SADF soldiers’ stories
Review article
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Abstract
This article reviews two recently-published memoirs by SADF veterans: one a volunteer who spent 13 months as a medic in Namibia and the other a conscript who was deployed as a member of a mechanised battalion in Angola. Clive Holt’s “At Thy Call” may be the more dramatic of the two because he participated in the largest and fiercest conventional engagement of the entire war and seems to have been psychologically scarred for life. By contrast, Steven Webb’s “Ops Medic” seems uneventful as he was never involved in battle and appears not to bear any long-term ill effects of his more mundane experiences. Whatever their differences, these stories afford insights into how these soldier-authors have managed to come to terms with the memories of their times on active military service. And they have a wider relevance in that they provide insights into the enduring legacy of the militarization of South Africa and its neighbouring states.

The authors of the two books reviewed here were part of South Africa’s national service generation. As was the case with almost all able-bodied white males of 18 and above, they donned the nutria brown uniform of the South African Defence Force (SADF). Steven Webb and Clive Holt were two of the approximately 600,000 citizen force soldiers who served in the SADF between 1968 and 1993. Webb was a volunteer who joined at the age of 23 whilst Holt was 19 year-old conscript. Whereas Webb exercised a choice, Holt believed that he had no option other than to heed the call-up and perform national service or diensplig. Failure to do so meant harsh penalties. Holt went somewhat reluctantly whereas Webb’s enthusiasm was tempered with anxiety and misgivings. When Webb and Holt were inducted into the SADF, national service was two years duration. The period of national service had been gradually extended from 9 months to

1 This statement requires some qualification as the call-up was extended to “coloureds” and Indians after the creation of the tri-cameral parliament that accorded these groups token rights and added responsibilities of citizenship. White males in South West Africa were also conscripted by the SADF and, from 1980 national service was extended to all Namibians who were assigned to SADF units, the South West African Territory Force (SWATF) and the South West African Police (SWAPOL). The only exception were the Ovambo because they were deemed to be South West Africa Peoples’ Organization (SWAPO) supporters.

2 The alternatives were to object on conscientious – actually religious – grounds and face a six year jail sentence, or flee the country.
two years as exponential manpower demands were made upon a cohort of white males. Their obligations did not end with national service as they were assigned to citizen force or commando units that were liable for periodical call-ups for camps. Such camps usually lasted three months and involved deployment in the ‘operational areas’ from 1973 or stints in the black townships from 1984. ‘Dad’s army’, as the older soldiers were sometimes called, found themselves having to undergo regular (re)training so as to maintain their fighting — as opposed to their physical — fitness. They often served alongside new intakes of national servicemen (NSM). Thus those belonging to this national service generation were part-time soldiers for much of their adult lives. In fact, conscription or national service can be said to have been the only form of discrimination against young white males.3

Conscripts were indoctrinated to believe that it was their duty to defend the country against the twin threats of African nationalism and communism, described by the Afrikaans colloquialisms rooi/swart gevaar (literally ‘red/black danger’).4 This was in accordance with ‘total onslaught’ ideology that served to rationalise the authoritarian nature of the apartheid system by creating the myth of an implacable enemy beyond the country’s borders. This apparently monolithic force included Cubans, the armies of the frontline states, guerrilla insurgents, as well as revolutionaries operating in the country. This perceived threat was countered by the creation of a garrison state and the thoroughgoing militarization of South African society.5 The process of militarization was reinforced by social institutions such as the family, education system, mainstream media and the churches. Consequently, national service was widely regarded as a necessary commitment to make in order to ensure the continuation of white power and privilege.

South Africa’s 1957 Defence Act sanctioned the mobilisation of forces beyond its borders if the security of the country was in the opinion of the State President under threat.6 Some citizen force soldiers were reluctant to be deployed in Angola, but by far the majority had no qualms whatsoever about taking the fight into independent sovereign states. And there was little soul searching about being assigned to the occupation forces in SWA/Namibia which was effectively treated as a ‘fifth province’ of the Republic. Opposition to and evasion of call-ups only gained momentum in the 1980s when members of the citizen force were pressed into backing the South African Police efforts at crushing resistance in the townships. A few soldiers supported the End

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5 The most extensive treatment is to be found in Jacklyn Cock & Laurie Nathan, (eds.), War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa, Claremont, David Philip, 1989.
Conscription Campaign (ECC)'s efforts to pressurise the government into providing alternative forms of service. And in rare instances they even went into exile to join the ranks of the armed wings of the African National Congress (ANC) or Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). But by and large, South Africa's citizen soldiers accepted — or even welcomed — the opportunity to render military service, partly because most believed the myth of the SADF's invincibility and did not pause to consider the consequences of the destruction being inflicted on the peoples of the region. The sense of moral ambiguity evident in SADF veterans' discourse about the war is largely a retrospective development.

