through volunteerism, such as the help they received from a group of students from the University of Potchefstroom, who offered to clean up and restore the old rectory and graveyard.<sup>61</sup> Another group of students from the aforementioned university provided the community with a free concert on 15 July 1982.<sup>62</sup> A volunteer from Prins Albert also made her services as a hairdresser available to the women of Laingsburg, once a month free of charge.<sup>63</sup> The community members took a keen interest in each other's wellbeing. All Laingsburgers cared for the elderly population. Regular outings were organized for them.<sup>64</sup> In addition, the owners of the Laingsburg hotel, Paul and Brenda Ameels, treated them to a special luncheon.<sup>65</sup>

In 1982, Laingsburgers had very little to celebrate in terms of rebuilding, apart from the celebration of the centenary anniversary of the DRC. The stone building was among the few structures, which survived the ravaging flood disaster the previous year. It was completely refurbished. New oak benches replaced its pews, which the flood covered in a mud sludge. The garden, which had been ruined, boasted new flora while the steel gate, which was flattened under the immense force of the water, that swept through Laingsburg, was also restored.<sup>66</sup> A special committee was established to organize the celebration,<sup>67</sup> which was scheduled to take place between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of December 1982. It caused much excitement among Laingsburgers, who endured a dull existence in the temporary dwellings.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to the Rebuilding Committee, a newsletter was established to keep the people updated on developments. In addition to this, many other recreational activities were organized by various people in the community to keep residents occupied. It included hikes for the children along the Buffels River, special movie nights for the young adults and other interested community members, as well as a mobile library where residents could borrow books and where children could go, to enjoy activities

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<sup>61</sup> *Laingsburg Nuusbrief*, 25 Junie 1981.

<sup>62</sup> *Laingsburger*, 18 Junie 1982.

<sup>63</sup> *Laingsburg Nuusbrief*, 19 Julie 1981.

<sup>64</sup> *Laingsburg Nuusbrief*, 21 Oktober 1981.

<sup>65</sup> *Laingsburger*, 13 Augustus 1982.

<sup>66</sup> "NGK eeu oud: Rampdorp gaan feesvier," *Die Burger*, 19 Oktober 1982, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> *Laingsburger*, 30 Julie 1982.

<sup>68</sup> *Laingsburger*, 3 September 1982.

such as general knowledge quizzes.<sup>69</sup> Although poorly attended by Laingsburgers, the school's sporting events had recommenced, mainly featuring rugby and netball.<sup>70</sup> Trips such as the tour for the senior citizens, which included stops in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Sun City, Kruger National Park and George among other places, were also subsequently organized.<sup>71</sup>

Sports proved to be a major distraction from the rebuilding process ranging from rugby to badminton. In addition, a Karoo marathon was organized, scheduled to take place on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 1981.<sup>72</sup> The 80km event was well supported and numerous donations were made such as one by Coca Cola of 360 litres of Coke.<sup>73</sup> By the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 141 people had already entered for the race; far surpassing the goal of the organizers whose target was 100 event participants. More encouraging was the fact that participants came from as far as the Free State and Natal Province.<sup>74</sup> The event was to take place over two days and subsequently happened for three consecutive years.<sup>75</sup> Not surprisingly however, the recreational activities for coloured residents were nearly nonexistent and took place separate from those of the white residents. This included a bazaar, which was planned exclusively for the coloured community on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August.<sup>76</sup>

At a meeting in December 1981, the Director of the Department of Community Development confirmed new plans for Laingsburg.<sup>77</sup> It was then estimated that about R5 million would be spent on rebuilding Laingsburg. However, residents were not satisfied with the location of the new development and made known their dissatisfaction about the ways in which they were compensated for their material losses. It was established that in total, 118 new living units would be built, with 77 during the first phase at a cost of R4million. During the second phase, houses to be rented out would be built by the National Housing Commission, as well as bachelor flats and a business complex consisting of nine shops. The projected completion of

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<sup>69</sup> *Laingsburg Nuusbrief*, 2 April 1981.

<sup>70</sup> *Laingsburg Nuusbrief*, 14 Mei 1981.

<sup>71</sup> *Laingsburger*, 25 Maart 1983.

<sup>72</sup> *Laingsburger*, 6 Augustus 1982.

<sup>73</sup> *Laingsburger*, 27 Augustus 1982.

<sup>74</sup> *Laingsburger*, 10 September 1982.

<sup>75</sup> *Laingsburger*, 17 September 1982.

<sup>76</sup> *Laingsburger*, 20 Augustus 1982.

<sup>77</sup> "77 huise volgens plan na vloed," *Die Burger*, 8 Desember 1981, p. 3.

the building was nine months after construction commenced. Essential services would also be rolled out in the following year, including a new sewerage system.<sup>78</sup>

However, unease soon spread among the residents and the public regarding the proposed plans.<sup>79</sup> They were dissatisfied with the intended location of the new houses on a rocky expanse of land chosen by the Department of Community Development, without having consulted with property owners.<sup>80</sup> They believed this would make the building of houses difficult and potentially slow the process down significantly, whilst also making certain activities like gardening, virtually impossible. The fact that better suited land was situated 200 meters away from the chosen location further angered residents. Additionally, plots which were made available were flooded in 1976. Most of the residents' houses were insured and those who did not have insurance were provided with houses, while those who had insurance were expected to use the money towards purchasing new houses.<sup>81</sup> While it was also maintained that the Government would build each resident a house of the same value as the property, which they had previously owned<sup>82</sup>, this caused more residents to leave Laingsburg.<sup>83</sup>

As the one-year anniversary of the flood approached in 1982, Laingsburg's temporary settlement stood desolate and little progress was made regarding the rebuilding of the town<sup>84</sup> while the remaining Laingsburgers found themselves reliving their trauma.<sup>85</sup> Emotionally evocative images covered the front pages of most newspapers in South Africa, as residents held a commemorative ceremony in honour of those who lost their lives.<sup>86</sup> The memorial service was attended by 750 people, where wreathes were placed on the stage in the church hall, symbolizing the lives of those who perished. The rebuilding process however, lacked the desired momentum<sup>87</sup> and the excitement,

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<sup>78</sup> "Laingsburg kry R5m. vir nuwe huise," *Die Burger*, 9 Desember 1981, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> "Laingsburg moet op plek bly staan," *Die Burger*, 26 Mei 1981, p. 16.

<sup>80</sup> "Laingsburg is erg ontevrede," *Die Burger*, 20 Junie 1981, p. 10.

<sup>81</sup> "Laingsburg nog deur probleme oorstrom," *Rapport*, 26 Julie 1981, p. 10.

<sup>82</sup> "Laingsburgers só vergoed La," *Die Burger*, 9 Junie 1981, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> "Laingsburg is erg ontevrede oor geld," *Die Burger*, 29 Julie 1981, p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> "Laingsburg – 'n jaar na die ramp," *Die Volksblad*, 25 Januarie 1982, p. 14.

<sup>85</sup> "Laingsburg ramp maak steeds seer," *Die Burger*, 15 Januarie 1982, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> "Laingsburg onthou sy nag van smart," *Die Burger*, 25 Januarie 1982, p. 1.

<sup>87</sup> "Laingsburg sê dankie vir gespaarde lewens," *Die Vaderland*, 25 January 1982, p. 4.

which residents displayed months earlier when they were given new plots, was replaced with fears that Laingsburg could become a ghost town.<sup>88</sup>



**Figure 17:** One year later the new graveyard appears desolate while residents were still living in temporary houses, visible in the background.<sup>89</sup>

Lacking detailed information regarding when exactly the rebuilding process was to commence, was a cause for concern among residents<sup>90</sup> and many families had opted to leave Laingsburg as a result to settle elsewhere while a total of 40 learners had already left the school.<sup>91</sup> The hot Karoo summer temperatures, reportedly made living in the temporary houses unbearable. To combat this, they covered their windows with aluminum foil to prevent direct sunlight from entering their houses. This, however, proved to be a futile exercise. Furthermore, residents also found that the powdery residue caused by the silt pestiferous, as it was continuously whisked into their dwellings. They tried to combat this by insulating their houses with foam.<sup>92</sup> When information appeared in newspapers on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1982 that rebuilding was to commence, residents could breathe a sigh of relief. It emerged that the process would commence with the building of new streets and the installation of a new

<sup>88</sup> "Laingsburg fight for new life," *The Cape Times*, 18 January 1981, p. 9.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> "Geteisterdes in moedeloos," *Die Burger*, 15 Januarie 1982, p. 10.

