

Memories of the Border War: An Interpretive Analysis of White South  
African Defence Force Veteran Perspectives, 1966-1989

by

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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## DEDICATION PAGE

To my parents, who, even when they are halfway across the world, have always been there.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	vii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED .....	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ix
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2 THE GENERALS IN COMMAND: DUTY AND THE PRESERVATION OF ORDER.....	13
2.1    AN APOLITICAL WAR .....	17
2.2    A REACTIONARY RESPONSE .....	24
2.3    CASSINGA AND CUITO CUANAVALA .....	31
CHAPTER 3 THE SADF’S ELITE SOLDIERS: THE MANY FACES OF THE FIGHTERS .....	37
3.1    THE PARACHUTE BATTALIONS .....	40
3.1.1    PARATROOPER UNIT CULTURE.....	43
3.1.2    PARATROOPER POLITICS IN THE WAR.....	45
3.1.3    PARATROOPERS CREATING CONTROVERSY.....	47
3.2    THE RECONNAISSANCE REGIMENTS.....	52
3.2.1    RECCE UNIT CULTURE .....	58
3.2.2    RECCE POLITICS IN THE WAR .....	60
3.2.3    RECCES CREATING CONTROVERSY .....	64
3.3    32 BATTALION.....	69
3.3.1    32 BATTALION UNIT CULTURE.....	74

3.3.2	32 BATTALION POLITICS IN THE WAR .....	78
3.3.3	32 BATTALION CREATING CONTROVERSY .....	81
CHAPTER 4 NON-ELITES: THE DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES OF NATIONAL SERVICEMEN .....		86
4.1	CONSCRIPTION AND NON-ELITE STATUS.....	90
4.2	VAGUE POLITICS .....	99
4.3	ENFORCED AND PERSONALLY IMPOSED CENSORSHIP .....	103
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION.....		111
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....		118

## **ABSTRACT**

Through their stories, South African Defence Force (SADF) veterans of the Border War participate in the historical revival of South Africa's involvement in the Angolan conflict, 1966-1989. Their engagement in the Border War discourse sets these veterans apart for an analysis of their motivations to participate and how their views compare and contrast with one another. SADF veterans are reconstructing their past within their present context in the new South Africa. Their struggle to rectify public knowledge and perceptions of the past through the provision of their personal memories is a growing trend within South Africa, one that has become a conversation between the various competing narratives.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED**

ANC	African National Congress
FAPLA	Popular Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (the armed wing of the MPLA)
FNLA	National Liberation Front of Angola
GOC	General Officer Commanding
MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe (the armed wing of the ANC)
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola
SACP	South African Communist Party
SADF	South African Defence Force (pre-April 1994)
SANDF	South African National Defence Forces (post-April 1994)
SAP	South African Police
SWA	South West Africa (Namibia)
SWAPO	South West African People's Organization
SWATF	South West African Territorial Force
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNITA	National Union of the Total Independence of Angola
US	United States (of America)
USSR	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)

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## **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

This work is concerned with white South African Defence Force (SADF) veteran's reflections on their service during the Border War. The Border War signifies South Africa's involvement in the Angolan Civil War from 1966 to 1989. The Angolan conflict was the most prominent Cold War proxy war in Africa. South Africa became involved due to the threat to their Namibian territory, which was called South West Africa (SWA) until its independence in 1990. In 1966, UN resolution 2145 (XXI) declared that South Africa no longer had a right to administer SWA. South Africa refused and would not withdraw from SWA.

The South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) was the national liberation movement of SWA. SWAPO was determined to gain independence for SWA. The Border War began with SWAPO's cross-border incursions from the border separating Namibia and Angola, which led to their first confrontation with the South African Police (SAP) in December 1966. Shortly afterwards, South Africa's conflict zone became regionalized when the African National Congress (ANC) and their military wing, the Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) began organizing attacks from Botswana. This regionalized warfare would spread from Angola to Mozambique as these two countries began their struggle for decolonization from Portugal.

South Africa accused neighbouring African states of harbouring its enemies and allowing the ANC and SWAPO's cross-border attacks. The Angolans began their own liberation struggle during the same period. Their decolonization from Portugal, known as the Angolan War of Independence, lasted from 1961-75. By the end of 1975, three separate major parties had formed, each vying to take control of the capital, Luanda. The

Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) with their military wing, the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA) succeeded in this task, while the other two groups joined forces with South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

By this point, South Africa's involvement had increased significantly. The National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) had fractured and many of its members moved from northern Angola to join the South Africans on the border, where the other party, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) was already well-established. UNITA was the major political contender against the MPLA. It was led by Jonas Savimbi, who also sided with South Africa, as well as with the United States. All these forces were jointly opposed to the MPLA's communist ties with the Soviet Union and its allies.

At the loss of their Portuguese ally, it was impossible for South Africa to collaborate with the newly-installed MPLA government because of its anti-apartheid and pro-SWAPO stance. The Cold War was linked to this African war due to the MPLA's communist connections and the Cuban military involvement in Angola beginning in 1975. The Cold War intrigue meant the United States had an interest in encouraging the South African and UNITA side. South Africa recognized the US as a much-needed ally due to the international anti-apartheid movement and the threat of economic sanctions. In 1974, South Africa's investment in the Angolan conflict increased with conscription rising from one year, which had been in place since 1967, to a compulsory minimum of two years. The mandatory military service applied to every white South Africa male upon their graduation from high school or their postsecondary studies.

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<sup>1</sup> William Minter, *Apartheid's Contras: an Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 11.

The nature of South Africa's involvement in Angola revolved around the Cold War system where there was no outright declaration of war and infiltrations into enemy territory took place through clandestine operations. It was the period of détente, from 1962-79, when the US and Soviet involvement in Angola was indirect and through their proxies UNITA, South Africa, the FNLA and the MPLA. The level of secrecy was therefore paramount to maintaining a war that was internationally illegitimate. The SADF imposed this secrecy on its own members, for example through the Defence Act, Official Secrets Act, Key Points Act, Suppression of Communism Act, and Internal Security Act. The plethora of laws was designed to keep the extent of the war effort in Angola from the public. This was usually justified on the grounds of national security.

The South African government, particularly after 1985, was anxious to keep its operations in neighbouring states a secret because they were against international law. International sanctions were already crippling the South African economy and South Africa hoped to improve its international image. Although many nations had imposed sanctions on the South African government it was still not wholly ostracized by the British, French or even the US. P.W. Botha, the Prime Minister of South Africa, wished to portray South Africa's involvement in Angola as entirely based on their struggle against Soviet expansionism.

The other aspect of secrecy was that, as the war dragged on, white South African communities asked more and more questions about why they were fighting. Military conscription lasted two years with a bare minimum of another 720 days service required before a man was 40, which could mean a basic four years' service between the ages of 18-40. Expanded conscription was commonly known as a "call-up." During their call-

ups, large numbers of soldiers were required to do service in the townships – something which turned many against military service. The government was anxious not to let the illegal operations thousands of kilometers away in Angola further influence feelings of discontent about the increased military commitment.

By 1980, the anti-apartheid movement had turned the international press against the apartheid regime and its wars across southern Africa, including the Border War. During the 1980s, the President P.W. Botha continued to order the SADF's interventions into Angola, an extensive campaign to eliminate SWAPO in SWA, police enforcement of security legislation, and the ban of the ANC within South Africa.

The South African National Party (NP) government enforced the system of legislated racial segregation known as apartheid. The apartheid regime existed throughout South Africa participation in the Border War and came to an end shortly afterwards. The apartheid laws were repealed in 1990 and the negotiations to end apartheid, involving the President of South Africa Frederick Willem de Klerk and ANC President Nelson Mandela, culminated in 1994 with multi-racial democratic elections. The ANC's Mandela became the new President of South Africa, thus making the organization which the Border War veterans had fought against their new government. The ANC, and many historians, believe the SADF was used by the state to maintain apartheid through repression and violence in conjunction with the militarization of white society.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the post-war negotiations, the ANC refrained from prosecuting apartheid-era politicians and generals. Instead, they adopted the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Though the TRC, public disclosure from individuals gave them

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Grundy, *The Militarization of South African Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p.58.

amnesty while providing the new South Africa with a societal healing process. However, the SADF veterans, from the generals to the foot soldiers, believe the TRC failed to give them the opportunity to tell their side of the story.<sup>3</sup> Their arguments are reiterated throughout their autobiographies and interviews because the conversation between veterans and post-apartheid society is still not over.

After the SADF withdrawal from Angola and Namibia, the South African civilian population was not responsive to Border stories.<sup>4</sup> The period after Mandela's release in 1990 was an extremely violent and uncertain phase in South Africa's history. This uncertainty left no space in the public's consciousness for Border stories. Society's rejection of their war stories left these veterans to bear the burden in silence as they thought was expected of them. It was up to the soldiers themselves to refute what they consider false and remove the negativity regarding their actions and involvement in the Border War. One of the goals in contemporary South Africa has been reconciliation and there have been a broad range of forms and forums that have attempted to ensure that a variety of memories and experiences are reflected, remembered and memorialized. Reinforcement of reconciliation, respect, democratic values and civic commitment has become a necessary focus due to the societal and racial divisions caused by apartheid.<sup>5</sup>

Through memoirs, interviews, and oral testimonies, former-SADF members have begun to tell their versions of the Border War. The University of Witwatersrand's *Missing Voices Oral History Project* includes a collection of interviews with former members of the SADF. By asserting their personal experiences, they have made an effort

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<sup>3</sup> Hilton Hamann, *Days of the Generals: the Untold Story of South Africa's Apartheid-era Military Generals*, (Cape Town: Zebra, 2001), xiv and Gary Baines, *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa's Late-Cold War Conflicts*, (University of South Africa: Unisa Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Gary Baines, *Beyond the Border War*, 153.

<sup>5</sup> *The Memory Project* (Cape Town: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2005), 2 and 4.

to engage in this debate. Currently, the Border War discourse appears to be “resurfacing everywhere. After a 15-year silence, the experience of serving in the army under apartheid has exploded in popular culture, popping up as a theme in music, literature and art.”<sup>6</sup> The vast array of detailed memoirs of ex- SADF members and the University of Witwatersrand’s *Missing Voices Oral History Project* have not yet been brought together to be analyzed, compared and contrasted.

The parameters of thesis will cover the veterans’ own military memoirs and the oral history interviews, which will demonstrate the dialogue on the Border War that is taking place within the public discourse. There are a limited number of first-hand accounts; however, they are representative of those who participate in the discourse, rather than of the SADF veterans as a whole. Any conclusions drawn from these sources will also be limited to their contribution to the public debate, rather than serving as representative of the veteran’s views who have not contributed to the conversation. This thesis examines what the SADF veterans are saying to the public, through their diverse recollections and representations of the Border War, to better understand the purpose and meaning of these reflections on those individual veterans’ identities and socio-political position in post-apartheid South Africa. This work seeks to add to the existing historiography on the politics of public memory and history in post-apartheid South Africa.

Chapter Two is directed towards the perspectives of the generals. Those in the higher ranks issuing orders were the most aware of the political situation and the reasons behind the actions of the SADF. Their accounts reveal a deep loyalty to the SADF and

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<sup>6</sup> Eve Fairbanks, “Trophies and Treasured Times” (*Mail & Guardian*. 25 Nov. 2011. Mail & Guardian Online. 8 Jun. 2012. <<http://mg.co.za/article/2011-11-25-trophies-and-treasured-times>>).

what they see as its achievements on the battlefield. They decide to publish or record their memories to have their perspective understood and to contest those who disagree.