The 'Border War' was fought extensively by SADF proxy forces in order to minimize casualties amongst white soldiers. Indeed, surrogates — whether coerced or co-opted — bore the brunt of the fighting from the 1980s and paid a much higher price for doing so than white servicemen. The SADF's own losses remained a state secret on account of the strictures placed on reporting of the circumstances in which casualties were incurred. Under-reporting of war casualties also served to prevent a decline of public morale. To this day the exact toll of those killed while on active duty remains unclear and a matter of conjecture. Nearly 2,000 names are inscribed on the bronze plaques on the walls of the memorial erected on Klapperkop in 1979 to honour those who had lost their lives in defence of the Republic of South Africa. Peter Stiff's roll of honour of those killed in active service (which is appended to Webb's book) is based on the names listed at the Klapperkop memorial supplemented by his own research. This is probably the most accurate list to date but it omits the names of permanent force members and NSM who died in accidents or by their own hand. My own research suggests that these casualties

8 For instance, San or Bushmen trackers and guerrilla irregulars from Daniel Chipenda's faction of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) forces recruited to units such as 32 Battalion have been displaced and marginalized in post-apartheid South Africa. In the case of 32 Battalion veterans, their difficulties include deprivation, an uncertain future as a refugee community shuttled from camp to camp within some of the most desolate areas of the country, unsympathetic treatment by the ANC government, and easy prey to mercenary recruiters. See Jan Breytenbach, Buffalo Soldiers: The Story of South Africa's 32 Battalion 1975-1993, Alberton, Galago, 2002. For the plight of the Bushmen, see David Robbins, On the Bridge of Goodbye, Cape Town. Jonathan Ball, 2007.
9 See Steven Webb, Ops Medic. A National Serviceman's border war, Alberton, Galago, 2008: 249-286. Willem Steenkamp's estimate of 715 SADF personnel killed in action between 1974-88 is clearly too low. See his "Citizen": 20. John Dovey's roll of honour lists 1,986 SADF members killed on active duty over the period 1964-94 but contains no data for 1980 and 1981). See http://www.justdone.co.za/ROH/index. In a statement to Parliament in 1982, the then Minister of Defence Magnus Malan reckoned that the SADF had a casualty rate of 0.012% (or 12 in every 100 000) of the average daily strength of its armed forces in South West Africa. It is not clear whether this figure includes casualties from accidents and suicides but this figure is a gross underestimate of the actual situation. According to Professor R. Green, the official death rate of white troops killed on the border, expressed as a proportion of all white South Africans, was three times that of the US forces in Vietnam. See The Cape Times, 4 Jan. 1985, quoted in Catholic Institute of International Relations, Out of Step: War Resistance in South Africa, London, CIR, 1989, 31.
outnumbered those killed in action by about 3:1 and that the total number of white troops who died during the 1970s and 1980s was at least 5,000. But even this figure tells only part of the story for it excludes black members of the SADF and its surrogates.

National service was phased out following a sequence of events that culminated in the transfer of power from a white minority regime to a democratically-elected government. The South African and Cuban withdrawals from Angola, followed by a United Nations supervised settlement in Namibia, paved the way for a relatively peaceful transition whereby the African National Congress became the ruling party in South Africa. For some former NSM the transition was fraught with apprehension and misgivings. Many could not understand why they had been asked to sacrifice so much only to surrender power to those whom they had previously regarded as ‘the enemy’. Webb notes that (an unidentified) individual remarked with respect to the SADF’s withdrawal from Angola that: “We fought long and hard to get there and what did we do? Give it away again. We won all the battles but lost the war” (93). This sentiment echoes that of some retired SADF generals who have insisted that they held the line against the liberation movements and their (communist) allies and thus were in a position to call the shots in negotiations with the ANC. Instead, they were betrayed or ‘stabbed in the back’ by the politicians who made too many concessions to the ANC when its military wing did not have the capacity to threaten the security of the state or the power of its ruling white minority.

As the apartheid regime’s security forces had the most to lose, they were the most recalcitrant in surrendering power. For their part, most SADF veterans remained silent: either out of a sense of loyalty to the old regime and fellow soldiers, or for fear of being held accountable by the ANC government for war crimes or human rights violations. Few testified before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) because it was widely believed to be biased against the SADF, the institution which they had served. Journalist Karen Whitty explains their reluctance to testify in the following terms:

Bound by a sense of honour to their fellow troops, and the patriarchy still espoused by white South Africa, few men have come forward and spoken about their experiences, however barbaric and mundane, in South Africa’s border wars.10

If ex-conscripts were suspicious of the TRC, they were equally wary of public reaction to the divulgence of heinous acts. Whilst SADF soldiers may not have routinely committed atrocities, there is abundant evidence that Koevoet and other counter-insurgency forces were responsible for political assassinations, kidnappings, torture, and other acts of terror. For, as we shall see, the SADF resorted to replicating the tactics of SWAPO and upping the ante in the ‘dirty war’ that was waged for the loyalties of Namibians. And yet a clique of retired SADF generals refused to acknowledge their role in perpetrating

human rights abuses both in and outside of South Africa.\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, certain conscripts reported that the lack of public knowledge about the war created suspicion of their stories, while others were summarily dismissed as sympathy seekers or outright liars by the former SADF generals and their apologists.\textsuperscript{12} Thus veterans felt betrayed when the very authorities that they were convinced would defend their actions left them in the lurch. If trauma involves a betrayal of trust and the abuse of relations of power, then it is not surprising that many veterans embraced victimhood.\textsuperscript{13} So the selective amnesia of the retired generals was compounded by ‘ordinary’ soldiers’ self-imposed silence.

TRC amnesty applications were primarily from the ranks of the liberation armies or non-statutory forces.