<sup>91</sup> "Laingsburg word spookdorp as owerheid nie keer nie, sê inwoners," *Die Burger*, 8 Junie 1981, p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> "n Jaar verby - Laingsburg sê nog dankie," *Hoofstad*, 23 Januarie 1982, p. 3.

sewerage - and storm-water drainage system, expected to be completed within 15 months.<sup>93</sup>

The valor of certain Laingsburgers in rescuing others and the significant roles that they played during the rebuilding process, received acknowledgement. Such was the case for Isak van der Merwe, who received the Salus medal for his outstanding service during this time for his role in rescuing many residents during the flood and for his role as the chairperson of the rebuilding committee, at a special ceremony held in Cape Town.<sup>94</sup> The completion of certain facilities including the three new tennis courts was another cause for excitement during this ceremony. To celebrate the new addition to the town, a “bring and braai” was held on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1982.<sup>95</sup> By the 15<sup>th</sup> of October of that year the first five of the 118 required new houses were handed over to its new owners by the Minister of Community Development<sup>96</sup>, and in December, six more houses were handed over to their new owners.<sup>97</sup>

### **Politics and Dissatisfied Residents**

Intensified anti-apartheid protests and resistance characterized the 1980s in South Africa. The cosmetic reforms, which the Government introduced to include non-white South Africans by way of a Tricameral Parliament, to make provision for the needs of different racial groups, in turn further contributed to this resistance.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, the political tension between white and non-white residents were also evident in the wake of the flood and spilled into the post-flood relief efforts. Two separate relief points had reportedly been set up, one intended solely for white flood victims and another for non-white victims. Furthermore, anonymous phone calls were made to the *Cape Herald* newspaper, during which there were complaints that the news crews from the SABC were only reporting on the ways in which white residents were affected by the flood.<sup>99</sup> Another reader wrote to *The Argus* newspaper, highlighting the absence of

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<sup>93</sup> “Bouery aan die nuwe Laingsburg begin,” *Die Burger*, 26 Januarie 1982, p. 2.

<sup>94</sup> *Laingsburger*, 30 April 1982.

<sup>95</sup> *Laingsburger*, 21 Mei 1982; *Laingsburger*, 4 Junie 1982.

<sup>96</sup> *Laingsburger*, 15 Oktober 1982.

<sup>97</sup> *Laingsburger*, 3 Desember 1982.

<sup>98</sup> L. Thompson, *A History of South Africa from the Earliest Known Human Inhabitants to the Present*, pp. 234-235.

<sup>99</sup> “Distaster town apartheid slated,” *Cape Herald*, 7 February 1981, p. 1.

reporting on the ways in which non-white residents were affected by the flood on television.<sup>100</sup>

The ways in which the Government treated the non-white victims of the Laingsburg flood, presented an opportunity to criticize the racially oppressive and exclusionist apartheid Government. Readers of popular Afrikaans newspapers such as *Die Burger* and *Rapport*, were especially vocal in this regard. In a letter written to the paper, a reader expressed their contempt at the fact that the Government would make funds available on a racially discriminatory basis.<sup>101</sup> Others appeared more neutral in their anti-apartheid convictions. As illustrated in another letter a reader commented on the ability of South Africans to “support each other across races” and questioned why apartheid persists.<sup>102</sup>

Furthermore, apart from the few signs of rebuilding, Laingsburgers and other South Africans sought explanations about how the publicly donated funds were spent. Certain goals, which were set during the rebuilding process, were never met and some residents were dissatisfied with the ways in which the Government provided compensation.<sup>103</sup> Albeit the case, by May 1981 however, 186 payouts had already been made. They included the loss of furniture items, personal effects, implements, tools, livestock and vehicles that were not covered by insurance.<sup>104</sup>

There was also dissatisfaction among certain residents about the fact that those whose houses were not insured, would receive similar houses as those whose houses were indeed insured. Furthermore, residents were dissatisfied with the five designs that were suggested for the houses, which they claimed resembled houses fit for a “sub-economic” area.<sup>105</sup> Concern was also expressed about the reselling of items of clothing which were donated to Laingsburg, but which were not being used. Even though it was maintained that the profits could be used to further assist Laingsburgers whose needs in terms of clothing had now been met, donors were especially vocal

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<sup>100</sup> “Apartheid on SABC tv,” *The Argus*, 2 February 1981, p. 14.

<sup>101</sup> “Diskriminasie: G’n hoop vir ‘n einde,” *Rapport*, 8 Maart 1981, p. 2.

<sup>102</sup> “Laingsburger se les vir SA,” *Die Burger*, 20 Februarie 1981, p. 12.

<sup>103</sup> “So is slagoffers van vloedramp gehelp,” *Die Burger*, 5 Maart 1982, p. 18.

<sup>104</sup> “Munnik regrets flood complaints,” *The Cape Times*, 7 May 1981, p. 11.

<sup>105</sup> “MP goes to aid flood victims,” *The Cape Times*, 5 June 1981, p. 2.

against this, as these items would be sold to those who intended to make profits from items intended to aid Laingsburgers.<sup>106</sup>

In response to the dissatisfaction of the community about payouts, the Minister of Health, Welfare and Pensions maintained that ex-gratia payments were made from voluntary public donations and contributions from the Government. Furthermore, it was also maintained that these funds were to be used to provide payment to all those who suffered losses because of the floods, in all the magisterial districts concerned.<sup>107</sup> However, there were those who believed that the government had done and continued to do ample to help the people of Laingsburg.<sup>108</sup>

Other readers commented on how the Laingsburg community was swiftly provided with new houses from the Government, while little attention was given to the welfare of black people, many of whom were squatters.<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, coloured people who lost houses during the flood were promised housing of the same standards as that offered to white residents.<sup>110</sup> However, this was not the case and South Africans soon commented on this by writing open letters to newspapers, criticizing the mistreatment of coloured people.<sup>111</sup> Readers once again pointed out that most of the money would be “invested” in the wellbeing of the white community.<sup>112</sup> In an article which appeared in *Die Burger*, it emerged that only R6 000 was set aside for the rebuilding of houses which belonged to the coloured people. In addition, no mention was made of further emotional support or material compensation.<sup>113</sup>

Readers were outraged at the fact that the coloured community did not receive the same caliber of support in the wake of the flood, as the white community did, including psychological support, material and monetary compensation and new housing.<sup>114</sup> While the residents of Laingsburg were provided with temporary housing, in the nearby coloured community of Zoar, residents were still without permanent housing - 14

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<sup>106</sup> “Rampgebiede se nood afgeweer,” *Die Vaderland*, 18 Junie 1981, p. 9.

<sup>107</sup> “Munnik regrets flood complaints,” *The Cape Times*, 7 May 1981, p. 11.

<sup>108</sup> “Ramp-klagte is verstommend,” *Die Burger*, 5 Maart 1982, p. 10.

<sup>109</sup> “Help for Laingsburg, but no roof for squatters,” *The Cape Times*, 13 August 1981, p. 12.

<sup>110</sup> “Vreugde,” *Rapport*, 15 Maart 1981, p. 1.

<sup>111</sup> “Slagoffers van vloed gehelp ongeag kleur,” *Die Burger*, 14 Oktober 1981, p. 16.

<sup>112</sup> “Diskriminasie: G’n hoop vir ’n einde,” *Rapport*, 8 Maart 1981, p. 2.

<sup>113</sup> “Bruines kry groot hulp ná vloed,” *Die Burger*, 28 Februarie 1981, p. 11.

<sup>114</sup> “Zoar se mense beter af as Laingsburg s’n,” *Die Burger*, 24 Junie 1982, p. 7.

months after the flood. Instead, they were living in tents, provided by the SADF. Although these residents were provided with food, clothing and blankets by the SADF immediately after the flood, they were simply ignored by authorities during the ensuing months. Their living conditions were bleak. Access to fresh water was as far as one kilometre away, while their sewage had to be disgustingly disposed of in nearby bushes.<sup>115</sup>

In the wake of the disaster, farmers also treated non-white flood survivors living on farms in Laingsburg with some hostility. The flood left many farmworkers destitute and in some cases, they were chased off the farms where they had worked all their lives. They were forced to seek refuge elsewhere, most likely on neighboring farms, where conditions were not much different.<sup>116</sup> The following quote encapsulates the inhumane way non-white farmworkers were treated:

Ons kry nou baie swaar hier. Die boere gee nie vir ons om nie, want hulle sê dit is deur die “hotnotte” dat hulle soveel skade moes ly. Ons moet die kos wat die helikopters hier afgelaai het, ook koop, maar ons het nie geld nie. Ons mag ook nie van die water uit die opgaardamme drink nie, want hulle sê daar sal nie genoeg vir hulle en die plaaswerkers wees nie.<sup>117</sup>

### **The New Laingsburg Emerges**

Although at a very slow pace, rebuilding continued in earnest, in 1983 while residents continued living in prefabricated houses.<sup>118</sup> Albeit the case, only 18 families had been able to take ownership of their newly built houses by January and a number of houses were only partially completed, indicating that Laingsburg was slowly starting to recover. This was however part of the first phase of the rebuilding process during which 77 houses were supposed to be completed and that by the end of 1982. Since that goal was not met, it was amended and the target was reset as 106 houses, which were supposed to have been completed by early the following year.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> “Zoar kry gou huise,” *Die Burger*, 7 April 1982, p. 15.