Chapter Three explores the perspective of the elite soldiers from the Parachute Battalions, 32 Battalion and the Reconnaissance Regiments. Their stories are significant because their identity as the elite of the army is markedly distinct within the SADF. These soldiers were the select few who passed selection, experienced the most fighting in Angola, and were recognized within the SADF for their specialized skills. 32 Battalion, nicknamed Three Two and the Terrible Ones, developed a reputation as lawless, unconventional soldiers with the most experience and success in combat situations. The Parachute Battalions were known for the controversy surrounding their airborne attack on the Cassinga military base or contested refugee camp which was criticized as either a successful battle or a massacre of defenceless refugees. The Reconnaissance Regiments were specialized soldiers who performed covert combat operations and gathered tactical information, going the furthest into Angolan territory.

The focus of Chapter Four endeavours to confirm that the qualities of the elite soldiers are in fact unique to them through a contrast with the regular national servicemen. The differences between these perspectives will convey the overall message of these SADF national servicemen, the new insights they provide and their separation from the perspectives of the elites and generals.

The SADF veterans engage in this contentious debate in post-apartheid society for the express desire to counter the public misconceptions of themselves and the war. In the aftermath of the war, the SADF elites and generals were pinpointed “as master

perpetrators of an unjust conflict.”<sup>7</sup> The generals and the elite soldiers had to contend with personal and targeted attacks from the anti-apartheid media.<sup>8</sup> According to Branquinho’s *Fantasy Industry*, media reports on the elites since the early 1990s were “nearly uniform in their tone: negative. Individuals are painted as suffering from PTSD (commonly referred to as *bossies* in the South African context), being extreme right-wing racists or unstable guns for hire.”<sup>9</sup> The elites carry the burden and responsibility for the most deadly raids against the ANC and SWAPO in Angola. It was their deployment in the townships, however, that definitively turned the white public sentiment against the military escalations of the SADF. While the retired Special Forces in America or Britain have become celebrities and public heroes, their South African equivalents have become the prime target of negativity and resentment over their perceived defence of the apartheid regime. The generals deal with personal condemnation as the representatives of an organization most often viewed as entrenched in the old regime.

Overall, all three groups attempt to undo the negative portrayals through a military focus on the war, which means their comrades, their unit, and their proficiency and success in military operations to achieve the aims of the war. They were soldiers who served the government and fought for the sake of their country and all its inhabitants. For the elites and the generals, their enduring loyalty to their units limits the extent to which they are willing to be critical of the war effort, the SADF, and the apartheid system. The national servicemen do not seem to have the same attachment to the SADF and explore a wider range of topics.

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<sup>7</sup> Lance Branquinho, *Fantasy Industry: Perceptions of the South African Special Forces in the Media* (Just Done Productions: Durban, 2006), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 7.

A thorough examination of the motivations that existed for these veterans to either write their accounts or participate in interviews must take into account the South African context.<sup>10</sup> Reconsidering this complex war is necessary because it was a pivotal period in southern African history. “The Border War had an impact on a whole generation of white South Africans.”<sup>11</sup> The creation of self-narratives takes place in dynamic social and political contexts which relate to the public memory of the Border War. The white South Africans who fought this war have significant disagreements on how to confront a South Africa they feel has misrepresented them. Many struggled to have their versions of the war not only remembered, but also their sacrifice on behalf of their country acknowledged and commemorated.

There are various distinctions within each chapter regarding the audience for these accounts. There is a difference between who their audience became and who they intended their audience to be. The generals and elites want a receptive audience, one that understands their background, the war from their perspective and therefore will no longer condemn their actions or those of the SADF. According to one of the major publishers of this type of narrative, Just Done Productions, which has published elite and national servicemen’s military memoirs, the main audience is other SADF veterans, those who also wish to revisit their memories of this war. The decision to publish in English, after many had originally published in Afrikaans, was an attempt to obtain a greater readership.

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<sup>10</sup> Graeme Callister, “Compliance, Compulsion and Contest: Aspects of Military Conscription in South Africa, 1952-1992” (Diss. Stellenbosch University, 2007), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Mike Cadman, “Missing Voices Project Final Report” (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2008), 3.

There is a difference between those who publish and those who participated in the oral history project. The veterans who took their own initiative to write a book, edit and publish it wish to reach a wider audience within South African society. The oral history interviewees are responding to the initiative of *The Missing Voices Project*. They have invested significantly less time and therefore have a less defined motivation and specific intention to participate in this discourse. The questions asked of the interviewees were often the same, with direction taken by the interviewer to cover their background, chronologically follow their time in the SADF, and end with a review of how they now regard their military service. Some interviews were formal while others were an informal conversation.<sup>12</sup> Mike Cadman explains in his final report the reaction of the interviewees after they were approached to be interviewed:

Some interviewees were initially reluctant to speak on the record, expressing concern that ‘someone’ may be trying to find out about their role in the SADF. Others said that they did not want to participate in ‘any SADF bashing’ exercises but after hearing about the goal of Missing Voices agreed to participate. Others clearly had great difficulty in discussing traumatic events experienced during combat.<sup>13</sup>

The experience of participating in the interview process was significantly different than publishing a book. Publishing meant reaching a broader and public audience with a greater likelihood of having an effect on the discourse of the Border War.

The generals have a public image, which means a higher level of publicity and therefore a wider audience. The elites intend to contribute their re-evaluations of the war to inform a public audience that does not often understand their particular roles in the Angolan conflict. The national servicemen interviewees are the least concerned about an

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<sup>12</sup> Mike Cadman, “Missing Voices Project Final Report” (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2008), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 6.

audience because they do not have a considerable negative public image to refute. The books by national servicemen were published overseas; therefore, it appears they want an international audience. The other accounts are all published within South Africa and appear to focus on the social dynamics within their own country and therefore their focus is the public within the new South Africa.

The crucial question of why now? is posed by Gary Baines in his article “Breaking Rank: Secrets, Silences and Stories of South Africa’s Border War.” He discusses how ex-SADF members’ efforts have found a public audience and interest in the uncompleted debates of the Border War.<sup>14</sup> Baines explained that this level of interest “might simply suggest nostalgia for the old order or might equally hint at a deep-seated desire to come to terms with the past.”<sup>15</sup>

Mike Cadman’s final report for the Missing Voices Project is an overview of the interviews he conducted. It is a valuable resource that as-of-yet remains unused in academia due to restricted access. Cadman also questioned the motivation of the interviewees to participate in the project. He noted that “the willingness of many men to discuss their SADF military experiences for the record is a relatively new phenomenon.”<sup>16</sup> One common comment that Cadman encountered was that “no one has ever asked me what happened.”<sup>17</sup> In these cases, it is most likely their stories would have remained unspoken if the project had not taken place. There was also a strong desire of some men to reinforce their sense of identity by recording their understanding of events

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<sup>14</sup> Gary Baines, “Breaking Rank: Secrets, Silences and Stories of South Africa’s Border War” (Rhodes University: Grahamstown, 2007), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Cadman, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 9.

in their own words. This is a difficult past for them to confront, but even so, they are willing to go on record for these reasons.

Recent articles on the subject show the relevance of this topic in South Africa today. Most notably, Eve Fairbanks' "Trophies and Treasured Times" from November 2011, in the South African *Mail & Guardian* examines Border War nostalgia as witnessed in Cameron Blake's war memorabilia shop and its clientele. The article questions why it is only now that their national service is important for ex-SADF members to remember, what they are looking for when they go to the shop, how they feel about sharing their stories, why this genre of memoir is growing in popularity and why it is pursued predominantly by the white community. This article concisely attempts to answer these enquiries and places heavy emphasis on the public interest and popularity of the Border War at the present as a mechanism for redefining white South African identity.

The situation in post-apartheid South Africa lends itself to this form of autobiographical writing. Many veterans are actively reconstructing their pasts. As is the case with most military memoirs, the message of the SADF veterans is an exercise in remembrance, nostalgia, and a therapeutic personal effort to interpret what took place during the war. The politics, the controversies, their role in the war and the aftermath of the war are all major topics with which they contend. These topics will enable an understanding of their message and the patterns that can be discerned. It will also explain their identities as South Africans, their adaptation to post-service life and post-apartheid South Africa and their perceptions of how the war fits into South African life and politics.

## CHAPTER 2 THE GENERALS IN COMMAND: DUTY AND THE PRESERVATION OF ORDER

A general who has taken part in a campaign is by no means best fitted to write its history. That, if it is to be complete and unbiased, should be the work of someone less personally involved. Yet such a general might write something of value. He might, as honestly as he could, tell of the problems he faced, why he took the decisions he did, what helped, what hindered, the luck he had, and the mistakes he made. He might, by showing how one man attempted the art of command, be of use to those who later may themselves have to exercise it. He might even give, to those who have not experienced it, some impression of what it feels like to shoulder a commander's responsibilities in war.<sup>18</sup>

The SADF generals have personal concerns in the Border War discourse. Their primary accounts tell a triumphant story, one where everyone was against them and they overcame all adversity to complete their job successfully. The problem is that this version of the Border War was not accepted by everyone. The generals decided to publish or record their memories to have their perspective understood and to contest those who disagree. To date, three former Chiefs of the South African Army and subsequently of the SADF have contributed to this task. Generals Jannie Geldenhuys and Magnus André De Merindol Malan wrote their military memoirs, and General Georg Meiring and Geldenhuys participated in the *Missing Voices Project*. The accounts of these former SADF generals provide their perspective and understanding of the politics behind the Angolan conflict, their response to the controversies and the media surrounding their decisions, and the intentions and message of their books and interviews. They promote their authority as those who were most aware of the reasons for the SADF's military actions. They believe that the SADF was unduly criticized and victimized, particularly in the aftermath of the war. The accounts of these former SADF generals provide their

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<sup>18</sup> Viscount William Joseph Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London: Pan Books, 1999), preface.

explanations of the politics and the controversies surrounding their involvement in this war.

Those in the higher ranks issuing orders were aware of the political situation and the reasons behind the actions of the SADF. Their perspective includes what they knew, what they thought, what they saw within their viewpoint at the time and what the war effort meant to them. This is historically relevant because it shows the aspirations of these key, influential participants in the war for the legacy of the SADF. Their identities are linked with the SADF due to their intimate knowledge and life-defining connection to it. In post-apartheid southern Africa, the end of the Border War was a pivotal moment that effected significant change across the region. The generals' efforts to comment on this past, challenge certain conceptions of it and renounce any transgressions indicate the extent of its importance to them. The revisiting of the Border War is due to South African contemporaneous socio-political interests to reconcile the past and the stigmatisation felt by the white South African community.

Geldenhuis is the most outspoken concerning the SADF's marginalization in the new South Africa and feels that the history written and public relations on the Border War portrays the SADF as apartheid-defenders who lost the war. Frederick Heymans ascertained this in his thesis from the University of Stellenbosch. "Democracy resulted in reverse stigmatisation: the *South African white* population now lives under the *stigma-shadow* of past racial injustice and discrimination."<sup>19</sup> Stigma implies a discredited status and in this case the stigma against white South Africans comes from their history as the

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<sup>19</sup> Frederik Heymans, *Stigma and Suffering: a Theological Reflection within the HIV/AIDS Pandemic from the Perspective of a Theologia Resurrectionis* (Diss. University of Stellenbosch, 2008), abstract.

proprietors of apartheid. Their cultural inheritance carries with it negative perceptions, which the generals establish in their view of the SADF's victimization.