Of the 256 members of the apartheid era security forces that applied for amnesty […] only 31 had served in the SADF. In contrast, there were close to 1,000 applications for amnesty from members of the various armed structures aligned to the ANC.\textsuperscript{14} Relatively few ex-combatants made statements as victims, choosing not to represent themselves in this way. Conversely, a former ECC organizer, Laurie Nathan, explained to the TRC that he believed SADF conscripts were “both victims and perpetrators”.\textsuperscript{15} The TRC characterised a special hearing on conscription as “neither an attempt to look for perpetrators, nor a process that will lead to the awarding of victim status.”\textsuperscript{16} In spite of its good intentions, the TRC “left the experiences of ‘ordinary’ soldiers largely invisible — not merely forgotten but ‘wished away’” as a report of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) declares.\textsuperscript{17} Nonetheless, the TRC at least recognized that some SADF veterans were likely to have been traumatized by their experiences. However, the extent of the problem is difficult to gauge. Certain soldiers are only now trying to come to terms with traumatic and life-altering experiences. At the time, there was little or no treatment for those with the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

\textsuperscript{11} They made a submission to the TRC that was co-ordinated by General Dirk Marais, former Deputy Chief of the Army, on behalf of his peers. It was entitled: “The Military in a Political Arena: The SADF and the TRC”. See Hilton Hamann, \textit{Days of the Generals}, Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2001: 130.

\textsuperscript{12} For instance, the testimony of conscript Kevin Hall has been carefully scrutinised and rebutted by Hamann, \textit{Days} : 221-223 and Magnus Malan, \textit{My lewe saam met die SA Weermag}, Pretoria, Protea, 2006: 474-476.


(PTSD). Whilst the SADF was not inclined to acknowledge the distresses of its foot soldiers, there has been belated recognition by medical practitioners of the existence of post-conflict trauma amongst former NSM. SADF veterans tended to repress their traumatic memories so as not to admit recollections too painful to recall. And society largely failed to acknowledge the hardships that ‘regular’ soldiers who were not necessarily involved in abuses or war crimes faced in coming to terms with their experiences. These veterans of the ‘Border War’ are unlikely to heal their psychological wounds until such time as they receive therapy. This is not to insist that healing is assured or that closure is attainable for questions remain about what constitutes ... a suitable trauma history, and what sentiments can be expressed in the national public sphere. In other words, there is still an unresolved tension between society’s need to know and its wish to deny or ignore what exactly was committed in its name.

In its concern about the consequences of the war, the TRC Report acknowledged the need to “raise public awareness about the reality and effects of post-traumatic stress disorder” and to encourage former conscripts and soldiers who participated in the conflict “to share their pain and reflect on their experiences.” Aside from proposing projects aimed at rehabilitating and rebuilding the lives of veterans, the TRC envisaged that they could possibly be “help[ed] to tell and write their stories.” Some have since done so although not necessarily as a result of the TRC’s instigation.

Publications of this type by SADF veterans include Barry Fowler’s Pro Patria (1995), Anthony Feinstein’s In Conflict (1998), Rick Andrew’s Buried in the Sky (2001), and Jacqui Thompson’s collection of conscripts’ reminiscences published under the title An Unpopular War (2006). It would appear that the passage of time for reflection has given soldier-authors the distance to understand their experiences and shape them into narratives. A number have undoubtedly found their writing cathartic and thereby achieved a degree of healing and reintegration into post-war society. Others are still dealing with traumatic episodes and repressed memories. These confessional texts seldom admit complicity in upholding the apartheid system, and when they do, it is not on account of ideological convictions or patriotism but rather because they believed that they were duty bound to do so. Their life stories are also frequently characterized by a telltale political naivety that suggests the SADF was a neutral or stabilizing force in a situation where violence was endemic. These stories are recounted with a blend of honesty and self-delusion, candour and scepticism, and self-deprecating humour. Some

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18 For a pithy review of the extent and nature of post-conflict trauma and other psychosocial problems amongst former national servicemen (and ex-combatants from the ranks of MK and APLA), see Sasha Gear, “The Road Back: Psycho-social Strains of Transition for South Africa’s Ex-Combatants”, in: Baines & Vale, (eds.), Border War: 245-266.


20 TRC, Report, vol. 4: 221.

21 Ibid.: 242.
are suffused in nostalgia for the ‘good old days’ while, contrarily, evincing a modicum of
guilt about the part that the narrators played as perpetrators of intimidation and
violence. But the overwhelming impression is that these veterans see themselves as
having simply performed their duties.

Steven Webb exemplifies this mindset. He is a British-born immigrant who opted for
national service as a break from a succession of dead-end jobs. Following the call-up of
his younger brother, he believed that he would make his father proud of him by
volunteering. He also reckoned he owed the country something in return for his
livelihood; that others were paying the supreme price while he had made no sacrifice
whatsoever. Webb hints at the guilt he felt when the name of a deceased friend who had
served in the SADF appeared on the family television screen during the epilogue to
South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)’s late-night programming (15). The text
offers a number of clues to suggest that Webb suffered from a lack of self esteem. He
wished to prove himself in at least two respects: demonstrate that he could pull his
weight despite his small stature and that he could prove his loyalty as a naturalized
South African. As an English speaker or soutie, Webb sought to fit in and gain
acceptance in a predominantly Afrikaner macho military culture. His motives for
volunteering, then, suggest that a wish to improve his poor self image was far more
important than a commitment to an ideology or to upholding a way of life. Webb
(unconsciously) frames his narrative as a rite of passage story according to which his
two years of national service taught him to take responsibility for his life choices. He
undoubtedly also took enormous pride in his accomplishments while in uniform,
especially being able to pass tests that he regarded as measures of increased maturity
and ‘manhood’. He also took considerable pride in attaining the rank of (full) corporal.