<sup>116</sup> “Swaarkry ná die vloed,” *Rapport*, 15 Februarie 1981, p. 1.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> “After the floods,” *The Cape Times*, 8 January 1983, p. 8.

<sup>119</sup> “The new Laingsburg begins to sprout from the mud,” *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 January 1983 p. 9.

As the rebuilding of the town gained momentum, excitement and a renewed sense of confidence in the ability of the Government to complete the houses within the new provided timeframe prevailed among Laingsburg residents<sup>120</sup>, some of whom had now lived in prefabricated housing for almost two years, while others had already moved into their new homes.<sup>121</sup> The prefabricated accommodation was a problem, for many. The boarders at the boys' hostel for example, complained of the structure's unbearable heat during summer and its severely cold temperatures during winter, due to a lack of air conditioning and the inconvenience of having to make use of ablution facilities, separated from the structure; as well as the lack of space and proper facilities for studying.<sup>122</sup>

However, it was only three years later and at an estimated R30 million, that rebuilding neared completion. By June 1984, the last ten houses were being built, the new boys' hostel was nearing completion and the foundation for the new old age home was being laid, while a new business complex was also built.<sup>123</sup> The Government contributed R539 000 towards the construction of the new old age home, which was officially opened in November 1985. In addition to the new facility's sickbay, which could accommodate 16 elderlies, there were also 21 single rooms as well as four double and six single flats.<sup>124</sup>

By 1984, the town had been completely rebuilt and newspapers now shed light on the new Laingsburg, by reporting on how the people were settling in.<sup>125</sup> With its new infrastructure, and housing, Laingsburg attracted many new residents. Its population consequently reached the same numbers as it was before the flood. Although many learners left the school after the flood, the number of learners enrolling were steadily increasing.<sup>126</sup> Ultimately, it was maintained that a further R 3,2 million was spent on a new drainage and sewerage system and the construction of new houses cost R7,3 million while R 1,7 million was made available to those who built their houses themselves.<sup>127</sup> Built above the newly established flood line 648 meters above sea level,

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<sup>120</sup> "A town rebuilds after the flood," *The Cape Times*, 21 January 1983, p. 6.

<sup>121</sup> "Confident Laingsburg leaves havoc far behind," *The Star*, 1 February 1983, p. 4.

<sup>122</sup> "All steamed up over hot house hostel," *Sunday Times*, 13 February 1983, p. 5.

<sup>123</sup> "Laingsburg weer wat hy was," *Oosterlig*, 6 Junie 1984, p. 13.

<sup>124</sup> "Laingsburg bejaardes dankbaar," *Die Burger*, 18 November 1985, p. 9.

<sup>125</sup> "Vandag kabbel koel water deur sy rotstun," *Die Burger*, 25 Januarie 1981, p. 20.

<sup>126</sup> "Laingsburg se inwoners vermeerder mooi," *Die Burger*, 25 Januarie 1984, p. 20.

<sup>127</sup> "Laingsburg kry groot geskenk," *Die Burger*, 25 Januarie 1981, p. 20.

many residents were also of the opinion that the new Laingsburg functioned better with its new and improved infrastructure, as opposed to how it did before the flood.<sup>128</sup> The 118 limestone houses were now being serviced by a brand new and improved sewerage system, while passage through the town was made easier by the newly built roads.<sup>129</sup>

To thank those involved in rebuilding Laingsburg, including fellow South Africans for their generous donations, and to celebrate the completion of the rebuilding process, a day of thanksgiving, was held on 18 August 1984, which was to be attended by the new Minister of Community Development, Pen Kotzé and the Minister of Telecommunications, Dr. Munnik.<sup>130</sup> At the ceremony, the Laingsburg municipality awarded the South African Police with honorary citizenship in recognition of the role it played in the rescue and relief work in Laingsburg. In attendance were 300 dignitaries, residents, members of the armed forces and guests.<sup>131</sup>

At the event, the Minister of Community Development maintained that R 30 million had been spent on rebuilding Laingsburg. An amount of R 3 million was spent on temporary homes, offices and a community hall; R7 million for 118 new homes; R3.2 million for sewerage and electricity; as well as R770 000 for a new shopping centre and office complex.<sup>132</sup> Additionally, R14,2 million in total was spent on ex-gratia payouts of which R5,6 million was contributed by the public and R6,9 million by the Government; while the removal of 185 000 tons of silt cost the Government in excess of a million rands and the building of a new pavilion cost R110 000.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, a new old age home was in the process of being built, which reportedly cost R 1,5 million.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> "Nuwe dorp lê bo gevaarlyk," *Die Burger*, 25 Januarie 1981, p. 22.

<sup>129</sup> "Baie dorpe sal nuwe Laingsburg beny," *Die Burger*, 25 Januarie 1984, p. 22.

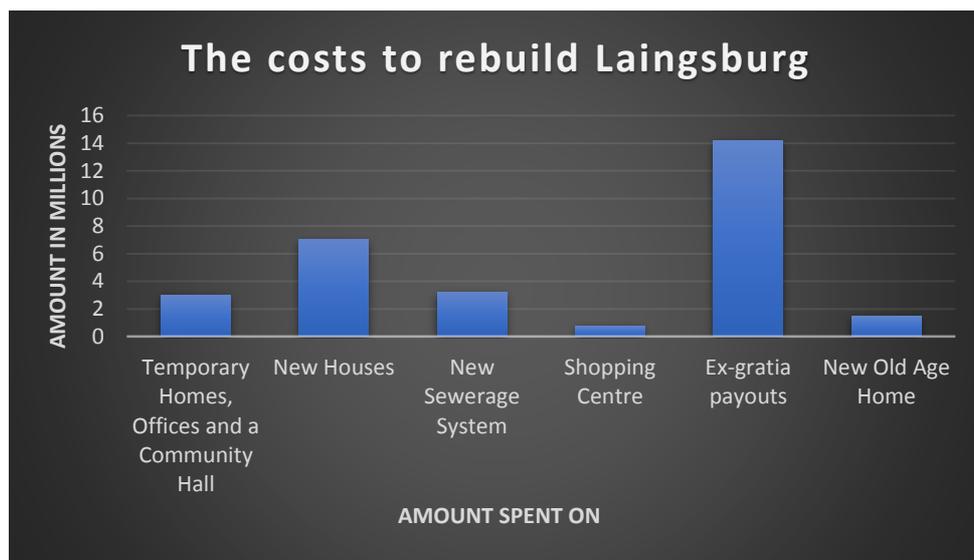
<sup>130</sup> "Laingsburg hou dankdag op 18 Augustus," *Die Burger*, 14 Junie 1984, p. 10.

<sup>131</sup> "Laingsburg says thanks to all for assistance," *The Cape Herald*, 20 August 1984 p. 4.

<sup>132</sup> "Laingsburg survivors thank S. Africa at ceremony," *The Argus*, 18 August 1984, p. 2.

<sup>133</sup> "Laingsburg-herstel kos R30 miljoen," *Die Transvaler*, 18 Augustus 1984, p. 1.

<sup>134</sup> "Laingsburgers kry hul dorp terug," *Rapport*, 19 Augustus 1984, p. 8.



**Figure 18:** A graph indicating the amount of money spent on rebuilding Laingsburg.<sup>135</sup>

By 1983, quite a few families had already moved into their new houses. The town also welcomed new residents. Among them were teachers and again special mention was made of the importance of activities to keep the community occupied, including a motorcycle rally.<sup>136</sup> Interestingly, the flood was recalled for the first time in months, only after the town received a significant amount of rain, since this reminded residents of the fateful day, which they were trying to forget. The plans regarding the old age home were also mentioned and things were looking up for them. Other plans which were mentioned included those for the new rugby pavilion, athletics field as well as the disaster graveyard while the existing graveyard was to be repaired.<sup>137</sup>

## Conclusion

The Laingsburg flood gripped the attention and tugged at the hearts of people throughout South Africa and beyond. The devastation of lives and the destruction caused to the natural and built environment encapsulated the magnitude of the flood. As highlighted in this chapter, it consequently made the impact of and response to the disaster, a highly publicized and publicly scrutinized process. Furthermore, this chapter wove together various archived newspaper accounts of the process of

<sup>135</sup> "Laingsburg says thanks to all for assistance," *The Cape Herald*, 20 August 1984 p. 4.

<sup>136</sup> *Laingsburger*, 21 January 1983.