Malan, Geldenhuys and Meiring represent the military decisions of the upper echelons of the SADF. Malan was the Minister of Defence from 1980 to 1991, Geldenhuys was promoted from Chief of Staff Intelligence to Chief of the SADF from 1985 to 1990, and Meiring was the last Chief of the SADF from 1993 to 1994, and the first Chief of the SANDF from 1994 to 1998. During the Angolan conflict from 1983 to 1987, Meiring was the General Officer Commanding, South West African Territorial Force (SWATF). In their varied connections to the government, Malan was appointed as a cabinet minister; therefore he connected to both the SADF and the government it protected. Meiring's military leadership allowed for a negotiated settlement with the ANC. His approval of the process meant the ANC did not have to fear a military coup. He also prevented the right wing from sabotaging the negotiations.<sup>20</sup> Meiring remains firm in his conviction that he was apolitical, and that his military supervision over the negotiations, with no self-determined interest in the outcome, strengthens his argument. Geldenhuys took part in the negotiations that led to the end of the Border War. All three generals insisted upon the apolitical and impartial role of the SADF.

Geldenhuys was the first former Chief of the SADF to publish in 1993 with *Die Wat Wen*. The English version, *A General's Story*, was published a year later. It was his intention to write specifically at this time, before the end of apartheid and the beginning of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was meant to be his personal account and enabled him to relay his side of the story. Geldenhuys republished his book in 2007 with a new title *At the Front*. He made no the substantial changes to the second edition. This

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<sup>20</sup> Baines, *Beyond the Border*, 14.

decision was not to respond to any criticism that took place after 1993, since he made minimal revisions to the new version. By republishing, Geldenhuys noticed the growing interest and readership in this form of literature and wanted to maintain his status as a prominent contributor. Even without updates, Geldenhuys makes his point of view a part of the discourse.

Malan wrote his own story for the very first time in 2006, after reading the autobiographies of other ex-SADF members. Malan's *My Life with the SA Defence Force* is a much more extensively detailed account than any others, including those of the soldiers, in which he appears to have set out to research and produce a history. He sets out his intentions in writing the book in the foreword: "Every organisation, including the South African Defence Force, has its own history which should be preserved. I have written this book in answer to this call."<sup>21</sup> Through his writing, Malan made his substantial attempt to contribute to the reading public's memory of the war.

Malan and Geldenhuys published in order to obtain a public audience. They were both published in English, not only Afrikaans, in order to obtain greater readership. Their accounts were not only focused on explaining the war to the veterans or the white South African community, but to the entire public in the new South Africa. For example, Geldenhuys discusses his argument against the deployment the SADF into the townships, which he indignantly felt was the role of the police not the military. He was, however, overruled by the politicians of the time. He also mentions that his own son served in 32 Battalion, the predominantly black unit, and was killed in a training accident whilst with them. This shows Geldenhuys' attempts to reach out to the new South African public and contend with misconceptions of himself and the SADF. Meiring did not write any form

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<sup>21</sup> Magnus Malan, *My Life with the SA Defence Force* (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2006), 9.

of memoir, yet he did record his memories of the Border War through the *Missing Voices Project*.

## **2.1 AN APOLITICAL WAR**

The generals claim they took orders and did not make the political decisions behind the SADF's actions. Geldenhuys notes that, "I don't believe one always realises how totally interwoven war and politics became at all levels of society."<sup>22</sup> Despite this interwoven nature of politics and society, Geldenhuys considers himself apolitical and states, "I stayed out of politics and I didn't want to get mixed up with politics, and that happened right through my whole career."<sup>23</sup> Meiring's perspective is again similar to Geldenhuys. Meiring believes the only purpose of the military was to follow the orders of the government and fight South Africa's war. He states, "I'm just a simple soldier."<sup>24</sup> These denials of their part in politics are not reiterated by Malan because he has a noteworthy political career. Malan does not, however, focus on his role as a politician or define what decisions he made that could be linked to controversy. Geldenhuys, Malan and Meiring do, however, explain their perspectives on the political developments of the war.

Geldenhuys believes his interpretation to be connected to the realities on the ground, which he hopes gave credibility to his words. According to his first-hand

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<sup>22</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys, *At the Front: a General's Account of South Africa's Border War* (Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball, 2009), 142.

<sup>23</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys interview, "Missing Voices Oral History Project," (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2008), 9.

<sup>24</sup> Georg Meiring interview, "Missing Voices Oral History Project," (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2008), 21.

account, they were not fighting SWAPO and the ANC, only the armed wings of those groups. In his mind, fighting the armed wing of SWAPO in the operational area was completely separate from the SWAPO representatives they met with in Windhoek. He did not believe they were same organization and has the same elucidation for the armed wing of the ANC (the MK) and the ANC. “MK is our enemy; ANC is the ministers, the politician’s enemy, not ours.”<sup>25</sup> Geldenhuys feels this was the military interpretation and what separated them from the politicians.

Meiring explains how vast and insurmountable the Angolan conflict appeared to be at the time.

The Americans were involved, the British were involved, the Russians were involved, the Cubans were involved, Angola was involved, we were involved, and South West Africa was involved. Then we had incursions against us from the freedom movements around the area. SWAPO was involved, the ANC was involved in another area, and the whole conglomeration was extremely volatile and difficult to imagine sitting back now and looking at that point in time. It seemed to be overwhelming the odds against us. And that we as soldiers, as an army, as a Defence Force, could successfully handle all this that was thrown against us, I think this is the major aspect of what came out of this.<sup>26</sup>

Meiring believes the SADF achieved their objectives and performed their duties proficiently and without question. He simplifies the argument into that was their role and they performed it dutifully. Their job was linked to politics in that the military created the situation in which negotiations favourable to South Africa could take place.<sup>27</sup>

The generals contend that the SADF’s actions in Angola directly and purposefully contributed to Namibia’s democratic elections. In a similar style, the generals use this reasoning in relation to the South African democratic elections. Stating the case for how the 1994 elections came to be, Malan declares that “the Defence Force was able to create

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<sup>25</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys interview, 40.

<sup>26</sup> Meiring interview, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 22.

a climate in South Africa in which a new political dispensation could be peacefully negotiated.”<sup>28</sup> Malan and Geldenhuys both argue that the role of the military was not political, but it created the conditions in which a favorable political solution could be found. Meiring made the same argument and worded it in almost exactly the same way. “Namibia got its independence without a major military coup or operation whatever, and that we were happy to leave behind a peaceful environment. And if it were not for us it wouldn’t have been. So this is I think our aim and our goals in that.”<sup>29</sup> The generals reinforce the same points with the same arguments, indicating that they are making the same points as they did at the time of the war when they were all involved.

During his interview, Geldenhuys discusses how an editor tried to add that “the South African government sent the SADF into Namibia in order to maintain apartheid.”<sup>30</sup> Geldenhuys feels this was outrageous and would not accept its inclusion, using the explanation “in any case it’s my book. If I want to write that it’s my right to do so.”<sup>31</sup> His response was that the SADF did not go into SWA to maintain apartheid. He reasons that since the SADF did not defend an apartheid system within SWA,<sup>32</sup> the SADF actions there were not meant to defend that same system in South Africa.<sup>33</sup> He deflects from this conversation as it was not a topic that he thought related to the Border War. Neither Meiring nor Malan comment on the defence of apartheid as a factor in the war effort, not even to dismiss it. They believe they fought in the defence of South Africa, which meant for the benefit of all South Africans and not for a specific political party. They feel their

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<sup>28</sup> Malan, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Meiring interview, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys interview, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Geldenhuys stated that in Namibia it was a free society and SWAPO was not banned there as the ANC was in South Africa.

<sup>33</sup> Geldenhuys, *At the Front*, 40.

statements on the apolitical nature of the SADF reaffirm these claims and set their role apart from the decisions and policies of their government.

Decisions about crossing the border were highly political and the generals do not have the authority to order major cross-border operations without political consent. In the following passage Geldenhuys explains the rigid hierarchical system of the SADF.

General Malan clearly demarcated responsibilities with regard to cross-border operations. A decision to cross the border was a political one for which the government and the Minister of Defence carried the responsibility. The successful execution of the operation was the responsibility of the Chief of the Defence Force. Detailed instructions were always issued. For example, the circumstances under which hot-pursuit operations were allowed at all in Angola, or when we could only carry out non-offensive reconnaissance, subject to certain limitations.<sup>34</sup>

This method of warfare limited the generals on the ground and controlled their actions to such an extent that any operation became more of a bureaucratic struggle than a military one. This passage is meant to support Geldenhuys' argument that the military carried out orders issued from Pretoria for all major operations and was not responsible for setting policy.

Malan was the Minister of Defence, however, and as a representative of the government he was in the position to make these decisions. He explains that the difficult decisions were made at the behest of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Pik Botha, due to political considerations outside his control, or that the decision was made on a political level without specifying his own role.<sup>35</sup> Malan, too, separates the SADF and the state and he does not see his involvement in both as a conflict of interest.

When judging the actions of the Defence Force during the period of conflict, one needs to bear in mind that the Defence Force was a service organisation of the State. The Defence Force therefore had to operate in support of the State, and in accordance with the constitution of the day, as the new SANDF has to do today.

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<sup>34</sup> Geldenhuys, *At the Front*, 93-94.

<sup>35</sup> Malan, 124.

The instructions the Defence Force received and the orders it issued should therefore be understood against this background. These instructions were received from the legal government of the country, recognised as such internationally, and were bound by a written, approved constitution.<sup>36</sup>

Malan hopes his explanation would validate the SADF's and the National Party's political conduct. He also works to resolve questions on his own engagement in both organizations. Similarly to Geldenhuys and Meiring, Malan blames politics that the SADF could not put their full force behind their operations, but he explains that it was political considerations, such as the international sanctions and criticism, that caused this situation. The politicians themselves were responding and making difficult decisions given the political climate.

Geldenhuys' language is suggestive of the SADF's victimization when he discusses the complicated nature of the war. "It was the most complicated situation which we [the SADF] found ourselves."<sup>37</sup> This wording has the implication that the SADF was a mere pawn in the midst of this chaos, that they found themselves in this situation rather than being an integral part of the war effort. He states, "The politics and the violence of our side vis-a-vis the insurgent forces it was a complete mix-up but we had to."<sup>38</sup> Again, Geldenhuys exonerates the actions of the SADF and argues that they had to do what was asked of them because that was their duty. He portrays the SADF with no control or responsibility within the situation. When Geldenhuys is asked directly whether the military was a victim of the broader political arguments concerning apartheid and the propaganda war, he unequivocally states yes, "we were a victim of that and as a matter of that you'll see as we go further with this conversation we were much more of a victim

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<sup>36</sup> Malan, 161.

<sup>37</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys interview, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 40.

than you already think at this stage.”<sup>39</sup> Geldenhuys sees the SADF as victimized and explains the controversies as the SADF’s unfair treatment by the media, the ANC and SWAPO.