As part of the July 1984 intake, Webb was assigned to the SA Medical Services Training
Centre at its Klipdrift base. He underwent basic training where he was subjected to a
rigorous – even extreme – regime of physical exertion and privation that was
colloquially referred to by the Afrikaans term afkak (literally, ‘shit off’). In this and other
respects, SAMS was little different to any other arm of the SADF. Following his training in
counter-insurgency, he joined a unit that made a brief sortie into Angola before South
African forces were withdrawn (in April 1985). Thereafter he was deployed as a medic at
a base called Etale situated south of the Angola/SWA border. Except for the occasional
periods of leave, Webb spent much of the remaining 13 months of his national service
on ‘the Border’.

Webb accompanied between 15 and 20 patrols during his tour of duty that comprised
part of the SADF’s counter-insurgency campaign in northern Namibia. He is disarmingly
honest in admitting that they failed dismally to win the hearts and minds of the PBs
(plaaslike bevolking or local population). For instance, he dismisses a so-called

22 An abbreviation of soutie, literally ‘salty penis’, an Afrikaans term of opprobrium reserved for English-
speaking South Africans who were seen to have divided loyalties between the mother country (the United
Kingdom) and their adopted home (South Africa).
‘humanitarian patrol’ led by a naïve Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) dominee (padre) who preached the gospel in Afrikaans to a captive audience for the farce that it quite evidently was. He notes how members of 101 Battalion fraternized with local women and managed to procure sexual services. Instead of spreading goodwill, they contracted — and probably spread — syphilis (138-9). He observes that both the SADF and SWAPO used intimidation and violence (or the threat thereof) in order to extract information or coerce cooperation from or, at the very least, to ensure the neutrality of the PBs. He describes a number of instances when the SADF used tactics that mirrored those employed by SWAPO (186-7; 219-220). Such was the congruence between their tactics that when the SADF impersonated the enemy they were easily mistaken for SWAPO. On at least one occasion, the SADF troops used women as human shields (158), and on another occasion terrorized children in order to force their mothers to talk (220). And yet even in retrospect, Webb still countenances such conduct as both necessary and justified by the circumstances. However, he does sympathize with the PBs who found themselves in the invidious position of having to placate two armed forces that commandeered everything from food and other provisions to shelter. And he has begrudging admiration for the bravery of an old chief who contrived to cover the flight of SWAPO cadres from an approaching SADF patrol at great personal risk (159). All in all, his description — tinged by cynicism and humour — of operations repudiates the SADF’s own claims that the conduct of its troops in Namibia was disciplined — indeed exemplary. It also reveals why it was deemed necessary to invoke Section 103 ter of the Defence Act to indemnify SADF members serving in Namibia for unlawful actions “in connection with the combating of terrorism”. The SADF was responsible for many unlawful actions and for creating a climate conducive to acts of terror by its proxies.

Webb’s anecdotes provide plenty of evidence that the SADF’s mission in Namibia was anything but the success that its apologists have asserted. The SADF boasted of its superior fire power and high kill ratios but the trail of death and destruction it sowed only increased the fear and hostility of the local population. Indeed, many of the operations Webb learned about or was involved in served to alienate the PBs and thereby play directly into SWAPO’s hands. Webb does not spare his own side from criticism and highlights some of the SADF’s follies. There are unflattering descriptions of the foibles of camp commanders, of jealousies and fights between different units, and of the sheer incompetence of some of its officers in the field. On one occasion a lieutenant contrived to get his platoon lost on account of his inability to read his map and then accidentally threw a white phosphorous grenade into the midst of his troops while attempting to signal their presence to a helicopter in their proximity (222-4). This ‘sorry’ story epitomizes the hit-and-miss nature of the SADF’s efforts to maintain an edge over its adversary. The cumulative impression created by reading Webb’s account is that it was not simply that the SADF made mistakes in the implementation of its strategies, but that its mission was altogether ill-conceived and poorly executed.

23 Satchwell, “Power”: 41.
In certain respects, Webb is a keen observer of the human condition in wartime. But when it comes to appreciating the ambiguities of his own situation, he has many blind spots. For instance, the paradox that his military training equipped him to kill and to save lives is lost on him. He seemed more intent on experiencing combat — often going beyond the call of duty to do so — than putting his medical skills to the test. Although Webb expresses relief rather than regret at not having to take a life, elsewhere he displays no regard for the sanctity of human life. This is especially so in the case of the enemy whom he refers to variously as “SWAPO”, “insurgents” or “terrs”. He does not employ these terms in direct speech or dialogue in order to lend his account authenticity. Rather, his use of the unreconstructed language of the SADF suggests that he has not even begun to examine the morality of the war. Naming, after all, has a way of defining a person or an object for good or evil — and the terms that Webb favours are most certainly not neutral. In a rather revealing comment in his introduction, Webb notes that in all the time he spent in Namibia, he never once heard the enemy referred to as PLAN, the acronym for the Peoples’ Liberation Army of Namibia. For the SADF to have done so would have been tantamount to recognizing them as soldiers rather than as ‘terrorists’ who would have been eligible to be treated according to the terms of the Geneva convention. It would also have accorded SWAPO’s armed wing a degree of legitimacy that South Africa was not prepared to concede notwithstanding the fact that as far as the international community was concerned it was illegally occupying Namibia and SWAPO was the ‘sole and authentic’ representative of the Namibian people.