<sup>137</sup> *Laingsburger*, 28 January 1983.

rebuilding the town of Laingsburg and the lives of its people, as well as articulating the challenges that arose and the attempts made by the Government and others to address them.

*We can't celebrate Heritage Day when our people are still missing  
and not remembered with dignity. 1*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Remembering what happened then, now

#### Introduction

Memorialization is commemorative, enabling the living to mourn the loss of loved ones and to attain a sense of closure.<sup>2</sup> In the wake of the Laingsburg flood disaster, there were several commemorative events to memorialize it. This flood is deemed one of the most devastating and traumatic natural disasters in South Africa's history and it happened during the inhumane political dispensation of apartheid. As a result, non-white flood survivors' experiences were not captured, nor treated with the necessary dignity, significance and respect. As time progressed, the disaster also became part of Laingsburg's tourism sector and this commodification further affected the way in which it was commemorated and is memorialized. This chapter therefore addresses the theme of memorialization against the backdrop of apartheid and within the context of commercialisation. It also addresses the related identified voids in the existing documented accounts. It achieves this by providing a historiographical overview of the memorialization of disasters and memorialization in South Africa, in general. The experiences of non-white Laingsburg flood disaster survivors are then incorporated and integrated into the broader narrative and highlights the effects of the commodification of the disaster.

#### Historiographical note on Disasters and Memorialization in South Africa

It is essential to enable an understanding of the broader historiography of disasters in South Africa, especially regarding natural disasters and its memorialization before one can meaningfully discuss the ways in which the Laingsburg disaster has been commemorated and memorialized. Although the exploration of commemoration and

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<sup>1</sup> The words of Benjamin Kleinbooi who spearheaded the "Untold Stories" program, as stated in the following article, "Laingsburg flood victims honoured," *The Cape Times*, 24 September 2013, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> S. Marschall: "Pointing to the Dead: Victims, Martyrs and Public Memory in South Africa," *South African Historical Journal*, (60), (1), 14 October 2008, p. 103.

memorialization post-disaster happened elsewhere in Africa and internationally, it appears that this field largely remains unexplored within the South African context. For this reason, research on disasters should be encouraged: to uncover the ways in which memorialization may have been covered; to identify the gaps in the historiography; and to highlight the ways in which this study aims to contribute to memorializing disasters within the broader South African context by using the Laingsburg flood disaster as a case study.

Prior to the Laingsburg flood disaster of 1981, South Africa experienced several natural and man-made disasters. Some of these were so devastating and gripping that it inspired writers such as Jose Burman to explore them. In his publication, *Disaster Struck South Africa* (1971) he succeeds in providing vividly detailed, though brief, accounts of each disaster by making use of newspaper articles and some archival material. The disasters he explored, include: the Great Fire of 1869, which wreaked havoc on and destroyed a number of farms in the George district; the Braamfontein dynamite disaster of 1896; this was followed by the Coalbrook mining disaster in 1960, during which 437 black miners were trapped underneath the earth – none of whom were rescued; as well as the earthquake in 1969, which had its epicenter in Tulbagh, and claimed the lives of 11 people on the surrounding farms.<sup>3</sup> Although this publication was intended for posterity, the thoroughness of the investigation and the use of relevant historical sources strengthens the accounts provided and makes it a valuable contribution to the general historiography of disasters in South Africa.

Existing research about disasters with specific reference to natural disasters and memorialization in South Africa is scant. Albeit the case it would, however, appear that historians and other academics have written extensively about the ways in which man-made atrocities like those which transpired during the apartheid era have been memorialized and how these events have become part of constructing a more inclusive narrative of the “new” South Africa. Since the abolition of apartheid and the advent of democracy, there has been a great emphasis on memorializing anti-Apartheid stalwarts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See J. Burman: *Disaster Struck South Africa*, 1971.

<sup>4</sup> See S. Victor: “The Politics of Remembering and Commemorating Atrocity in South Africa: The Bisho Massacre and its Aftermath, 1992-2012,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, (41), (1), 2015,

Nonetheless, in recent years the subject of disasters in South Africa also started receiving attention. One of the most notable researched disasters is the Ellis Park Stadium Disaster of 2001, during which 43 people died and 158 were injured, when a section of the stadium collapsed. Subsequently, it has been heralded as the most devastating sporting disaster in South African history.<sup>5</sup> Since the related research was published merely three years after the disaster, it is perhaps understandable that it did not include information related to the incident's commemoration and memorialization. Recently, there was also an academic enquiry regarding the Braamfontein explosion of 1896, outlining its causes, the experiences of those who witnessed it as well as the immediate repercussions. Attempts made to remember the disaster, are however, only briefly touched upon by the author. This consistent oversight inadvertently perpetuates the lack of research regarding the memorialization of disasters. This thesis therefore, in part, aims to address closing the gap, using the Laingsburg flood disaster as a case study.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, Albert Grundlingh explored the 1917 Mendi Disaster, during which 615 black South Africans died. His study illustrates how this disaster consequently became a tool for self-help and of the advancement of the black community through the establishment of the Mendi Memorial Committee for Education. Anti-segregationist black leaders who gathered support among members of the black community to oppose the underlying segregationist ideology of apartheid often used the subsequent commemoration events as a political platform. During the political turmoil of the 1980's however, not much attention focused on celebrating those who perished in the disaster. Doing so, would imply the celebration of black people who were willing to fight for the white Government. On the other hand, during the 1990's and post-1994 the narrative became one of bravery coupled with numerous attempts to resurrect the memory of these men. The narratives and experiences of the black and coloured troops who participated in the First World War (1914-1918), has also been captured and explored in more detail by Albert Grundlingh which highlights the necessity of more inclusive

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pp. 83-102; S. Marschall: "Commemorating 'Struggle Heroes': Constructing a Genealogy for the New South Africa," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, (12), (2), 2006, pp. 2003.

<sup>5</sup> P. Alegi: "Like Cows Driven to a Dip: The 2001 Ellis Park Stadium Collapse in South Africa," *Soccer and Society*, (5), (2), 2004, p. 233.

<sup>6</sup> See, G. Ahnie: "Ik Weet Niets van die Ontploffing: An Examination of the Braamfontein Explosion of 1896," MA Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2017.

histories.<sup>7</sup> The disaster remains a useful analytical tool, because it demonstrates how disaster can be politically and socially advantageous and it highlights the amenability of a narrative, depending on the political context - the latter of which also played out in Laingsburg, after the flood.

Within an international context however, the topic of post-disaster memorialization and commemoration has been and continues to be a much-discussed topic in books and journal articles, offering several interdisciplinary perspectives and analyses.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, this is not the case in South Africa. The memorialization of disasters has largely been restricted to certain atrocities committed during and associated with the apartheid regime creating a gap in scholarship pertaining to the commemoration and memorialization of natural disasters in South Africa, which this thesis attempts to address.

### **Memorializing the Laingsburg Flood Disaster**

By definition, memorialization is the social commemoration of people, experiences and events transmitted from the past to the present.<sup>9</sup> It takes a variety of forms, including formal museums and monuments. The functions of memorialization include, among other things, the creation of a specific place for immediate family and/or the larger society to mourn and honour victims. This facilitates the historic preservation of a specific era in a country or community's history; advancing educational purposes, including the retelling of history for future generations; as well as offering symbolic reparations to honour the victims of a tragedy and reinstate their reputations.<sup>10</sup> It is an important process as it enables a society to re-write certain narratives of the past, by for example recognizing survivors of human rights violations and by so doing begin a

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<sup>7</sup> See, A. Grundlingh: "Mutating Memories and the Making of a Myth: Remembering the SS Mendi Disaster," 1917-2007, *South African Historical Journal*, (63), (1), 2011, pp. 20-37; A. Grundlingh: *War and Society: Participation and Remembrance: South African black and coloured troops in the First World War, 1914-1918*. Sun Media, Stellenbosch, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> See, P.C. Pezzulo: "Tourists and/as disasters: Rebuilding, remembering, and responsibility in New Orleans," *Tourist Studies*, (9), (1), 2010, pp. 23-41; See, P.P. Karan & S.P. Subbiah (eds): *The Indian Ocean Tsunami: The Global Response to a Natural Disaster*. University Press of Kentucky, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Hoelscher, M. & Anheier, H.: *Indicator suites for Heritage, Memory and Identity*, in *Heritage, Memory and Identity*, Anheier, H. & Rajisar, Y. (eds.). p. 334.