Through their attempts to preserve the history of the SADF, the generals are in a position of influence to make a greater impact with a larger readership. In their books, they speak directly to former SADF members. The reasoning Malan provides for why veterans should be proud of their actions and not doubt South Africa’s war effort in Angola is essentially that the pre-emptive actions of the SADF in fighting along the border kept the war from coming to South African soil.<sup>40</sup> He believes South Africa would have had to face off against communism within its borders had it not intervened outside them. He accepts as true all of the concerns of the South African government about the Communist revolutionary forces poised in both Angola and Mozambique after Portuguese withdrawal to start a domino effect in Southern Africa such as the one America predicted would happen in Southeast Asia. The generals believe the communist governments of Russia, Cuba and East Germany were the sole inspiration for the development of the ANC and SWAPO. They do not refer to these organizations as black nationalist or political liberation movements.

Meiring and Geldenhuys’ accounts affirm that they completely agree with this concept. According to Meiring, communism threatened Namibia and SWAPO sought to take Namibia by force, which in turn would threaten South Africa if they had not pre-emptively intervened. “We in fact fought the war for South West Africa, not for South Africa...ok, indirectly we fought for South Africa because the further we could keep the

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<sup>39</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys Interview, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Malan, 12.

insurgency away from our own physical borders, and the better it would be for us.”<sup>41</sup>

Meiring specifies that the SADF defended Namibia from communist Russian expansionism, which he believes was a reality at the time. Once SWAPO’s communist benefactor was gone due to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, South Africa was prepared to end the Border War and bring independence to Namibia. Meiring believes the SADF did their job effectively and created the political conditions for a Namibian settlement.

Geldenhuis states his similar position on the SADF’s pre-emptive response to the communist threat.

To a large extent our successes can be ascribed to the fact that we never sat back and waited to be attacked. We always took the initiative and carried the struggle to the insurgents, as in the case of Ongulumbashe, despite all the criticism that resulted. That is why Namibia and South Africa bore almost no scars of war when their respective movements towards political settlements began. It was all worth the effort, and it was the proud attainment of all those in South African uniform – those who won.<sup>42</sup>

This passage shows Geldenhuis is entirely confident that South Africa’s pre-emptive strike was necessary to prevent the war encroaching on South Africa, the world was against South Africa even when it did the right thing, their efforts were beneficial to Namibia, and they had won militarily and achieved their goals. The positive aspects of their efforts within Namibia were not reported upon by the anti-apartheid press. For example, the national servicemen built local schools and hospitals which have remained there and are still in use. This was irritating for the generals and they all reiterate the same frustrations. The commonality found in the views by Geldenhuis, Meiring and Malan all confirm the same beliefs in these significant and debated political factors of the war.

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<sup>41</sup> Meiring interview, 11.

<sup>42</sup> Geldenhuis, *At the Front*, xv.

## 2.2 A REACTIONARY RESPONSE

The generals neither specified which segments of the media criticized them, nor which ones praised their actions. As generals, Malan, Meiring and Geldenhuys feel better informed and authoritative, therefore best suited to answer questions and allegations aimed at the SADF and to “counter possible misperceptions, rumours and inaccuracies.”<sup>43</sup> They are motivated to write and speak due to what they consider to be inaccurate information about the conflict.

The war was covered in a limited fashion at the time and the families most affected by conscripted soldiers’ departure to the border did not fully comprehend where they were going or what they were fighting for. The families of soldiers only had the vaguest sense that their husbands, sons or brothers were going to fight on the border, a faraway place where they did not expect soldiers to see combat. When soldiers were killed, SADF Headquarters would announce their death and only occasionally told the family it took place in the operational area. It was, however, very seldom that the SADF would admit a soldier had been inside Angola. Neither Malan nor Geldenhuys discusses the Defence Act, Official Secrets Act, Key Points Act, Suppression of Communism Act, Internal Security Act and dozens of other Acts that directly sought to keep the public uninformed. Malan interprets the public concern over the SADF’s secrecy as propaganda directed against the SADF. The lack of public awareness on the Border War made it even more difficult for the returning soldiers to discuss their experiences with their loved ones,

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<sup>43</sup> Malan, 10.

and contributed to their need to speak out about it in such forms as books, websites and oral histories.

According to Malan and Geldenhuys, they were often accused of censorship and secrecy. Meiring was not a Chief of the SADF during the Angolan war, therefore he is not held responsible to the same extent as the other two generals. Malan and Geldenhuys deny these accusations and reference their attempts to bring the media into the fold. In his description of his relationship with the media, Geldenhuys claims that he always opened the door and invited them in. “With the appointment of the [Auditor General] and the separation of South West and South African politics, Pretoria imposed few restrictions on me regarding the media and politics. It meant that I could deal with the media independently.”<sup>44</sup> Geldenhuys understands how information is generated in the press and he would work with the media when he wanted to get a specific message to the public.

When the generals allowed the press to be involved it did not mean that SADF actions in Angola became public knowledge. Going into Angola was always covert to keep operational information from their enemies. Geldenhuys, in his interview, blames the Cold War for the type of secret war that was fought in Angola. He understands that during the Cold War period war was no longer declared outright.<sup>45</sup> He views this as an essential aspect of the Cold War, since secrecy in all other respects stemmed from attempts to hide they were fighting at all. He believes South Africa did this because “if you don’t declare a war, the one who is discovered first tossing a boulder or being

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<sup>44</sup> Geldenhuys, *At the Front*, 142.

<sup>45</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys interview, 18.

offensive, he's the culprit."<sup>46</sup> The SADF hid their movements across the border to lessen the criticism of what they had to do in Angola.

The SADF kept their activities in Angola secret because of the ever increasing international pressure, even trying to keep the Battles of Cuito Cuanavale from the public when there were over 3,000 South African men inside Angola. There are many aspects of the way in which this war unfolded and was fought that can be attributed to the Cold War style of war and politics, above all the South African government's repeated articulation of and engagement with Cold War rhetoric. Geldenhuys and Malan advocate that the SADF's actions prior to 1990 should be grasped within the militarily hostile Cold War context and perceived Soviet assault.

Meiring believes that it was Resolution 435 of the United Nations that necessitated the secrecy. He states that the Resolution "put a lot of political restrictions on South Africa as such, and we had to manoeuvre inside that, and not always good enough, because the restrictions were such that if you do more, it would be noticed, and if you do less it won't be effective. So it was always a very subtle way of doing things."<sup>47</sup> He explains how the SADF managed this situation through covert and clandestine operations.

The controversy for the generals was not only secrecy; it was the false accusations and negative public perception of the SADF, which they believe was created by the ANC propaganda that controlled most of the media. Malan explains this phenomenon in vague terms:

An example of the creation of perceptions was the many allegations and accusations of human rights violations supposedly perpetrated by the Defence

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Meiring interview, 7.

Force in the early 1990s. These accusations against the Defence Force never let up, and their constant repetition caused the Government of the time and the general public to lose confidence in the Defence Force.<sup>48</sup>

In this passage, Malan refers to the involvement of the SADF in the townships from 1990-94. This became controversial because the government appeared to be using the military against its own people to defend the white minority. Malan explains that the SADF was not able to defend itself because the vast majority of the criticism took place after the war and once the SADF had already become the SANDF. He states that “there are very few informed bodies or persons able or willing to answer questions about, or allegations aimed at, the former organisation.”<sup>49</sup> Malan feels the SADF had no voice in aftermath of the war, especially during the TRC hearings; he makes it his duty to respond to the public judgment of the SADF.

Geldenhuis does not blame the media for their discrepancies with his reality; he faults the profuse propaganda against the SADF. He states, “In conflict situations the air is so thick with propaganda that even I did not always know what was real and what was not.”<sup>50</sup> Geldenhuis believes he should not be held accountable for what was said in the media. He discredits the reporting by referring to it as propaganda and, as someone who was accused of executing the transgressions, he absolves himself of that implication by saying he did not know either. Malan makes a similar statement to show that the media were exaggerating false information and manipulating the public. “The public, in particular, found it very difficult to distinguish between the truth and fabrication.”<sup>51</sup> By pointing towards the problematic nature of the propaganda and media fabrications, Malan

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<sup>48</sup> Malan, 184.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Geldenhuis, 147.

<sup>51</sup> Malan, 184.

and Geldenhuys believe their words are the most credible. They explain they are not responsible for the public's difficulty in distinguishing fact from fiction. Geldenhuys claims his book is "one of the best original sources of truth about the war."<sup>52</sup> Malan, too, states that his book would finally explain the truth. "I am trying to disclose facts so that the truth about the Defence Force will be clearer. Other recent attempts to find the truth have failed miserably."<sup>53</sup> Meiring claims that it was the ANC that was most responsible. He says the ANC "had a very good machine as far as propaganda was concerned, which we never seemed to copy."<sup>54</sup> According to the views of the generals, they were blameless and in the same position as the public in that they could not always decipher what was propaganda or not.

Malan sees the Border War and the civil war within South Africa as a revolutionary war. "It was a question of winning the people's hearts and minds. Everything was aimed at gaining and retaining the population's support in this way."<sup>55</sup> Malan repeatedly asserts his hearts and minds theory in his book and in South African newspapers. According to Malan, in a revolutionary war it is important to manage the public's perceptions of the government and the Defence Force. They must have confidence in their institutions or the war will be lost. As a politician, Malan is one of the most outspoken veterans in the hope of promoting his side of the story, the SADF, and the National Party.

Geldenhuys construes that the media was conniving against the SADF. "Many a time I felt that we could do nothing right, and SWAPO nothing wrong. We were often

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<sup>52</sup> Malan, xi.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>54</sup> Meiring interview, 25.

<sup>55</sup> Malan, 188-9.

portrayed as the bad guys and SWAPO as the good guys.”<sup>56</sup> Geldenhuys feels the media was against them, though he did not explain exactly what media or specify any reports. Throughout the war, the Afrikaans press and the SABC were either controlled by the government or strong supporters of it. The exception was *Vrye Weekblad*, edited by Max du Preez and journalist Jacques Pauw, which had a strong anti-apartheid stance. The English press was considered liberal compared to the Afrikaans press and often opposed the actions of the SADF in Angola.<sup>57</sup> Although the English language press as a whole was more critical of the government, many were not overly critical. Some supported conscription as necessary to counter threats against South Africa and some took a hard line against organisations such as the End Conscription Campaign (ECC). Geldenhuys claims any negative scrutiny of the SADF in the news was pure speculation.

Meiring confirms Geldenhuys’ perception and sense that everyone was against them. Meiring states, “it’s not just our fault, the whole [political] situation was like that because the whole world was against us at the time.”<sup>58</sup> They believe that they became the targets within a situation where they only played a military role, which was to train, prepare and fight to win South Africa’s wars.<sup>59</sup> This reiterates their argument that they were only concerned with the military, not the political, aspects of the war. That was their role in the war; however, it was misdirected by the press to debase them as well as the SADF.

Geldenhuys, Meiring and Malan do not explain why the media might want to vilify and denigrate the SADF’s reputation. The generals are convinced there was a

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<sup>56</sup> Malan, 110-11.

<sup>57</sup> Lance Branquinho, *Fantasy Industry: Perceptions of the South African Special Forces in the Media* (Just Done Productions: Durban, 2006), 19.

<sup>58</sup> Meiring interview, 13.