In his dedication, Webb pays tribute to NSM and their families who “endured two long years […] and who put their faith and belief in God, their country, the SADF and in the defeat of communism.” His tribute has somewhat of a hollow ring to it because he simply mouths the discredited sureties of the apartheid state. Given his own faith in the SADF’s medical corps, Webb not surprisingly singles out the 37 medics who “gave their lives serving others during the Border War” and the 15 medics who “were awarded the Honoris Crux for bravery” for special mention. Two appendices provide (near) complete lists of SADF personnel killed while on active service and awarded the Honoris Crux which, according to the blurb on the book’s cover were “published for the first time”. The publisher obviously believes that the inclusion of these appendices is as likely to catch the eye of potential buyers of the book as the content of Webb’s story. Peter Stiff is probably correct in this calculation for the book’s readers are likely to comprise primarily SADF veterans and aficionados of military history. There is undoubtedly a market for books about the ‘Border war’ that trade in nostalgia. Writing of what rugby means for Afrikaners during South Africa’s transition, John Nauright notes that nostalgia serves as a form of compensation so as “to create a sense of cultural security during a loss of political, and possibly cultural power.”24 It is apparent that many SADF veterans still cherish fond memories of military service and markers of these identities.

The publisher also rather selfishly imposes his own agenda on Webb’s project. A prolific writer of military history himself, Peter Stiff adds a coda to Webb’s book which amounts to an intervention in the Freedom Park fracas (244-248). Stiff holds that the omission of the names of SADF personnel who died on ‘the border’ would be understandable if Freedom Park’s wall of names was dedicated only to heroes and heroines of the freedom struggle. But the inclusion of the names of those who died in other southern African conflicts renders this omission inconsistent. In this respect he has a valid point for the Freedom Park Trust has not been altogether consistent in upholding the principle of inclusiveness when remembering those who lost their lives in South Africa’s conflicts. This is borne out by the fact that the names of combatants on both sides of the South African (or Anglo-Boer) Wars are inscribed on the wall of names whereas the names of those who lost their lives in the Liberation Struggle are not balanced by those killed in the Border War. Both conflicts were arguably civil wars and, rather than treat one side as victims and the other as perpetrators, it would be more even-handed to regard these conflicts as a shared tragedy. Stiff believes that in terms of the TRC’s mandate to promote reconciliation, Sikhumbuto should honour both sides of the freedom struggle. The premise of this viewpoint is that there is a moral equivalence between choosing to sacrifice one’s life for a legitimate armed struggle and doing one’s duty as an apartheid soldier. However, Stiff and other SADF apologists do not seem to realise that if the Freedom Park Trust were to concede this, they would effectively undermine their claims to the moral high ground and to have fought a ‘just war’ against the illegitimate apartheid regime. Stiff also contends that conscripts and citizen force soldiers were not necessarily supporters of apartheid. This may be true in certain instances but this does not gainsay the fact that the majority of white South Africans were complicit in upholding the system of minority rule.

The second book to be reviewed here is Clive Holt’s *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter*. It has the by-line: “a frontline account of the 1988 Angolan War, as seen through the eyes of a conscripted soldier”. The soldier-author fought in southern Angola between November 1987 and June 1988 in what were, arguably, the most significant engagements of the 23-year long conflict. The blurb on the back cover proclaims it “a classic account of war, as well as a window into the world of post-traumatic stress disorder”. It fails to live up to the first part of this claim for it is no literary masterpiece. But that is not my concern. For the purposes of this review, I wish to examine the latter claim, specifically what Holt’s story reveals about how its author developed combat-related trauma, as well as the SADF’s neglect of PTSD and the psychological problems suffered by its veterans.

*At Thy Call* is partly based on a diary that Holt kept during the time that he was involved in the fighting in Angola. Occasional diary entries punctuate the early part of the narrative and provide the reader with a sense of proximity to the events described in

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greater detail in the text written some 15 years later. Diary material was supplemented by information gleaned from the extant military histories and communications from fellow veterans of the battle. Thus the book combines first-hand recollections, personal memories and a synthesis of secondary sources. It is by no means a seamless story but is more than a battlefield biography for it does not end with the war. Unlike Webb’s book, it is not simply a *bildungsroman* or coming of age story. As with most soldier-authors, Holt reflects on how what he did and witnessed as a soldier affected him. And it is Holt’s frank disclosures of how repressed memories have come to haunt him that interests me.

In 1987 the 19-year old Holt underwent training at Bloemfontein and was then assigned to 61 Mechanised Infantry Battalion. His unit was involved in the pitched battle of Cuito Cuanavale between the SADF and its surrogate force UNITA on the one hand, and the Angolan army (Fapla) and its Cuban ally on the other. I have no wish to revisit the issue of who won the battle here (which the author does in chapter 6). Like Webb, Holt remains convinced that he was fighting a serious communist threat although he acknowledges at one point that the SADF was “an aggressor in a foreign country” (150). He clearly has a lingering pride in the performance of his unit and shows an undying loyalty to his fellow soldiers. However, this is offset by a pervasive sense of the futility of war and an indictment of the SADF’s treatment of those who put their lives on the line for their country.27