<sup>10</sup> J. Barsalou, & V. Baxter: *The Urge to Remember: The Role of Memorials in Social Reconstruction and Transitional Justice*. Available Online: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/srs5.pdf> (17 July 2017).

process of healing, which may assist a previously divided society in need of reconciliation.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst several museums and memorials exist in an attempt not to forget disasters such as the Laingsburg flood of 1981, there is a lack of detailed, comprehensive and inclusive documentation of these disasters. Addressing this issue is an important enterprise for historians. It is particularly important to do so whilst people who have lived through these events are still alive and therefore able to provide oral accounts of what happened. This is even more poignant within the South African context, where there is a history of exclusion, based on race. To exclude any person or group's accounts of events prevents historians from capturing everything there is to know about the event. In the South African context, it perpetuates the legacy of apartheid. Historians are therefore in a position to address the ethical dilemmas of the past and introduce a new way of historicizing.

Memorializing the victims of the 1981 Laingsburg flood has received much attention. Leading up to the first anniversary of the flood in 1982. Newspapers nationwide were once again flooded with articles in which residents recounted their experiences. However, the anniversary of the flood was overshadowed by the frustration of the community due to the lack of redevelopment and rebuilding - as most residents were still living in temporary accommodation made available to them by the Government.<sup>12</sup> This aside, there were numerous attempts to memorialize the Laingsburg flood and certain individuals associated with the disaster. Almost immediately after the flood, there were talks of memorializing those whose lives the floodwaters claimed, by building a special graveyard for them and establishing a commemorative plaque bearing their names. Although this was the case, progress in this regard was slow and numerous newspapers reported on the neglected graveyard and its poor location.<sup>13</sup>

Since the flood, there were several commemorative church services. The first organized commemorative church service took place one year later in 1982, while

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<sup>11</sup> *Memory and Memorialization*, [www.csvr.org.za](http://www.csvr.org.za) (17 July 2017).

<sup>12</sup> "n Jaar verby - Laingsburg sê nog dankie," *Hoofstad*, 23 January 1982, p. 3.; "Brenda wants the river over to flood again," *Weekend Argus*, 25 Januarie 1981, p. 13.; "Laingsburg sê dankie vir gespaarde lewens," *Die Vaderland*, 25 Januarie 1982, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> "Forgotten victims," *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 January 1983, p. 9; "After the floods," *The Cape Times*, 8 January 1983, p. 8.

most residents were still living in tents or prefabricated houses. The refurbished church building, one of the few buildings that escaped the flood with minimal damage, hosted the service. Every resident, including eminent persons, attended it. During the service those who had lost family members placed wreathes in remembrance of them.<sup>14</sup> From the outset, however, some white residents expressed a measure of hostility towards the coloured residents during the grieving process, whom resided in a coloured township on the outskirts of the town. However, they were not included in the wreath laying nor the tree planting ceremonies.<sup>15</sup>

The church strategically framed the 1982 commemorative service as a “communion service”, which barred many of the coloured residents from attending, as they were not members of the church. As a result, many coloured residents were compelled to stand outside the venue. They later left during proceedings. It is worth noting however, that there were certain white residents who disagreed with the way the church intervened in that manner. They were of the opinion that everyone should have participated in the commemorative process.<sup>16</sup> This not only continued to divide the community along racial lines, it also prevented participation in a collective grieving process. The process was consequently compromised which resulted in some conflict between the coloured and white people years later, as will be illustrated.

In addition, the Government focused exclusively on recognizing white residents who made “outstanding contributions” during the flood. Isak van der Merwe, a farmer in the Laingsburg district, received the silver Salus medal for the rescue work he did during the flood and his subsequent involvement in rebuilding Laingsburg, as the chairperson of the Laingsburg Disaster Fund.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the South African Air Force, which was instrumental in rescue missions the day after the flood, also received recognition from the Government. At a special ceremony held at the air force base at Ysterplaat, the Southern Air Commandment Unit, which was responsible for getting 350 people in the Laingsburg district to safety, received the prestigious “Vredesabel” of the Inspector General of the air force, General Major Pienaar. Ysterplaat air force base

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<sup>14</sup> “Sobs as Laingsburg remembers its dead,” *The Argus*, 25 January 1981, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> “Room for whites only in flood town’s hall of grief,” *The Argus*, 25 January 1981, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> “Laingsburg flood rescuer honoured,” *The Argus*, 19 April 1982, p. 3.

also received the award for Operational Efficiency in its role during the flood.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the SAPF received honorary citizenship for the role it played in recovering corpses and feeding surviving, homeless residents. Under the guidance of then police commissioner, Brigadier Genis, the SAPS was also responsible for the successful coordination of the subsequent cleanup and feeding operation, done in conjunction with a contingent from the SAAF, the SADF as well as the South African Navy.<sup>19</sup>

Memorializing the victims of the Laingsburg flood reportedly took time and the planning thereof was reportedly inefficient. Two years after the flood, the graveyard stood neglected among the rubble of the ongoing construction work. It was here where some of the victims laid buried - namely those whose bodies were recovered and who were successfully identified. Tombstones marked only two graves while piles of baked earth, baked by the intense Karoo sun, marked the rest and withered flowers intermingled with deteriorating plastic blooms. The town clerk at the time maintained that the municipality had planned to have a memorial built. According to him, the task of building the memorial was subject to a process of tendering. Unfortunately, however, there had been no interest displayed in the process.<sup>20</sup> Only days before the second anniversary of the flood, talks of memorialization suddenly gained momentum. The Reverend Jan Ackerman revealed intentions to build an obelisk. It would be on display at the DRC. It was in memory of his predecessor Reverend Jacobs who valiantly lost his life as the floodwaters swept his body downstream while he was attempting to rescue some elderly folk at the old age home.<sup>21</sup>

Memorialization did not receive immediate attention after apartheid was abolished in 1994 either. Newspaper articles pertaining to the commemoration of the flood were rare, except for the twentieth anniversary of the disaster. A special report in *Die Burger* newspaper marked the occasion, where survivors again recounted their experiences of that day.<sup>22</sup> It is also noteworthy, that as part of the commemorations the community

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<sup>18</sup> "Lugmag eenheid vereer na ramp," *Die Burger*, 15 April 1982, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> "SAP kry ere-burgerskap van vloeddorp," *Die Burger*, 4 Julie 1984, p. 1.; "Ereburgerskap vir polisiehoof," *Die Transvaler*, 17 Julie 1984, p. 6.; "Dorp vereer Le Grange," *Die Vaderland*, 17 Julie 1984, p. 6.; "Laingsburg honours its debt to the SAP," *The Cape Times*, 20 August 1984, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> "Forgotten victims," *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 January 1983, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> "Ere-naald opgerig vir vloedheld," *Die Transvaler*, 17 Januarie 1983, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> "Hy't gemaan, ons het nie geluister," *Beeld*, 25 Januarie 2001, p. 16; "Laingsburg 20 jaar later," *Die Burger*, 25 Januarie 2001, p. 1.

deemed certain individuals to be flood heroes. This was in honour of their attempts to save lives, by risking their own. Again one such an individual was the Reverend Jacobs. They memorialized his sacrifice by naming the new Old Age Home building after him.<sup>23</sup>

The narratives of the coloured flood survivors received very little to no attention during the apartheid era. This only changed 22 years later when Carel van Wyk, who was the school principal in 1981, interviewed coloured and black residents who were present during the flood. Making use of these interviews and in collaboration with Stellenbosch University, he compiled a publication entitled *Nog Laingsburg* (2003), in which these residents recounted their experiences – most of them for the first time, 20 years later. The experiences of some of the coloured people proved to be horrifying, as in the case of Frans Diko, who witnessed nine of his family members being swept away by the flood waters.<sup>24</sup>

### **Allegations of a Mass Grave**

Shortly after the 21-year anniversary, the attention of the media focused on Laingsburg again. This time it reported on allegations of a supposed mass grave, where black and coloured residents reportedly laid buried. Perhaps an indication of the resulting racial tension caused by these allegations is the fact that two separate commemorative ceremonies happened that year, for the first time since the disaster. Coloured residents gathered at the site where they believed their family members' bodies laid buried, while the white residents held a separate church service to commemorate their families.<sup>25</sup> Many residents within the coloured community supported these allegations. They requested an investigation into the matter. One of the residents, Colin Meyer, maintained:

Ek het net soos 'n klomp ander kinders op die ashoop gespeel. Kort ná die vloed het ons gesien hoe die weermag se helikopters voorwerpe in swart sakke, wat beslis lyke was, in 'n groot gat naby die ashoop stort.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "Die helde dominee," *Die Burger*, 25 Januarie 2001, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> See C. Van Wyk, *Nog Laingsburgvloed*, Sun Media, Stellenbosch, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> "Torrent of bitterness is legacy of Laingsburg flood," *Cape Argus*, 28 January 2002, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> "Bewere oor lyke in massagraf ondersoek," *Die Burger*, 25 Januarie 2002, p. 2.