<sup>59</sup> Meiring interview, 17-18.

global conspiracy against them. They believe the black people in South Africa would never have become politically active if it were not for outside agitators. Geldenhuys provide an example of how he was often accused of hiding something even though he had no involvement in the operation.<sup>60</sup> Such is the case of Operation Savannah, where he was not involved and was unaware of the administrative process or the decision making.<sup>61</sup> Geldenhuys feels that he had faced tough scrutiny in the press due to his position as Chief of SADF. His career and his life are intimately connected with both the politics and military of South Africa from the time of the Border War.

Magnus Malan has similar methods for dealing with the press. In his discussion of the propaganda war he believes the media's objective was to "belittle and break down authority."<sup>62</sup> He also mentions that "accusations against the Defence Force never let up, and their constant repetition caused the Government of the time and the general public to lose confidence in the Defence Force."<sup>63</sup> He does not explain the possible motivations behind allegations of human rights violations and how the media would benefit from these denunciations. He sees the media as part of the political campaign against the SADF as well as a tool of outside influences. They also believe this of the churches that were against them. However, most churches and the religious community do not oppose them. On the contrary, the Dutch Reformed Church was a particularly strong defender of apartheid and the military.

Former SADF members choose to discuss and circulate their perspective on the war through various outlets such as websites, groups, and publications. The generals

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<sup>60</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys interview, 39.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>62</sup> Malan, 183.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 184.

benefit from the use of military memoir as a forum in which to speak to former SADF members. Malan is able to address them directly: “Many former Defence Force members, particularly those who were directly involved in operations, are often plagued by a nagging doubt: Were the proactive military actions worthwhile? My answer is an unequivocal YES!”<sup>64</sup> Malan expresses an important motivation for his writing while directing his attention to a vital segment of his readers.

Malan acknowledges the reality that many men were disheartened by the SADF in the aftermath of their fighting and the fact that they were not given suitable recognition and memorialisation following their years of service, due to the deteriorating political circumstances in South Africa leading up to the 1994 elections. Malan is apologetic and states, “I still reproach myself for not having adequately expressed my gratitude for the way in which loyal, disciplined Defence Force and Armscor members executed almost superhuman tasks in stressful conditions. They form part of a remarkable generation – the heroes of the recent past.”<sup>65</sup> He calls them heroes to convey his high esteem and value for their sacrifices. He uses his book to express this sentiment in the hope that the veterans would remain proud of their actions and maintain a positive perception of the SADF.

### **2.3 CASSINGA AND CUITO CUANAVALÉ**

The generals have some of the most defining commentary on the controversial events of the war. Geldenhuys believes that the Cassinga raid “was a jewel of military

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<sup>64</sup> Malan, 11-12.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 11.

craftsmanship – and SWAPO knew it.”<sup>66</sup> This is a contentious statement because the Cassinga raid is portrayed as a massacre of refugees by SWAPO. As Chief of the SADF, that he believes Cassinga was a successful military campaign made him a focal point of the controversy. A Namibian newspaper article in 1998 entitled “Viljoen, PW among the villains of Cassinga: TRC” used this exact quote, that it was a jewel of military craftsmanship, to vilify him as heartless and malevolent towards the innocent slain refugees.<sup>67</sup> Geldenhuys first published this quote in 1994, and left it exactly the same for his reprint in 2009, adding only a qualification in the front of the sentence that “PLAN sometimes fought very well, especially when its members were surprised or cornered, but the Cassinga raid was a jewel of military craftsmanship – and SWAPO knew it.”<sup>68</sup> This insinuated that PLAN, SWAPO’s People’s Liberation Army of Namibia, was a sore loser and needed reassurance that they did fight well at times, but in the case of Cassinga they were defeated by the SADF. Geldenhuys, therefore, believes that the allegations of Cassinga are based solely on their need to vilify the SADF and make reparations for the severe loss they suffered in combat.

Malan was not involved with Cassinga, but he decides to contest the media’s persistent portrayal that it was a massacre. He quotes Jan Breytenbach, the leader of the operation, who position is that “all the ‘refugees’ were very well armed with a variety of weapons, including AK-47s, 12.7 and 14.5 mm anti-aircraft guns, 82 mm mortars and RPG-7s. There was a magazine packed to the rafters with weapons of almost every calibre, including land mines, mortars, bombs and rockets. Excellent protection for so-

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<sup>66</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys, *A General’s Story* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1995), 93.

<sup>67</sup> C. Maletsky, “Viljoen, PW among the Villains of Cassinga: TRC” (*The Namibian*, 12 November 1998).

<sup>68</sup> Geldenhuys, *At the Front*, 99.

called refugees!”<sup>69</sup> Malan believes that it is false to say that the SADF had any malicious intent against refugees. He describes them instead as terrorists at a military base that the SADF can prove with aerial photography. Malan and Geldenhuys feel they had to make their stand on this matter in order to defend SADF’s actions and show how erroneously the media could manipulate a story.

Meiring does not discuss Cassinga; however, he explains the circumstances at the Battles of Cuito Cuanavale. The Cubans contend that the SADF failed to capture the town of Cuito Cuanavale and the South African soldiers were forced to retreat. The SADF response is they had never intended to take over Cuito Cuanavale because they fought defensively to keep their enemies as far away from the border as possible. This operation was particularly significant because after the SADF withdrew, the South African government negotiated the independence of Namibia, and South African democracy followed before long. Meiring explains his views as follows:

And they crossed the river and from then onwards we were at a sort of a stalemate because UNITA had no power in themselves to capture Cuito Cuanavale. We could have. We had no authority to use the Three Two Battalion troops as storm troops. We were there in support but we couldn’t use them actively. It was different later on. But we were in fact capable at the time of taking Cuito Cuanavale. But politically it was not on.”<sup>70</sup>

Meiring responds to the Cubans who perceived that they had won against the South Africans. He explains that it was the Cuban’s leader, Fidel Castro who made these claims. “Castro is on his last days, and I don’t think that he would like to go down as a failure. That is one thing. When Castro – he killed one of his officers himself because of

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<sup>69</sup> Malan, 194.

<sup>70</sup> Meiring interview, 5.

the failure in this area – but now he wanted to proclaim to the people that he wasn't so bad at all.”<sup>71</sup> Meiring blames Castro's insecurities on his manipulation of the facts.

Malan argues that the SADF never intended to take over any part of Angola and Cuito Cuanavale was a defensive measure to maintain their SWA buffer against the largest communist onslaught of the war. “Yet it must be clearly stated that South Africa did not withdraw from Angola at that stage because it suffered a military defeat, but because of political considerations. If South Africa's actions had been spurred by a desire for territorial expansion, it would have been able to overrun the whole of Angola.”<sup>72</sup> Malan explains that the SADF reacted to the growing communist forces. He believes their defensive strategy was successful and led to a political climate in SWA and South Africa where the new political dispensations were peacefully negotiated.<sup>73</sup>

Geldenhuis acknowledges that this was the moment in the war when the SADF considered to have lost. “To withdraw or not was not the question, the question was how and when to complete it. We had never even considered a counter-performance from the Cubans and Angolans.”<sup>74</sup> This misunderstanding of a complex South African strategy is often the source of post-war discrepancies. The generals feel the need to repeatedly explain Cuito Cuanavale and proclaim their victory.

The generals do not have a single variation in their views regarding Cassinga and Cuito Cuanavale. They promote their concept that the town of Cassinga was a military base and that they succeeded their intended objectives in the Battles of Cuito Cuanavale. Even if the generals were neither involved in, nor Chiefs of SADF at the time of,

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<sup>71</sup> Meiring interview, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Malan, 140.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>74</sup> Geldenhuis, 274.

Cassinga or Cuito Cuanavale, they still feel their voices would be recognized as authorities on these controversies.

Geldenhuis, Meiring and Malan are the three most outspoken former Chiefs of the SADF. They will never escape, and would not want to, that title or their identification with the SADF. Their perspectives on the politics and controversies of the war are similar. They do not express resentment regarding the government's treatment of them in the aftermath of the war; however, they believe it held them back from military success over their enemies. There is no indication that they believe the communist threat was exaggerated. The three generals do not contradict one another, and even word their arguments very similarly.

The Border War is unquestionably significant to the generals because it was the most important event in their careers. The autobiographies of Geldenhuis and Malan and the personal interviews of Geldenhuis and Meiring show what they hope people will remember about the war. They write and speak as authorities whose words continuously defend the SADF's and their own reputation. They create a scenario in which their own actions and those of the SADF at the time are undeservedly criticized today. They performed their duties to protect South Africa while managing the secrecy restrictions, and formidable foreign enemies. In their minds, the lack of acknowledgement for these sacrifices and successes is due to the misconception that they were connected to politics. In their minds, the media and public unjustly connect them to the political decision making behind the war effort. Malan could not make this argument because he ended his career as a politician intimately involved in the political decision making. He does not,

however, explain this connection and maintains it was due to political considerations and Pik Botha's orders that decisions were made rather than of his own accord.

Geldenuys, Meiring and Malan assert that the actions of the SADF were apolitical; they followed orders issued from Pretoria. The generals, however, associate their actions with the political consequences of the war, such as the idea that they fought in Namibia in order for a peaceful and democratic election to take place. Malan, Meiring and Geldenuys participate in the Border War discourse because they want the public to understand their role in the war and that they were not the perpetrators of any misconduct. They remain attached to this war because it shaped their contemporary social and political standing. It is in their personal interest to promote the war with a positive spin to maintain their own reputation within South African society. They are appealing to the fair-mindedness of all South Africans, not only the white community.

## **CHAPTER 3 THE SADF'S ELITE SOLDIERS: THE MANY FACES OF THE FIGHTERS**

The elite soldiers of 32 Battalion, the Reconnaissance Regiments and the Parachute Battalions have the most cohesive and comprehensive set of recollections by white SADF veterans. Their publications and oral histories far outnumber those written or vocalized by men from the other SADF Corps. These three units are considered the elite fighting units, whose combat role has made them a target for the negative media reports on the SADF and South Africa's actions in Angola. The varied accounts describe each soldier's own story; however they all focus on the importance of their elite status and proud history. The war was a defining life experience in which their identities and reputation intertwined with that of their comrades, their unit and the SADF. The elites' perspective on the war is therefore closely oriented with the SADF's official stance, as defined by Geldenhuys and Malan in the previous chapter. The elites defend the same political positions, argue against what they consider to be the media's misinformation, and provide their own experiences and knowledge of the war to inform a public audience.

Each of these units has a unique perspective on the war. 32 Battalion, the Reconnaissance Regiments and the Parachute Battalions were, for the majority of the time, physically separate in their operations, activities and social grouping from the other elite units and the rest of the SADF. 32 Battalion operated the most within Angolan borders, the Recces infiltrated the farthest into Angola for small clandestine operations and the Paratroopers performed one of the SADF's most well-known attacks on Angolan soil during Operation Reindeer. These were the soldiers who sought out elite status, most

often from the moment they were conscripted. They succeeded during the rigorous selection process and trained to become the best, most dedicated soldiers of the SADF. They saw the most action, performed the most risky exploits, and were the main weapon of attack for the SADF within Angola.<sup>75</sup> Each unit developed a distinct unit culture based on its role within the SADF, the events in which it participated, its social organization, and the controversies that it faced.