For the sake of providing sufficient contextualisation to appreciate Holt’s disclosures about how the fighting affected him, I will provide a brief synopsis of the campaigns in which he was involved. The first phase of the operation that went by the codename Modular was planned to stop the combined Cuban/FAPLA advance on UNITA’s stronghold of Mavinga and its Jamba headquarters. The SADF won a victory against enormous odds at the Lomba River where it halted the advance. Operation Modular segued into Hooper (then Packer and finally Displace) as the SADF launched repeated assaults on well-fortified enemy positions in the Tumpo triangle. Its failure to secure a bridgehead proved a decisive setback in the SADF’s bid to capture Cuito Cuanavale.28 This protracted conflict veered between intense large-scale conventional engagements and standoffs. During the ensuing stalemate, the fortunes and objectives of the warring parties changed frequently.29 Ultimately, it was the loss of the SAAF’s air

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26 Telephone conversation with Clive Holt, 8 February 2006.
27 Whitty, “Review”.
28 The then Minister of Defence, Magnus Malan, as well as the SADF generals claim that it was never the SADF’s intention to occupy Cuito but this is pure spin. See Ronnie Kasrils, “Historic Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale”, Address to Public Forum “Commemorating the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale”, Rhodes University, 28 May 2008.
superiority that proved telling as the ground forces had to withdraw or face the prospect of having their escape routes cut off. The likelihood of sustaining heavy losses of NSM would have been politically disastrous for the apartheid government. Meanwhile, Cuban forces outflanked the SADF and advanced on the Namibian border while its MiG fighter planes bombed the Calueque dam killing 12 NSM. The SADF then counter-attacked and inflicted casualties on the Cuban/MPLA forces. However, the overall situation in southern Angola was now far more fluid and gave the Cuban/MPLA forces the edge. It was the SADF whose teeth had been broken.30 For the first time ever the Cubans threatened the Namibian border and the SADF appeared vulnerable. The announcement by the Chief of the SADF, General Jannie Geldenhuys, of a massive call up in mid-1988 attests to this. It was the South Africans who sued for peace and brokered the negotiations that culminated in their withdrawal from Namibia and of Cuban forces from Angola.

61 Mechanised Battalion joined the fray in November 1987 and was soon involved in the thick of battle — what Holt calls (rather inappropriately) the “rumble in the jungle” (83). The unit participated in some of the fiercest fighting of the campaign. Holt pinpoints a specific day — 25 February 1988 when 32 Battalion followed by 61 Mech launched an assault on Tumpo — as the beginning of his nightmare. The columns of tanks and infantry assault vehicles (or Ratels) advanced on well-fortified and heavily-mined enemy positions through dense bush and undergrowth. They were subjected to artillery barrages and constant bombardment by MiGs. In the heat of battle, Holt experienced and witnessed some gruesome incidents, one of which unnerved him. The driver of the command Ratel, by the name of ‘Langes’ Geldenhuys, collapsed as a consequence of heat exhaustion and dehydration. This was followed by hysteria in which he cried for his brother whom Holt later learned had been recently killed in a motor vehicle accident. He had reached breaking point. Adrenaline stimulated by fear kept most of the soldiers functioning but the casualties mounted as they pursued an unrealistic objective of clearing the Tumpo area and destroying the bridge across the Cuito River. It was not exactly slaughter but the SADF lost 31 men and UNITA an unknown number. However, the attritional nature of the fighting took a heavy toll on the SADF forces, especially its morale. Confidence was shaken by the enemy’s tenacity and some of the troops had reached the end of their tether. Faced with intense life-threatening situations for an extended period, individual soldiers became susceptible to frayed nerves, fitful sleep and frequent bouts of nervous exhaustion — a sure fire recipe for the development of psychological disorders.

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30 This description borrows from Castro’s metaphor. See Dosman, “Countdown”: 219, 223. The boxing analogy suggests that the Cubans parried the SADF at Cuito with a left jab and then countered with a right thrust towards the Namibian border. Ironically, such a strategy amounts to a variation on a theme of Soviet conventional battle tactics of which Castro was highly critical.
Mech was withdrawn (and replaced by fresh troops) after four months. The unit regrouped at a demobilisation camp where they were given a pep-talk by Geldenhuys and Operation Hooper souvenir t-shirts (114). This was followed by group debriefing sessions in which psychologists were tasked to gauge whether the troops were fit for leave. These debriefings were supposedly designed to detect early warning signals of trauma so as to identify and treat those likely to develop PTSD (120). The sessions were actually a farce as they lasted less than half an hour and Holt recollects that: “I felt that I had not even begun to get in touch with the emotional and traumatic impact of what I had been through” (121). However, at the time he was relieved that the psychologist had not bothered to provide more than a perfunctory interview. Neither he nor his comrades were interested in counselling by psychologists of whom they were suspicious. They were much more interested in going home. Holt believed that he would cope with the trauma and return to his life in civil street without any need of therapy (122). In retrospect, he has come to realize that he was sorely mistaken.

Holt goes to considerable lengths to make the point that the approach of the psychologist was a far cry from the procedure set out in the SADF’s debriefing model specifically designed for Angolan War veterans. He cites extensive passages from the notes of a clinical psychologist who headed the Operation Hooper debriefing team to illustrate the gap between theory and practice. Holt calls the chapter in which he describes the process “Thirty Minutes to Clear the Minefield”. This is clearly an ironic take on the short-circuited process which amounted to going through the motions of the debriefing and evaluation session which he and his fellows were obliged to attend. And the analogy of the minefield suggests that the charges were not defused; that the primed mines might lie dormant beneath the soil only to be detonated sometime in the future.