Initially there were talks of excavating the site where the bodies were reportedly buried, but there was some confusion about whom was to make such a decision and as a result, the investigation was delayed for some months.<sup>27</sup> Eventually an investigation was officially opened in December 2002, upon the instructions from Marthinus van Schalkwyk, the then premier of the Western Cape at the time. Local Government MEC, Cobus Dowry was to liaise with then mayor of Laingsburg to obtain the addresses of and affidavits from residents who could participate in interviews, to probe the validity of the allegations and the possible existence of a mass grave and its location.<sup>28</sup> However, by January 2003, affidavits from those who claimed that a mass grave did indeed exist were not forthcoming.<sup>29</sup>

In February 2003, a specially appointed task team visited Laingsburg, to hear testimonies from those who claimed to have seen the bodies being disposed of at a nearby landfill.<sup>30</sup> The Council for Geoscience conducted radar scans at the suggested site. These scans would determine whether there were subterranean disturbances in the soil, which would in turn support or nullify the allegations.<sup>31</sup> The radar scans subsequently proved that there were no traces of human remains in the surveyed area. However, the Council for Geoscience maintained that metals and electrical cables could have interfered with the results of the scans. This necessitated excavating the site.<sup>32</sup>

Starting on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July until the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2003, archaeological investigations took place at the identified site. During a press conference held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September, the then Minister of local Government, Cobus Dowry announced that the investigation proved conclusively that there was no evidence to back the allegations of a mass grave.<sup>33</sup> However, the investigation also placed some needed light on the

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<sup>27</sup> This quote comes from an article in which a resident claims to have seen bodies being disposed of at a nearby landfill. "Verwarring op Laingsburg oor massagraf," *Die Burger*, 18 December 2002, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> "Bid to establish if Laingsburg reports about mass grave are fact or fiction," *Cape Times*, 23 December 2002, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> "Laingsburg haunted by flood scandal," *Cape Times*, 27 January 2003, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> "In vullissakke begrawe?," *Rapport*, 16 Februarie 2003, p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> "Radar scans may reveal the truth of Laingsburg residents' mass grave claim," *Cape Times*, 26 March 2003, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> "Laingsburg mass grave search fails," *Cape Argus*, 1 May 2003, p. 5.; "Approval for excavation at Laingsburg 'mass grave' site," *Cape Times*, 1 May 2003, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> "Dowry: Press Conference to announce the outcome of Laingsburg Mass Grave Investigation," <http://www.polity.org.za/article/dowry-press-conference-to-announce-outcome-of-laingsburg-mass-grave-investigation-03092003-2003-09-03/searchString:laingsburg+mass+grave> (4 July 2017).

poor state of the graveyard, where coloured flood victim bodies were buried. As a result, the Western Cape Government made R200 000 available for the upgrading of the cemetery which included the building of a new access road and the planting of trees.<sup>34</sup>

It is noteworthy that although the mass-grave investigations attempted to bring about a sense of closure for members of the coloured community, it actually increased the tension in an already racially divided community. The allegations of a mass-grave brought these divisions and the associated social injustices to the forefront, especially because of its coverage in the media. As a result, the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice (IRSJ) became involved and hosted a seminar as part of its attempt to improve relationships across racial lines.<sup>35</sup>

### **Remembering post-apartheid**

It is purported that anniversary events post-disasters, are particularly important, as it facilitates a process of collective remembering and that they serve to locate and reinforce a disaster in a community's social history and identity.<sup>36</sup> In 2011, the community of Laingsburg commemorated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the flood. Organizers referred to it as a "Flood Festival". It was a collaborative venture with Stellenbosch University and the inhabitants of Laingsburg went to great lengths to remember the flood. A comprehensive Flood Festival program was planned, for the weekend of the 21<sup>st</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> of January that year. The event marked the biggest commemorative effort in the wake of the flood. Proceedings commenced on 15 January 2011, with the symbolic planting of 100 trees in memory of the lives which were lost. Some of the items on the program included the sharing of stories by flood survivors; the official opening of the Laingsburg Flood Museum; the unveiling of several artworks including a water feature based on the flood created by students from the Visual Arts Department of Stellenbosch University; an onstage performance, specially written for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, based on the flood. The festival concluded with a church service,

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<sup>34</sup> "Laingsburg kry hulp om rasse-onmin te beëindig," *Die Burger*, 26 Maart 2004, p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> A. Eyre: "In Remembrance: Post-disaster Rituals and Symbols," *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, (14), (3), 1999, pp. 26-27.

at which the late rector of Stellenbosch University, Professor Russel Botman, was the guest speaker.<sup>37</sup>

However, as part of commemorating the disaster, certain residents recalled the injustices committed against them and responded to this. Leading up to Heritage Day in 2013, there were claims that the new Laingsburg High School, as well as some of the new houses, were built on the same land where the graves of coloured people were located, but which was destroyed during the flood. As a result, a group of coloured people believed that they could not participate in Heritage Day, maintaining that there was no closure for coloured families affected by the flood, implying that they have no heritage to celebrate. In an attempt to include the coloured victims who lost their lives and whose graves could not be pointed out, Benjamin Kleinbooi facilitated a separate “untold stories” program. It was marked by prayer meetings and by coloured residents sharing their stories about the flood.<sup>38</sup>

According to Lisa Moore, the narratives, which memorials tell, can both facilitate or obstruct group cohesion. She maintains that if the process of constructing a memorial is inclusive, it can facilitate the necessary dialogue that can help to mend entrenched social antagonisms and heal painful wounds.<sup>39</sup> Initially, during the apartheid regime, little attention was given to memorialization and even less to that of the narratives of the non-white residents of Laingsburg. The local municipality organized the commemorative effort. The only memorial which emerged during this political dispensation, was that of a memorial plaque bearing the names of the flood victims. However, this plaque does not bear the names of all the other flood victims. The memorial has hence also become a reminder to family members of those whose bodies remain unfound. In as much as it is an attempt to remember those who lost their lives, it is also an important reminder of the damage caused by the segregationist and discriminatory ideology of apartheid.

There are no spaces in Laingsburg which commemorates the losses incurred by the coloured community whose relatives laid buried in the graveyard which was destroyed.

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<sup>37</sup> Laingsburg 30 Year Flood Festival Program.

<sup>38</sup> “Laingsburg flood victims honoured,” *The Cape Times*, 24 September 2013, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> L. Moore: “(Re)covering the Past, Remembering the Trauma: The Politics of Commemoration at Sites of Atrocity,” *Journal of Public and International Affairs*, (20), p.56.

Therefore, more than three decades after Laingsburg was devastated by the flood, memorialization remains an ongoing process. The Laingsburg municipality currently has a number of plans in the pipeline to make sure that the memorialization process is inclusive. There are claims that during the flood a graveyard where the ancestors of the coloured community laid buried was destroyed and never restored, yet where the white community's relatives were buried restoration occurred. This cause great unhappiness and in an attempt to rectify this, the Laingsburg municipality is planning to build a commemorative garden, as a space to memorialize these people and to make the younger people aware of their heritage.<sup>40</sup>

### **Remembering through Tourism**

The unique landscape of the Karoo has made it a very popular tourist destination and people visit it for several reasons. There are those who visit because of the experiences it offers that are unique to the region, such as its heritage sites and the Karoo food. There are also those who visit some of the attractions because they are travelling through the area; those who travel for business reasons and others who visit friends and family.<sup>41</sup> With the N1 running through Laingsburg, it receives a substantial amount of traffic daily, placing it in a strategic position for attracting potential tourists, as it is one of the oldest towns in South Africa, enveloped in natural beauty and also has a rich cultural history.

Following the disaster and the amount of attention the town received in the newspapers, many people were curious to know about what happened. Immediately after the disaster, people travelled to Laingsburg in droves to gaze upon the devastation caused.<sup>42</sup> With the devastation now something of the past, the interest in learning about what happened still attracts a substantial number of people to the small town. The Laingsburg Municipality has since decided to tap into the interest displayed. They consequently invested significantly in developing the town's tourism sector around the 1981 flood. Considering the town's racially divided history and previous arguments which suggests that tourist practices after a disaster can offer compelling

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<sup>40</sup> P. Williams: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, Laingsburg, Western Cape, 27 October 2016.

<sup>41</sup> R. Scholes, P. Lochner, G. Schreiner, L. Snyman-Van der Walt & M. de Jager (eds.): "Shale Gas Development in the Central Karoo: A Scientific Assessment of the Positive and Negative Consequences," p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> "Nou verstroom agies dorp," *Die Burger*, 9 Februarie 1981, p. 1.

opportunities for rebuilding and remembering<sup>43</sup>, presenting the people with a more inclusive and truthful narrative through tourism, seems to have been a mutually beneficial enterprise for the community as well as to those whose narratives were excluded.