This chapter is focused on the elite soldier's views on how they think they were misrepresented in the media and what criticism they respond to, rather than an all-encompassing explanation of the media's portrayal of these units over time. The various depictions within the media are discussed in so far as they are discussed within the soldier's accounts. The narratives are characterized by their contestations of the negative press. The Parachute Battalion's engagement in the Cassinga raid was the focus of negative media in the 1990s during the TRC hearings. The members of the unit refute claims that the Cassinga raid was a massacre of refugees and argue that the town of Cassinga was a heavily armed military base. The Reconnaissance Regiments were most perturbed by rumors that they were psychopaths and ruthless killers. Their accounts explain that their role was often misunderstood and that they performed clandestine operations where they gathered strategic information and only fought to defend themselves if they were discovered. 32 Battalion was one of the most controversial units because of its level of secrecy while fighting in Angola and its participation in the townships which included an incident at Phola Park that outraged the ANC. All the

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<sup>75</sup> Peter Warren Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 102.

accounts perceive that their unit has been the focus of a certain amount of criticism and their intent is to refute these claims.

The elite soldiers saw the unit as something to aspire to and were motivated to join a unit where they would be able to fight, be respected, and become part of the group. This image impressed the young conscripts and they remained loyal to their unit and the SADF despite all criticism. This chapter includes three sections, which focus on the Parachute Battalion, the Reconnaissance Regiments and 32 Battalion respectively as the topics of each section. The distinguishing qualities of elites are obtained through three sub-topic discussions on their focus on their unit culture and reputation, their understanding of the political reasons for the war effort and, finally, their reactions to negative media.

Through the limited sources on each unit (two books and one interview for the Parachute Battalion, three books and one interview for the Reconnaissance Regiments and two books and three interviews from 32 Battalion), each section of this chapter interprets how the elite perspective is presented by those who decided to participate in the Border War discourse. For their military memoirs, veterans have returned to their old battlefields, former state of mind, and enduring relationships. Upon reflection in the aftermath of the war, some veterans feel their actions were pointless, while others contest and reject any suggestion of their own wrongdoing.

There are socio-political and cultural developments that underpin the creation of this comprehensive genre of elite Border War memoir. The authoritarian National Party government could no longer restrict publications on the Border War after 1994; however, it took until the 2000s before this type of publication became a trend. The texts cannot be

disconnected from the fact that they were written and read in post-apartheid South Africa. The readership and audience broadened and has become more receptive to such accounts in the last five years.<sup>76</sup>

The *Missing Voices Project* interviews participate in the same discourse and respond to the same trends as the publications. Interviewees conjured up different memories of the war, which reflected a broader post-SADF and post-apartheid disillusionment, doubts about the cause and meaning of the war, and questions over the SADF's conduct.

### **3.1 THE PARACHUTE BATTALIONS**

The Parachute Battalions, also known as the paratroopers, Parabats or Bats, have an image and history that distinguishes them as one of the SADF's most elite fighting units.<sup>77</sup> Paratroopers consider themselves as elites who were highly-trained, specialized, and successful in combat. In the aftermath of the war, however, they faced criticism due to negative media attention surrounding their actions in the Cassinga raid. For veteran paratroopers the Border War is a significant and defining life-experience and, as the elites, they have a vested interest in amending how its history will be remembered. First-hand paratrooper accounts seek to uphold the unit's reputation, divulge their understanding of the war and defend their actions in the wake of controversy.

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<sup>76</sup> Dovey interview, "Missing Voices Oral History Project," (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2008), 29.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Pitta and Jeff Fannell, *South African Special Forces* (London: Osprey, 1993).

Through their personalized accounts of the war, paratroopers tell their stories and perspectives to respond to the growing Border War discourse. The works of Mathew Paul<sup>78</sup> and Granger Korff<sup>79</sup> as well as the *Missing Voices Project* interview with Brian Rogers,<sup>80</sup> will be the first-hand accounts of paratroopers for this chapter. This section explores the message inherent in their discourse and the paratroopers' contribution to the elite soldier perspective as it contrasts from those of the generals and national servicemen. Though limited by having only three sources, this section interprets how the paratrooper perspective is presented by those who decide to make their views public.

Paul, Korff and Rogers were engaged at various times in different capacities with the Parachute Battalions during and after the Border War. During the Angolan conflict, Paul, author of *Parabat*, completed his two-year national service as a conscript. It was only upon his return in 1997, this time to the SANDF, that he qualified and joined 44 Parachute Brigade. Though he was not a paratrooper during the Border War, his book includes interviews with paratrooper veterans of the Border War. One interviewee in particular, called Fenton, is significant as the only source that comments on certain controversies the paratroopers faced during the war. Granger Korff's *19 with a Bullet: a South African Paratrooper in Angola* is an intense and detailed personal account of his national service with 1 Parachute Battalion during 1980-81. He was involved in three cross-border operations, where he fought directly against SWAPO and FAPLA. Brian Rogers, an English-speaking South African, fought in Operation Savannah with 1 Parachute Battalion. He participated in the *Missing Voices Project* because he is

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<sup>78</sup> Mathew Paul, *Parabat* (Johannesburg: Covos Day, 2001).

<sup>79</sup> Granger Korff, *19 with a Bullet: a South African Paratrooper in Angola* (Johannesburg: 30° South, 2009).

<sup>80</sup> Brian Rogers interview, "Missing Voices Oral History Project," (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 2008).

determined that people should know more about the war, what it was like to be a Parabat and remember it correctly. He discusses his military experience and how it affected him.

All three accounts had divergent views; however Roger's interview differed most from the authors Korff and Paul. Korff began as a young and idealistic aspirant paratrooper who ended up as a disillusioned veteran questioning the validity of what he was told during the war. Paul's endeavor to convey the paratrooper story and perspective became his own effort to reconstruct its reputation and define his arguments on the controversies. Rogers expresses his frustration and anger at the SADF's inaction at the end of the war, describes his refusal of township duty due to his moral conflict with it, and reflects that the war was connected with the defence of apartheid. Korff and Paul both greatly desired to become paratroopers at the beginning of the war and their accounts embellish the unit's reputation. They claim to be apolitical soldiers, while stating their anti-communism and dislike for the anti-apartheid movement. Paul and Korff reiterate the official SADF stance on the war while Rogers' only similarity with them was his participation in the same elite unit. The books reflect the paratrooper ethos and promote their reputation in the aftermath of controversy and debate, while Rogers explains his personal views without a greater schema or argument in mind.

The authors decided on their own accord to write and publish for self-motivated reasons while Rogers' participation in an oral history interview was considerably less of a commitment. Publishing meant a broader and public audience with a greater likelihood of having an effect on the discourse of the Border War. Rogers has no such intention, his motivation is to aid the historical work on the subject and provide his insights, knowledge and experiences as requested. Mike Cadman and the *Missing Voices Project* took the

initiative to collect new perspectives from veterans like Rogers. Michele Pickover, in her article *Missing Voices: Border War Memories, Meanings and Archival Musings*, explains that “there is an unspoken culture that governs the telling of ‘war stories.’ Only certain people are ‘entitled to tell particular stories at particular times and places. Cultural criteria ‘distribute’ accessibility to different collective memories according to social entitlement.”<sup>81</sup> This is why the elite soldiers, who want to promote a particular storyline vindicating their role in the war, are more disposed to write military memoirs.

### 3.1.1 Paratrooper Unit Culture

In all three accounts, the paratroopers emphasize the significance of their unit culture and combat-based camaraderie. Paul was a clergyman and not a part of the unit but he held strong views on their perspective. For example, he states, “What I enjoy about the Parabats is their ‘don’t give a damn’ attitude about governments and ideologies. They are fighters and always will be, regardless of what so-called ‘enlightened liberals’ say in a world that is pathologically obsessed with human rights.”<sup>82</sup> His concern with this issue is due to the indictments of paratroopers as abusers of human rights. He declares his own defiant and defensive attitude while he portrays it as common to all paratroopers.

Korff was initially excited to become part of the paratroopers. When he was in high school, he encountered a paratrooper who told him: “You should come down; we need guys like you.”<sup>83</sup> Korff was enthralled by the idea of becoming a paratrooper. “I

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<sup>81</sup> Michele Pickover, “Missing Voices: Border War Memories, Meanings and Archival Musings” (*Innovation* 39, 2009), 74.

<sup>82</sup> Paul, Author’s notes and acknowledgements.

<sup>83</sup> Korff, 33.

wanted to get those wings on my chest and wear that deep maroon beret. I wanted to jump out of a plane, land through a tin roof and fight terrorists hand to hand.”<sup>84</sup> This is what Korff had believed it meant to become a paratrooper and it was an alluring image for a young, impressionable conscript. Korff’s level of enthusiasm to be part of an elite unit was also influenced by his older brother and father who were both part of the SADF. He recollected his grandfather’s time fighting in the Boer War and was infused with the ideology of the toughness of the Boer. “It had taken more than 400,000 British troops from all the corners of the mighty British Empire three years to subdue 87,000 Boers.”<sup>85</sup> As the war began, some South Africans viewed this war as the new generation’s turn to defend Afrikaner nationalism. Once Korff got his wings, his full loyalty was to the paratroopers.

The reputation of the unit is important to Korff. Membership in the Special Forces represented an exceptional rank that impressed outsiders. In an incident during a return home, Korff was arrested for carrying drugs. While in court, Korff describes himself as “standing at ease with my hands behind my back and looking straight ahead with my best Special Forces look.”<sup>86</sup> His use of this image is exactly why conscripts wanted to become members of the Special Forces. The paratroopers continuously emphasize their unique identity. Korff cites an incident where paratroopers from his unit cut parachute symbols into dead SWAPO members. They left them “hanging in the trees, stiff and bloated, with parachutes cut into their chests.”<sup>87</sup> This gruesome and menacing form of defacement is an example of the extent to which the paratroopers attempted to create a reputation for

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<sup>84</sup> Korff, 33.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 188.

themselves. By carving parachutes into their enemy, they hoped for recognition for these kills. The members of this unit were determined to set themselves apart to be distinguished as elite fighters.

Brian Rogers decided to join the Parachute Battalions when he was intrigued by a paratrooper whom he encountered while he was still in high school. He describes “that sense of belonging, that sense of wanting to go back to be with the guys, you know them, you trust them, you would work with them again.”<sup>88</sup> The war for Rogers is not about being part of the SADF, but specifically part of the paratroopers. Like Korff, he connects with the reputation and image of the unit with its highly prized paratrooper beret, the unit colors, the idea of jumping out of planes and its elite status.<sup>89</sup> Rogers asserts he would be willing to return to Angola to fight, “Any day. Any day. It would give me immense pride.”<sup>90</sup> This is not for political reasons, but for the unit itself. He fought in this war and would fight again because of his connection to the elite Parachute Battalion.

### 3.1.2 Paratrooper Politics in the War

The authors explain that the politics behind the Parachute Battalion’s military actions were not their concern. In Paul’s account he contends that the paratroopers are apolitical. He states that their loyalties lie with “God, their unit, and their country.”<sup>91</sup> He believes the paratroopers think of their fellow unit members as family. Consequently, the Parabats are inwardly-focused and protective of their own people and actions. *Parabats* is

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<sup>88</sup> Brian Rogers interview, 31.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

their chance to make the public understand and appreciate what they did for all South Africans. From this perspective, the war was a separate phenomenon to politics within South Africa concerning apartheid and the ANC.