Holt was duly granted leave and during his three-week pass he became aware of his jitteriness and hyper-sensitivity or ‘arousal’ to aural stimuli. Conversely, he displayed a lack of emotion in relating to death, including that of his own father who had died recently. His inability to relate to his mother and younger brother brought home to him his alienation from his family. This extended to friends and acquaintances as well. Holt was not keen to tell his war stories to people he now regarded as ‘outsiders’ inasmuch as they had not shared his experiences. He was affronted by people who asked whether he had killed anyone (132). Nor did he wish to have people think he was embellishing stories so as to impress listeners. On the rare occasions that he did relate something about his experiences, he admits to feeling a sense of guilt (129). Otherwise he chose to remain silent. This was partly due to the fact that the South African public was purposefully kept misinformed about the course of the undeclared war on foreign soil. Government disinformation and censorship bred demoralisation and suspicion. Holt likens himself to a used and discarded prostitute (131).

Following 61 Mech’s redeployment near the Calueque Dam in June 1989, an engagement with Cuban and Fapla columns resulted in the death of a respected friend Lieutenant Muller Meiring. Although this incident was recounted to him, it still caused Holt to reflect anew on his ability to cope with traumatic events. He notes that the standard way of dealing with such doubts was to “shut up, keep your feelings inside, and carry on with life” (150). In short, to vasbyt (‘persevere’). This was in keeping with a military training that stressed that quitting was a sign of weakness and that soldiers never showed emotions. So he “put on the proverbial brave face, even though he felt sick to the core” (152). Although ill-equipped to deal with such situations, Holt feared above all that he might ‘crack’ under the strain and go bossies. He defines bossies as a “colloquial term for ‘bush madness’, a condition associated with strange/abnormal behaviour as a result of spending prolonged periods of time in the bush under combat conditions” (191). Anecdotal evidence suggests that such soldiers were stigmatised and ostracised and they invariably became loners and outsiders. For its part, the army often turned a blind eye to the problem but on occasion sent the afflicted soldier for psychological evaluation and treatment. This was not so much out of concern for their wellbeing but rather because they were deemed to be unfit for combat. As Holt has it, “[m]ental health was not high on the agenda, and as long as you could perform your assigned function and not succumb to any physical illness or injury, it was assumed that you were okay and fighting fit” (150). In short, the SADF had little regard for the mental health of its soldiers.

If the SADF hierarchy did not take the mental health of its troops seriously, the troops themselves were equally inclined to be blasé about the need for professional intervention. It was common to use disparaging names such as koptiffies (‘head or mental mechanics’) to describe psychologists (111). The term implied that the psychologists would mess with one’s mind. When Holt notes after surviving the strike by Cuban MiGs on the Calueque Dam in late June 1989, that he was “starting to show classic warning signs of something [PTSD] I would not recognize for several more years” (164), he does so with the benefit of hindsight. When he returned home three months later, he experienced nightmares consisting of battle scenes that were repeatedly replayed in his mind. He identifies sleep disorders and drinking problems as telltale signs of his condition. And having acquired a working knowledge of the discourse of PTSD, he is able to recognize that his inability to process his traumatic experiences amounted to a “state of cognitive dissonance” (166). Holt also admits that he resorted to blocking out the memories of those events he was unable to process. He reckons that he even contemplated joining the permanent force as he felt totally alienated from civilian life (167). But he decided against such a course of action and klaared out (demobilized) of the army in December 1989 soon after his 20th birthday.

Holt’s penultimate chapter “Cowboys Do Cry” deals with his readjustment to civilian life. He describes himself as anxious, aggressive and ill-tempered, looking for fights and indulging in binge drinking. He also admits to embracing a “victim mentality” in order to attract the attention and sympathy of his peers (175). Following an incident on New
Year’s Eve 1989 when he ‘snapped’, he rejected the suggestion of seeking psychiatric help and, instead, sought solitude in order to reflect on his course of life. Holt subsequently learned martial arts in order to channel his aggression creatively, and personal motivation so as to regain control of his life by setting himself manageable goals. But his inability to hold down a steady job resulted in his blaming everyone but himself for his (re)lapses; even wallowing in self-pity. But when his then girlfriend lost her brother in a car accident, he was forced once again to confront his inability to deal with loss and pain. However, with his marriage to Alison, Holt found a companion with whom he could share the reliving of his traumas. The birth of a son and the family’s migration to Australia are recorded as life-transforming events. Holt reckons that emigration was like “leaving a haunted house, along with all its ghosts” (183). However, he has since discovered that his ghosts tend to accompany him because they live in his subconscious.

In 2002 Holt commenced researching and writing *At Thy Call*. The text attests to the fact that he read literature in the field of PTSD and incorporated certain insights in trying to understand what he had been through. In other words, the project had a therapeutic effect in that afforded him an opportunity to revisit and engage with his memories, as well as thoughts recorded in his diary. For Holt “narration itself becomes therapy and plays its part in reconciling the past with the present and in pacifying the feelings of guilt, pain, disassociation that arise when the unspeakable is confronted”. As my précis of key episodes in his story suggest, these events are retold with a fair degree of candour and honesty. Thus, *At Thy Call* seems to fit into the category/genre of confessional or cathartic literature. Holt, however, sees the book as serving another purpose: to impart his knowledge to others suffering from PTSD. He wishes to illuminate their darkness and to project a path to follow in order to obtain healing. Somewhat blithely, he offers readers a new beginning (187). It is, at least, preferable to promising closure.