**Figure 19:** The Laingsburg Flood Museum.<sup>44</sup>

Attempting to memorialize the disaster, resulted in a form of “tragedy for tourism.”<sup>45</sup> In 2011, with the 30<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the disaster, several of the initiatives launched in remembrance of the flood aided the economic development of Laingsburg. In this regard, perhaps the most important aspect of the 30<sup>th</sup> commemorative effort was the launch of the Laingsburg Flood Museum. The museum houses several artefacts from the flood, including personal items such as a shoe, recovered after the flood during the cleanup operation. One of the gas cylinders, which several residents held onto while transported downstream into the Floriskraal dam was amongst the salvaged items; as well as a collection of newspaper articles and images of the flood.<sup>46</sup> When

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<sup>43</sup> P. Pezzulo: “Tourists and/as disasters: Rebuilding, remembering, and responsibility in New Orleans,” *Tourist Studies*, (9), (1), 2010, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> The Laingsburg flood museum: [http://infolaingsburg.co.za/image.php?image\\_mini\\_gallery=83](http://infolaingsburg.co.za/image.php?image_mini_gallery=83) (3 August 2017).

<sup>45</sup> “Almal onthou dorp weens ramp,” *Die Burger*, 25 Januarie 2001, p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> F. Van Wyk, Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, Laingsburg, Western Cape, 22 June 2016.

visiting the museum, the curator explains the narrative by making use of these images and museumgoers get an opportunity to ask questions.

In addition to the Flood Museum, a Flood Route was also established. By following this route, interested persons can trace and “relive” aspects of the flood disaster. The route commences at the Flood Museum. Interested persons may walk through the town, following the route with or without a tourist guide. Either way, information notice boards provide guidance. These boards detail the destruction caused and what remained of the town. The tour ends at the museum where visitors are also shown a digital versatile disc (DVD), which contains a collection of shortened news broadcasts from 1981 of the devastation caused – which is also available for purchase.<sup>47</sup> Finally, in collaboration with Stellenbosch University’s Visual Arts Department, a Laingsburg Art Route was established between 2010 and 2011, to further memorialize the disaster. After extensive workshops with the community, six public artworks were completed and have subsequently become permanent features in the cultural life of Laingsburg, inspired by stories and images, which were shared. Some of the artworks are interactive and offer spaces of play while others serve to facilitate contemplation and at the same time provide a measure of visual pleasure.<sup>48</sup>

Based on the preceding discussion and on additional interviews conducted with community members, a number of positive and negative aspects can be highlighted regarding the municipality’s attempt to use the tragedy positively. One of the positive impacts is the fact that the community attracts tourists from everywhere who remain intrigued by the flood, which “puts Laingsburg on the map” and boosts its economy. This interest in death, disaster and atrocity emerged globally as a growing trend during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. John Lennon and Malcom Foley termed it dark tourism, also known as “thanatourism”, since it encompasses the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> F. Van Wyk, Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, Laingsburg, Western Cape, 22 June 2016.; *Laingsburg Flood Route*, Available Online: <http://www.infolainburg.co.za/index.php?p=17>, (3 August 2017).

<sup>48</sup> *Laingsburg Art Route*, Available Online: <http://www.infolainburg.co.za/index.php?p=17>, (3 August 2017).

<sup>49</sup> J. Lennon & M. Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, p. 3.

An interview with a flood survivor highlighted the far-reaching positive effects of memorialization. Accordingly, in this instance, it provides opportunity to acknowledge the initially overlooked narratives, giving dignity to their loss and suffering too. Apart from the fact that it provides a vehicle for individual emotional healing and closure, it enables the community as a whole, to heal by placing this narrative in the public domain. Furthermore, it vicariously contributes towards the reconstruction of the broader community within the context of a democratic South Africa, which is pivotal in the project of reconciliation between the different race groups. Furthermore, through an enterprise like historical research regarding memorialization “black farmworkers” like Frans Diko have an opportunity to have their stories documented and thereby permanently memorialized.<sup>50</sup>

Daar is ‘n bord opgesit ter herhinnering van my nege familieledede wie ek verloor het. Ek besoek dit altyd. Ek het ook my nuwe vrou daarnatoe geneem. Ek wil nog my broer daarnatoe neem.<sup>51</sup>

Secondly, approaching the memorialization of the disaster from a tourist perspective, the visitors become aware of the other tourist attractions, which are on offer. These include Seweweeks Poort, a low-lying mountain pass containing several fresh water streams and picnic areas. The historic town of Matjiesfontein is another one of the tourist attractions in the area with its Victorian architecture and Marie Rawdon museum, which displays various antiquities of this era.<sup>52</sup> By implication, the disaster vicariously promotes participation in other facets of the local economy. The strategic location of the museum, in the business complex which contains several outlets such as a coffee shop, hair dresser and arts and crafts shop – all of which employ locals – were also part of the municipality’s plan to foster sustainable economic growth.<sup>53</sup>

As an important agency in shaping the town’s identity, the Flood Museum has become a significant role-player in its broader development and economic sustainability. The onsite hairdresser, cake and coffee shops, arts and crafts center and internet café create employment opportunities, whilst generating revenue. Furthermore, having this

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<sup>50</sup> The response of a flood survivor to the question of whether commemoration has F. Diko: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, Laingsburg, 28 October 2016.

<sup>51</sup> F. Diko: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, Laingsburg, Western Cape, 28 October 2016.

<sup>52</sup> *Laingsburg Tourism*, Available Online: <http://www.infolaingsburg.co.za/index.php?p=17>, (12 August 2017).

<sup>53</sup> F. Van Wyk: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 14 July 2017.

all-at-one-site facility meaningfully enhances the tourists and other Museum visitor's experience. Over the years, the museum has become more sustainable by reinventing itself as a conference facility used by important stakeholders of the town, such as the town's municipal management team who hold their weekly meetings there. Because of the town's location, many school groups reportedly visit the museum and this enables spreading the word about the town's unique natural disaster history. The flood also forms part of the local school curriculum. This helps keep the oral history tradition alive.<sup>54</sup>

Thirdly, memorialization is an important feature of preserving history and sometimes has the effect that the Laingsburg Flood Museum has had, in that it has enabled previously excluded narratives to become part of the bigger story thereby playing a role in political transformation and reconciliation. This in stark contrast to how it was in the past, during apartheid. It is thus possible that through the inclusive memorialization efforts in Laingsburg, the narrative of the flood has been reshaped into an official account of the past, fostering the continuous collective commemoration of the event.<sup>55</sup>

Although the memorialization process positively affects the community, there have also been many challenges along the way. Arguably, these challenges have disrupted the memorialization process. As indicated, the 30<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the flood marked the biggest commemorative effort since the disaster. Several projects were launched at the time to maintain the commemorative process after the event, but things have since dwindled and there has not been any event since to commemorate the disaster again. Moreover, many of the interactive artworks, which were produced by Stellenbosch University to memorialize the flood, have stopped working or have been vandalized by the youth in the community, hence losing its significance as commemorative markers of the disaster.<sup>56</sup> The museum curator, Francis van Wyk, has assumed the responsibility of maintaining them.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, there are also those

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<sup>54</sup> F. Van Wyk: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, 28 October 2016.

<sup>55</sup> G. Corsane (ed.), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, p. 202.

<sup>56</sup> The vandalization of memorials has been a common occurrence in South Africa and it is maintained that most cases are economically motivated theft of metal or other parts which are perceived to be valuable. See S. Marschall: "Collective Memory and Cultural Difference: Official vs Vernacular forms of Commemorating the Past," *The Journal of South African and American Studies*, (14), (1), 2013, p. 77.

<sup>57</sup> F. Van Wyk: Interviewed by Ashrick Pietersen, Laingsburg, Western Cape, 28 October 2016.

who refuse to talk about their experiences because of the trauma they experienced while there are others who feel that they have shared their experiences too much. This has a negative impact on the memorialization process, since those whose stories are excluded consequently restricts the flood narrative to the experiences of those who have shared their stories.



**Figure 20:** The now vandalized water feature, constructed from flood debris unearthed throughout the years, in celebration of the 30-year commemoration of the flood.<sup>58</sup>

Additionally, speculation regarding to the supposed mass graves in which the relatives of coloured people were buried, had a significant impact on the memorialization process, by dividing it along racial lines. Although these allegations were investigated and supposedly found to be untrue, certain coloured families were left embittered about the fact that the bodies of their families were never recovered. Although there is a cemetery where the coloured people were buried, their graves have not been pointed out to this day. This also excludes the relatives of these people from participating in the memorialization process.

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<sup>58</sup> Laingsburg Flood Museum, Available Online: <http://www.infolaingsburg.co.za/index.php?p=17> (14 August 2017).