To Korff, communism was the source of all conflict on the border. “The only problem was that SWAPO were communists, trained, backed and supplied by Russia, China and half a dozen other communist-bloc countries who, as we saw it, wanted to get their sticky paws on mineral-rich South West Africa.”<sup>92</sup> He blames exaggerations in the world media for the negative depictions of South Africa. “Besides the rioting in the townships – almost everybody, black and white, seemed to get along and there was a lot of goodwill on both sides, contrary to the simmering hatred portrayed by the world media.”<sup>93</sup> Korff believes that it was only those outside of South Africa that do not agree with the apartheid system. He strongly disagrees with the American anti-apartheid movement. “I felt contempt for the US and their do-gooding naïveté, thinking that they could dictate what another country should and should not do.”<sup>94</sup> Korff is convinced that the Americans were politically manipulated during the war by their own country’s liberal views.

Rogers also makes the distinction that as a soldier he did not fight for political reasons. As he states in his interview, “I was a proud Parabat, I was proud of my military training, I was proud of what we did, I can honestly say on this tape now.”<sup>95</sup> Rogers is proud of what he did on a personal level fighting with the Parabats. His status as a paratrooper was an important distinction of his military service. Like the rest of his

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<sup>92</sup> Korff, 29.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>95</sup> Brian Rogers interview, 39.

comrades, he feels the common sense of camaraderie, achievement and superiority in being a member of this unit. This does not mean his statement is about defending a political cause. He does, however, reflect on the political implications of the SADF's involvement in Angola. He came to believe "the government of the day actually wasn't fighting Communism; it was fighting to defend apartheid."<sup>96</sup> Rogers does not consider himself racially prejudiced or a supporter of the apartheid regime. He reflects on the politics surrounding the war in his interview, but these thoughts were not his concern while he fought on the border.

### 3.1.3 Paratroopers Creating Controversy

The Cassinga raid is a controversial topic that is directly related to the Parabat's public image. The paratrooper's airborne attack on the military base and contested refugee camp of Cassinga is criticized in some circles as a massacre of defenceless refugees. Within the SADF it is regarded as a daring and successful attack on a legitimate military target. Paratroopers' elite status within the SADF benefited from what they deemed as a success and "a jewel of military craftsmanship."<sup>97</sup> Cassinga is a defining moment for them and they do not want it maligned in the media. In the immediate aftermath the South African media reporting Africa was positive and Fenton was surprised "to have been part of an attack the whole world seemed to know about! This made him feel good."<sup>98</sup> During the war, Cassinga was considered a significant military success by the SADF. In the post-apartheid years, the TRC had a different version of

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<sup>96</sup> Brian Rogers interview, 39.

<sup>97</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys, *A General's Story* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1995), 93.

<sup>98</sup> Paul, 59.

what took place at Cassinga. “In human rights terms, the SADF raid on Cassinga, which killed over 600 people, is possibly the single most controversial external operation of the Commission’s mandate period.”<sup>99</sup> The paratrooper image became associated with the massacre of refugees at Cassinga.

Paul attempts to erase the label of Cassinga as a massacre. As the ones who carried out the operation, paratroopers were the eyewitnesses to the event. Paul’s interviews with paratroopers were the most revealing of what they saw first-hand that day and how they reflect on their actions. None of the interviews mention the controversy or possibility of a massacre taking place at Cassinga. The Parabats do not acknowledge that there were refugees; they only mention the presence of civilians. They do not consider the possibility that the civilians were the refugees. For example, Paul describes his interview with a paratrooper named Fenton who looked in the trenches after the battle. “Sadly, he noticed that many people in civilian clothes – mostly women and children – had been killed in the trenches at this location.”<sup>100</sup> It is important for Fenton to distinguish them as civilians because the SADF position was that civilian casualties were the unfortunate consequence of war. If he had referred to them as refugees he would be corroborating SWAPO’s claims. The idea of a massacre, even the use of that word, is completely avoided in these accounts.

Declaring that he had no political affiliation, Paul nevertheless made strong political statements. UNICEF reported officially, two days before the raid, that there was

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<sup>99</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2003), Vol. 2, 46.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

a rapidly expanding refugee population in Cassinga.<sup>101</sup> The UNICEF presence at Cassinga was indicative of their aid to refugees, yet the SADF stance was that they were aiding the insurgents. In his book, Paul included a picture of a UNICEF bag in the rubble after Cassinga with the caption “UNICEF presence revealed at Cassinga.” He contended that UNICEF aided SWAPO and not the refugee camp. Paul was not a first-hand witness at Cassinga, but his account defends the paratroopers’ actions at Cassinga. Paul wishes to counteract the criticism of the paratroopers through his use of Fenton’s explanation of events at Cassinga. Paul states that “regardless of what the communists and the biased UN thought, Fenton knew that they had attacked an enemy base and not a refugee camp.”<sup>102</sup> Paul reflects the SADF stance that elements of the western media were in opposition to South Africa. The paratroopers feel misunderstood by the negative media portrayal by “Western liberals.” Paul hoped his interviewees would clear up the misconceptions and restore the reputation of this highly-trained, elite and specialized unit. He makes the claim:

To the South African paratrooper, Cassinga has come to symbolise the audacity, daring and aggression of the airborne soldier. Just as Arnhem has a special significance for the British paratrooper, Crete for the German paratrooper, Normandy for the American paratrooper and Dien Bien Phu for the French paratrooper, so Cassinga evokes a spirit common only to paratroopers in the South African Army.<sup>103</sup>

This treatment of Cassinga is indicative of the intent of Paul’s book. It is his personal motivation to corroborate their unit culture of heroism, courage and exceptional accomplishments in combat. It is the story of the men who are marked by their selection

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<sup>101</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2003), Vol. 2, 50.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>103</sup> Paul, 21.

to be members of an elite unit in the Border War. The Parabats sense of their vilification in the media meant they had to counter the negative media over Cassinga.

In 1986, when soldiers were called up to do township duty, Rogers refused.<sup>104</sup>

This was his response to the question posed by Mike Cadman: “And you decided that you didn’t want to serve in the townships because...what actually pushed you?”<sup>105</sup>

I understood the world, and as far as I had reached in my conclusion we were South Africans. What we were doing over there [in Angola] was stopping Communism. That that was what we were fighting about, that was whatever, and this [fighting in the townships] was now a different story about my country which I did not fully understand at all, I can assure you. 1986 I’m now 29 years old, but I still don’t fully understand my country’s politics at all. But I just felt, no, this is not what it is. And there was some stuff that went on in those townships, I’m so glad I wasn’t there.<sup>106</sup>

To Rogers, fighting in the townships felt completely different than at the Angolan border. He no longer wanted to be involved when he thought the conflict was not about a communist threat. This indicates that communism was his genuine motivation for participating in the war. His views corroborate the soldiers’ claims that they do not view the Border War as a defence of the apartheid system. The soldiers understand the war from their immediate surroundings. The other men in their unit mean more to them than the overall aims of the war.

The after-effects of the war motivated Rogers to participate in the *Missing Voices Project* interview. He is frustrated and concerned about the secrecy of the war and his feelings of abandonment by the SADF. For Rogers, the issue of secrecy was pervasive and debilitating. He discusses how most parents had an ambiguous concept of a mythical border area. Many do not know whether their son went to the border of Angola or

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<sup>104</sup> Paul, 29 and 33.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 34.

Mozambique. The soldiers themselves went to war with only a vague idea that they had to defend their country from a foreign communist enemy. “Without doubt it was a secret war. When you were there it’s not secret, when you come home it’s secret. And that’s what made me angry.”<sup>107</sup> The soldiers were not able to share much of their experience with their families due to the secrecy acts. After returning home, it was very difficult for the young conscripts to manage this disconnect on their own.

Paul’s remaining connection with the Parachute Battalion means he continues to revisit and reinforce his own views as well as those of former paratroopers, which is why their opinions are connected to the official lines of the SADF. Korff’s views reflect what he believed and was told before and during the war. Korff realizes that the SADF soldiers “might have been the ones sucked into one big lie and brainwashed for the sake of *Volk* and *Vaterland*.”<sup>108</sup> He expresses his confusion in the aftermath of the war and does not understand what he had fought for. He asks rhetorically, “Were we the bad guys?”<sup>109</sup> It is notable that someone of his previous disposition would be able to question and reflect on these issues almost two decades later. His new perspective is related to his recent surroundings, since he moved to America in 1985. “South Africa became a faraway place as the years went by. I had not spoken to a Parachute Battalion buddy since I had left the army in 1981.”<sup>110</sup> Korff’s removal from his previous environment to Los Angeles and his lack of reconnection with other paratroopers has contributed to his changing perspective.

These three men demonstrate a specific motivation to join the Parabats. Its image intrigued them and they all mention the wings and the beret which symbolize the pride

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<sup>107</sup> Paul, 38.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 338.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 337.

<sup>110</sup> Korff, 337.

and reputation of the unit. Their claims to “top slot in the SADF” with one of the toughest selection courses in the world, meant these men were highly competitive individuals whose sense of accomplishment is palpable in all their accounts, whether they agreed with the political reasons for the war or not.<sup>111</sup>

The Parachute Battalion accounts provide a sense of their mindset that stemmed from being part of such an elite team and how they respond to accusations regarding their actions during the war. The variations explain how these men were not indoctrinated by the SADF to a greater extent than the other units. More than following similar political views, these men reconstruct the reputation of their shared battalion in an attempt to further what it represented to them. They are determined that people know more about their unit and, according to their views, remember it correctly.

### **3.2 THE RECONNAISSANCE REGIMENTS**

The Reconnaissance Regiments, also known as the Recces, consider themselves the most highly decorated unit during the wars in Angola and Namibia. They became renowned as highly skilled soldiers and as members of the Special Forces. Their elite status within the SADF is never questioned. In some media depictions, however, they were considered a sinister and psychopathic force, accused of operating covertly and mercilessly against unsuspecting civilians.<sup>112</sup> These controversies detracted from the veneration the members of this elite unit expected due to their status within the SADF. The veterans remain proud of their actions and service as professional soldiers who

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<sup>111</sup> Paul Matthysen, *Recces* (Johannesburg: 30° South, 2010), 9.

<sup>112</sup> Matthysen, 10.

protected South Africa from the communist forces that greatly outnumbered them. They participate in the Border War discourse to refute what they consider to be misconceptions, relay their knowledge and perspective of the war as members of a covert unit and inform their families and the wider public of what it really meant to be a Recce.

Three military memoirs and one *Missing Voices Project* interview provide first-hand perspectives of the SADF Recces. The books include Paul Els' *We Fear Naught but God*, Andre Diedericks' *Journey Without Boundaries: the Operational Life and Experiences of a SA Special Forces Small Team Operator: the Personal Memoirs of Colonel André Diedericks HCS, HC, SM, MMM*, and Jack Greeff's *A Greater Share of Honour: The Memoirs of a Recce Officer*. The viewpoints of an anonymous Recce, dubbed Recce G by Mike Cadman, will also be included in this study. These veterans tell the story of the Recces because they are proud of their privileged position within the SADF hierarchy. These Recces believe their stories are noteworthy contributions to a public audience that does not often understand the Recce role in the Angolan conflict. This section explores the message inherent in their discourse and the Recce's contribution to the elite soldier perspective as it contrasts from those of the generals and national servicemen. Though limited to four sources, this section interprets the Recces from those who wish to have their stories known.