If the two books being reviewed are anything to go by, the war produced its fair share of psychological casualties. Whereas Holt’s story seems to suggest that he has been scarred for life, Webb appears not to bear any long-term ill effects of his war experiences. Not that Webb is oblivious to the existence of such problems. He recognized the symptoms of PTSD in the behaviour of others and sympathized with their predicament (230). However, Holt’s acute problems of readjustment to civilian life frame his story to a large degree. He cannot seem to escape his nightmares whereas Webb appears untroubled by his memories of military service. Holt’s story is probably not typical of NSM but, then, neither is it extraordinary in terms of its side effects.

A SADF veteran, John Deegan, related in a documentary programme entitled “The War Within” how his life became a litany of ills after his tour of duty on the border. His

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experiences included admission to psychiatric hospitals, the abuse of drugs, run-ins with the law, and broken marriages. He reckoned that he could only begin to deal with his demons once he became aware that others suffered from similar symptoms and that his condition had a name – PTSD.\textsuperscript{33} His story resonates with those of some other SADF veterans posted on the internet. Via such sites, these veterans have become aware that PTSD had been declared a diagnostic category by the US medical/psychiatric fraternity in 1980 and their Vietnam counterparts received therapy and counselling. In the absence of a similar programme for those manifesting symptoms of combat-related PTSD in this country, a few veterans established their own self-help groups. There are also other sites established for the express purpose of allowing those seeking advice or searching for a (cyber)space to tell their stories to do so. For instance, the South African Veterans’ Association (SAVA) set up a website that dubs itself: “A Non-Governmental, Non-Profit-making Veteran Service for Survivors of the 1970’s-90’s conflicts”. Its co-ordinator, Marius van Niekerk, appears to have taken a mission upon himself to facilitate atonement and healing for veterans of Cuito Cuanavale and has launched a few projects designed to achieve this. These include the co-writing of a book called \textit{Behind the Lines of the Mind: Healing the Mental Scars of War} (2007) and the co-production of a film \textit{My Heart of Darkness} that touts the by-line: “The victims of war are not just those that die, but also those that kill.”\textsuperscript{34}

This statement would seem to imply that the language of psychological trauma has been co-opted by the perpetrators of violence. Indeed, war veterans have been only too willing to embrace victimhood. This practice is not unique to South Africa. Kali Tal has highlighted the tendency to collapse the distinction between victims and perpetrators amongst American Vietnam veterans. He notes that they were exposed to combat or other life-threatening events, and […] exposed to the carnage resulting from combat were traumatized. But combat soldiers, though subordinate to their military superiors and frequently at the mercy of their enemies, still possess a life-or-death power over other people […]. These soldiers carry guns, they point them at people and shoot to kill […]. Much recent literature – popular, clinical and academic – places the combat soldier simply in the victim’s role, helpless in the face of war, and then helpless to readjust from the war experience upon his return home […]. The soldier in combat is both victim and victimizer; dealing death as well as risking it.\textsuperscript{35}

Gillian Eagle, too, has expressed concern about this trend. She noted that the “[o]pening [of] the door to the employment of PTSD as a diagnostic justification for the enactment of violence conceivably provides the basis for blurring the boundaries

\textsuperscript{34} http://www.saveterans.org.za/ (accessed on 12 November 2008).
between victims and victimisers.”\textsuperscript{36} This makes for an undifferentiated ‘victim culture’. This is not unique to South Africa or a particular traumatic event. Peter Novick’s work on the Holocaust has suggested that the appropriation of “vicarious victimhood” for the sake of moral capital reflects a wider cultural shift in the late twentieth century.\textsuperscript{37}

Certain South African medical health practitioners invoked PTSD in mitigation of the reprehensible deeds of apartheid’s security forces, while others justified gross human rights violations committed in the name of the liberation struggle. In both cases, trauma discourse was employed to minimise individual agency and abdicate political responsibility for acts committed in the name of the ‘greater good’. It seems to me that the TRC made it far too easy to lay claim to the role of victim and abdicate responsibility for politically-motivated violence with its amnesty process. Rather than seeking absolution, we should be prepared to acknowledge our agency and accept that we made choices even when we did so under certain constraints such as conscription. Even though conscripts were subjected to a military patriarchal system that projected a macho masculinity and reinforced white supremacist attitudes, they did not make ‘choiceless choices’. For if one has the space to act, react or resist then one cannot claim (complete) innocence or (absolute) victimhood.

Nor do veterans have a monopoly victimhood. Combatants are seldom the only casualties of conflict for innocent civilians are invariably caught in the crossfire. By Webb’s account, PBs were the primary victims of the (counter-) insurgency war in northern Namibia during the 1980s. Civilians have also suffered horrendously in Angola where the SADF and UNITA fought a protracted and larger-scale war against the MPLA and its allies (although Holt appears not to notice). Paying heed to the ‘collateral damage’ – to use an American euphemism – caused by South Africa’s occupation of Namibia and its destabilization of Angola is an important corrective to the claims made by and on behalf of ex-combatants that they deserve to be treated as having ‘special needs’.

Both Holt and Webb, in their own ways, attempt to make sense of their experiences in the SADF. Holt’s story may be the more dramatic of the two because he participated in the largest and fiercest conventional engagement of the entire war whereas Webb was never involved in a fire fight. Indeed, Webb feels the need to apologise to the reader for the ‘tameness’ of his story because he was not caught up in the full force of the war (237). In the final analysis, though, the fact that the respective protagonists had varied experiences and are able to find their own voices suggests that SADF soldiers’ stories have salience in the efforts of the wider South African society to understand its forgotten war.


Bibliography

Books reviewed


Works cited