## Conclusion

This chapter highlights the significance of historiography with regard to framing why the highly unlikely flooding of the town was also possible. Whilst Laingsburg is predominantly draught stricken, the Buffels River, which passes through it, has broken its banks on a few occasions and this has flooded the immediate area around it. This chapter illustrates the importance and usefulness of memorialization regarding the healing of memories. Furthermore, the role that agencies like the Laingsburg Flood Museum plays in both the memorialization and healing processes, is demonstrated. By painstakingly recording and re-telling flood survivors' stories, this museum also contributed to the preservation and memorialization thereof. This chapter also included the initially excluded narratives of non-white flood survivors, addressing an important aspect of the healing of this traditionally racially divided town. Additionally, chapter five directly and vicariously sheds light on the impact of the political dynamics surrounding the process of memorialization. The facts suggest that the memorialization process became much more inclusive, in post-Apartheid South Africa, thereby providing a more balanced historical account, while the tourism sector's role in memorializing and preserving the town's flood history and simultaneously sustaining its economy is also highlighted.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The field of disaster history is a relatively new, but growing sub-discipline. It appears to interest several academic historians and other researchers. Many regard the Laingsburg flood of 1981 as one of the most devastating natural disasters in South African history. It caused unimaginable damage to the natural and built environment and tragically claimed the lives of many. By researching this flood, this thesis contributed to the growing body of knowledge regarding disasters, focusing specifically on natural disaster history in South Africa. It included information about the area the flood occurred in and possible explanations why. It considered; the circumstances surrounding the flood, the impact it had on the environment and people, the ways in which the apartheid Government and citizenry responded and it explored the attempts made to commit it to memory, during and post, apartheid. Furthermore, this account pooled the information drawn from several available primary and secondary sources. The remainder of this chapter provides a synoptic overview of the contribution each of the preceding chapters made to compiling this account of the disaster.

Chapter one introduced the study and provided the rationale for undertaking it. It then proceeded to discuss the reviewed literature related to the topic under investigation, clarified the problem statement and focus of the research, discussed the methodology employed and gave an overview of what each of the subsequent chapters would focus on, to achieve the set outcomes. Chapter two commenced with a brief history of Laingsburg as a halfway-station between the towns of Beaufort West and Worcester. It explained that whilst some of its earliest inhabitants reportedly experienced it as a drought stricken area, there were also recorded instances of the Buffels River breaking its banks on the odd occasion, none of which were taken seriously since it never resulted in catastrophe. The background it sketched to the flood explains why no one would ever have expected the calamity caused by the flood that occurred in 1981, 111 years after the sale of the first plots in 1880.

Furthermore, the numerous firsthand accounts of the flood documented in chapter two explains why the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1981 will remain etched in the minds of Laingsburg's inhabitants who were in the town that fateful day. As much as this tapestry of stories

is about tragedy, it is also about resilience, compassion and overcoming. This chapter not only explained that earlier documented accounts of the flood were incomplete, since it excluded the narratives of non-white flood-survivors, it also addressed the issue by writing a more inclusive account. Vicariously, it highlighted the nature of South Africa's apartheid politics at the time and demonstrated its impact on individuals, groups and communities. This account of the 1981 Laingsburg flood therefore also started addressing the lacuna resulting from exclusion, whilst merging the multiple separate narratives contextually.

Chapter three is the longest chapter in this thesis. It covered various themes including information attesting to the magnitude and impact of the flood, its immediate and long-term effects and how it was responded to and exploited, against the backdrop of the apartheid narrative. Its contributions are therefore explained more substantially.

Apart from the Tulbagh earthquake of 1969, no other recorded South African natural disaster can rival the Laingsburg flood disaster of 1981, in scale and impact.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore no surprise that chapter three outlines the prompt and overwhelming monetary and other material support offered to the Laingsburg residents. It highlights the successful coordination of governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations, in working together in the face of a domestic natural disaster, regardless of the country simultaneously being involved in the Border War, and having no prior disaster-response protocols in place.

This chapter graphically narrated the tragic ways in which the floodwaters claimed lives, motivating why it is still regarded as one of the most devastating and catastrophic natural disasters, in South Africa's history. Additionally, it provided details about the immense damage caused to Laingsburg's natural and manmade environment. Those details included information about the uprooting of trees; the residential area almost completely washed away; the pronounced damage to farms located adjacent to the Buffels River, including the removal of valuable topsoil, submerged crops and the destruction of future harvests.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Page: *Reaction to disaster*, p. 16.

Furthermore, this chapter provided information about various aspects of the psychological trauma suffered by flood survivors and as part of providing a more inclusive account, it incorporated accounts obtained from non-white flood survivors. These accounts highlighted how, apart from suffering the trauma of losing family members, “non-white” Laingsburgers living on farms were further traumatized by their eviction from affected farms, and other forms of racial discrimination. The absence of therapeutic interventions for members of the Oudtshoorn Infantry School was also identified. Most of these individuals were between the ages of 19 and 24 at the time, and prior to the interviews conducted for this study, they reportedly never spoke about their experiences in Laingsburg.

Chapter three also discussed how in the wake of the biggest natural disaster in Laingsburg’s history, governmental and non-governmental organizations collaborated to manage the aftermath. It detailed how the SADF, the SAPF, the SAAF as well as Navy Divers, responded in tandem. The information provided in the chapter, attested to their individual and collective responsibilities. Furthermore, whilst highlighting the generous and compassionate responses of South Africans, apartheid’s impact remained in focus.

Chapter three demonstrated the ability of the Government and the South African citizenry to respond to a massive disaster. It also demonstrating the necessity of a disaster response framework. Finally, it explained how the disaster was used to garner support for the anti-apartheid movement, by amplifying the ways in which non-white residents were mistreated in the wake of the disaster.

Chapter four focused on what may be regarded as the most important phase in the wake of the disaster, namely the rebuilding phase. It discussed in detail the Government’s allocation of millions of rands to compensate farmers who lost everything as a result the flood. It also discussed the funds Government availed for the building of a new residential area. It provided information about how the process was characterized by regularly shifting deadlines and the consequent unpleasant living conditions experienced regarding the temporary housing settlement.

Furthermore, chapter four highlighted why and how the rebuilding process was also publicly scrutinized, particularly for the ways in which the so-called coloured and black

people were mistreated in the wake of the disaster and during the rebuilding phase. This chapter also provided a useful snapshot into the political dynamics at the time, shedding light on the various practices of racial segregation and discrimination as captured by the media. Chapter four's contributions also serve as an indication of the proliferation of anti-apartheid sentiments, illustrating how it became increasingly pronounced and spread throughout the country.

Chapter five broadly focused on memorialization. Given the fact that the Laingsburg flood disaster was hailed the biggest natural disaster in the history of South Africa at the time, it was essential to document the various attempts that were made in its aftermath, to commemorate it. Chapter five carefully pointed out why that process was compromised from the outset. Since the process was initiated during the apartheid era, it largely excluded the experiences of non-white flood survivors. The information provided by the chapter illustrates how the initial efforts regarding memorializing the disaster, focused on the experiences of Laingsburg's white population. Chapter five also provided information which supports the suggestion that there is a prevailing perception that non-white flood survivors did not endure the same suffering as white flood survivors. This chapter also highlighted that consequently, a very one-sided account of the disaster existed, for more than two decades. Non-white survivors were interviewed for the first time in 2002. They were invited to share their narratives, as part of marking 21 years having passed since the disaster happened. The associated challenges were documented in the chapter.

Chapter five also provided information about claims of a mass grave where coloured residents were apparently buried and their surviving relatives' dissatisfaction. Furthermore, this chapter highlighted the significant amount of racial tension that was fueled. It also pointed out how the local Government subsequently attempted to re-evaluate the flood narrative and their contemplation of the ways in which it could be economically beneficial to the community. This chapter then demonstrated and evaluated the attempts made to make the process of memorialization more inclusive. It discussed, how, through the promotion of the disaster as a unique, on-site tourism product the public is being re-educated about what happened, as the narratives and experiences of both white and non-white residents are now included. This chapter illustrated how packaging the disaster as a tourism product was an impetus for further

local economic development, which resulted in the establishment of a business complex, consisting out of several outlets where residents are employed.

Finally, chapter five also shed light on the importance of commemorative events and its significance to Laingsburg. It illustrated that although commemorative ceremonies were held on both the 10<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disaster, the commemorative effort marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disaster, was undoubtedly, the biggest and the most important. It also narrated how efforts to involve the entire community were bolstered by both the municipality as well as other stakeholders, such as Stellenbosch University's Visual Arts Department. Accordingly, this commemorative effort reportedly emphasized the need to memorialize the disaster through a number of memorials, such as a water-feature and contemplative artworks, among others. For the first time the entire community was involved in the process and a space was created for all flood survivors to share their experiences. This illustrated how the commemorative aspects of memorialization have become a vehicle which enables the inhabitants of Laingsburg to deal with the legacy of a devastating natural disaster that occurred within the context of a humanitarian disaster.

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