Recces were the first of the Special Forces units, originally founded in 1972 by Jan Breytenbach, and became one of the units most heavily involved in the day-to-day fighting and cross-border insurgencies. Though they were originally comprised of white elites, the Reconnaissance Regiments began to recruit black Angolan members in the

1980s.<sup>113</sup> Their principal role was, in small groups or as individuals, “to gather covert strategic and tactical intelligence information about enemy activity behind the lines.”<sup>114</sup> The high level of secrecy surrounding their missions necessitated strict recruitment requirements. Reportedly, out of the 700 yearly applicants only 45 would be accepted into the training course.<sup>115</sup> These elevated standards made the Recces highly skilled soldiers whose reputation grew accordingly.

Rece culture was based on its distinction within the SADF. According to Wayne Brider of 2 South African Infantry, the social pyramid was “Reconnaissance, closely followed by infantry school; Parabats, closely followed by the Cavalry; motorbikes, horses, and then dogs and things like that...And those that were left would go out and become infantrymen.”<sup>116</sup> The culture and reputation of the Recces was based on the perception of them by the rest of the SADF. The idea of the Recces was also romanticized in the wider population of South Africa, through pop culture such as the movie *Boetie on Manoeuvres*.<sup>117</sup> Their elite status was insurmountable: “As a unit, the Recces hold a reputation for the successful completion of military operations in Southern Africa carried out in the presence of expertly trained and equipped Cuban, East German, and Soviet advisors.”<sup>118</sup> Their reputation, discipline and attachment to their group of elites motivated the Recces in the war more than their sense of political loyalty.<sup>119</sup>

In Lance Branquinho’s *Fantasy Industry: Perceptions of the South African Special Forces in the Media*, he examines the perceptions of the Recces in the media and

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<sup>113</sup> William Minter, *Apartheid's Contras: an Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique*. (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 125.

<sup>114</sup> Matthysen, 22.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>116</sup> Wayne Brider, “Missing Voices Project” (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 2008), 3.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>118</sup> Matthysen, 27.

<sup>119</sup> Minter, 124.

suggests a difference in the Afrikaans press and the English liberal press. Branquinho discusses an incident that exemplifies how the South African media reacted to the Recces. A small group of Recces performing an undercover operation were compromised in May 1985 during Operation Cabinda. Two Recces were killed and their captain, Wynand du Toit, was captured while they were in Angolan territory trying to sabotage oil facilities, the type of raid the politicians had been denying up to that point.<sup>120</sup> It became the first Recce story to make headlines in South Africa and around the world. Branquinho contends that the Afrikaans press were “the government’s mouthpiece and sought the heroic element of the raid,” while “the English liberal press, horrified at cross border raids of such magnitude...stuck out.”<sup>121</sup> There were constant contradictory and polarized media portrayals of the SADF’s actions; however, the negative reporting most often came from the same, specific newspapers within South Africa, which Branquinho distinguishes as the English liberal press. He explains how the South African public understood the Recces: “During the 80’s very few knew of them, during the 90’s, they were making headlines for all the wrong reasons, and receiving scant recognition for what they actually did.”<sup>122</sup> Though there were also affirmative and heroic depictions, the press that derided the Recce’s reputation became an important focus of their recollections on the Border War.

Greeff and Diedericks are the elite of the elite and they include various depictions in their books to make this apparent to their readers. On the covers of their books, Greeff and Diedericks list their honours and awards after their names: Major Jack Greeff HC,

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<sup>120</sup> Fantasy Industry, Lance Branquinho, *Fantasy Industry: Perceptions of the South African Special Forces in the Media* (Just Done Productions: Durban, 2006), 19.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 19-20.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 24.

PMM, MMM and Colonel Andre Diedericks HSC, HS, SM, MMM. Greeff became one of the most decorated soldiers of his time in the SADF – awarded Chief of the SA Army Commendation Certificate, the Chief of the SADF Commendation Medal, the Ten Year Service Medal, the Southern African Medal, the Pro-Patria Medal with Cunene clasp, the Pro-Merito Medal for exceptional service and ultimately the Honoris Crux decoration for bravery. Diedericks was twice decorated for valour and pioneered the concept of small team reconnaissance within the South African Special Forces. All the medals and decorations were awarded as a result of their achievements during Special Operations. Greeff includes the disclosure that “the opinions expressed are my own and nothing to do with the South African Defence Force or Special Forces.”<sup>123</sup> Els also establishes himself as a worthy candidate to write a book on the Recces due to his status as long-term member with the Recces since the early stages of the war. He would not be considered a decorated soldier like Greeff and Diedericks. Els was not an operator who carried out missions. He was a signaler, cryptographer and radio operator for 5 Reconnaissance Commando.

Els, Diedericks and Greeff have greater similarities between them, while the views of Recce G are more often a contrast. There are strong parallels between the three books. The authors produced similar versions of the Recce Border War story, ones that are positive towards their experience and actions. Recce G disagrees with them on the role of the SADF in Angola and what the war means for South Africa. His differing views may have impacted his choice to remain anonymous, especially since this decision is a marked contrast from the authors who make their identities well-known. Els, Greeff

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<sup>123</sup> Jack Greeff, *A Greater Share of Honour* (Durban: Just Done Productions, 2008), vii.

and Diedericks resolutely establish their identities as long-serving members of the Recces who have received awards and personal recognition due to their time in the SADF.

Paul Els' *We Fear Naught but God* was published in 2000, before many former soldiers were ready to break the silence surrounding the war. For his book, Els had three aims in mind. Firstly, to bring the story of the Recces to the public, secondly, as a tribute to members involved, and thirdly to record the history and events of the Special Forces and the many honours and awards conferred on their members. Els' book attempts to provide the Recces with the representation he feels they deserve. He expresses the views of the elite regiments, brings attention to their contributions to the war and explains their challenging position within the SADF.

Andre Diedericks served with the South African Special Forces for two decades. As a conscript, from the beginning Diedericks was determined to become "a Recce and nothing less." He feels immense satisfaction in his achievement of Recce status.<sup>124</sup> Diedericks died of cancer in 2005, and only wrote his military memoir *Journey Without Boundaries* because he knew he would not be able to tell and explain his story to his children. He hoped it would help them understand where he went and what he did while they were young. "It was never intended to be a formal publication, but rather a humble and personal account of almost two decades of service in the Recces."<sup>125</sup> It was his wife who gave permission and support for the publication of the book in 2007.

Jack Greeff's *A Greater Share of Honour: the Memoirs of a Recce Officer*, was written in 2000 before Diedericks and Els' books, in which he too reflected upon his time

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<sup>124</sup> Andre Diedericks, *Journey Without Boundaries* (Durban: Just Done Productions Pub., 2007), 15.

<sup>125</sup> Diedericks, 130.

with the Recces with fondness and pride.<sup>126</sup> He spent sixteen years with the SADF and his last eleven years in 1 Reconnaissance Regiment. First inspired by a conversation with the late Mr. Nick Steele, a military historian, Greeff wrote for personal reasons, but also with the hope of inspiring future operators to possibly learn from his story.<sup>127</sup> He mentions that a Recce Unit Commander once told him “people who write books about themselves have an inferiority complex.” This delayed his interest to write a military memoir. Eventually, Greeff realized his depth of knowledge and significant experience in covert operations was a noteworthy story that others, especially SADF veterans, might want to read.<sup>128</sup>

### 3.2.1 Recce Unit Culture

On his unit culture, Greeff describes how the Recces sought to uphold the Afrikaner nationalist military tradition harkening back to the Anglo-Boer war. The Angolan conflict was their chance for glory and military history as the Anglo-Boer war had been for their grandfathers. The Recces became a battle-hardened unit, overwhelmed all enemies, and a “strong bond and sense of trust was built between Commanders and their men.”<sup>129</sup> Greeff believes that the Recces fulfilled every mission according to their prescribed task. Their small teams were never meant to fight major battles and take over enemy military bases, but due to the extent of secrecy the public did not know the extent and purpose of Recce missions.

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<sup>126</sup> It was published by Covos-Day in 2000. Just Done Productions reprinted it in 2008.

<sup>127</sup> Greeff, xiv.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, xiii.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, xxii-xxiv and 146.

In the *Missing Voice Project*, Mike Cadman interviewed a former Recce member Recce G. Recce G describes growing up in a staunch Afrikaans environment where it was necessary to “adapt or die.”<sup>130</sup> This means that the society did not allow for much opposition to their views. Recce G claims that he was always able to look at the bigger picture more than anyone else, despite his lack of outside exposure. When he was called up to the army, he had a predetermined interest to join the Reconnaissance Regiment. He thought this would mean greater respect and honour than the derogatory treatment he had received while in the support team.<sup>131</sup> The image of the Recces incited him to join them, but once he was a member he was no longer as convinced.

Recce G does not promote the unit culture in the same way as Greeff and Diedericks. Recce G believes it was a fabricated idea reinforced by his superiors in order to motivate him in the war effort. He refers to the unit culture as “this brotherhood type of thing,” of which he was not convinced. Recce G is not captivated by the unit culture and this quote is the only time he explains the existence of bonding, camaraderie and unit loyalty.

Els describes the Recce unit culture as entirely based on its exalted reputation. To Els, they were “the cream of all of South Africa’s combat soldiers.”<sup>132</sup> The Recces missions were covert, but they were they were well known as a Special Forces unit. Els thinks their repute was so insurmountable that he has to qualify that they were not superhuman beings. He pronounces, “Recces do cry!”<sup>133</sup> He believes some people thought that Recces were superhuman. The public has a basic sense of the Recces that

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<sup>130</sup> Recce G interview, “Missing Voices Oral History Project,” (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 2008), 1.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>132</sup> Paul J. Els, *We Fear Naught but God* (Johannesburg: Covos-Day, 2000), 138.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 138-9.

they were the most elite force in the war. Their exact missions, duties and the concept that they were performing operations in Angola were not well known. Els' demonstrates his high esteem of the unit and how he thought others perceived them.

The Recces were a small group and bonding took place in various forms, such as their shared religion. "Members attended church together, and this undoubtedly helped to strengthen the spirit of the group and understanding of one another."<sup>134</sup> This common culture and the connections they formed are emphasized by Els to show what contributed to making the unit exceptional. The Recces needed to develop trust in each other to survive in the small team operations hundreds of miles into enemy territory. The Recces were convinced that they were capable of winning the war despite the limitation of their small size and the political pressure for secrecy.

### 3.2.2 Recce Politics in the War

The communist threat was the Recces' main motivation for fighting. Els' believes the Recces fought and died for a cause they believed in, "a Christian-based society where all could live in peace and prosperity and where everyone could make a living and build a life."<sup>135</sup> For Els, this war was not about safeguarding the apartheid system; it was to maintain a world he understood against one that was foreign, communist and the enemy that would bring unwanted change to his country.

In terms of his perspective on the ANC and SWAPO, Els understands, after the end of the war, that they were not completely communist-inspired. "By the end of the

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<sup>134</sup> Els, 317.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 316-7

1970s, the army had become the principal defender against the rising tide of African nationalism in South Africa and the region.”<sup>136</sup> He is one of the few to use the terminology African nationalism, though he makes no further statement on what he thought of the concept. He admits he did believe, along with many Special Forces members, that South Africa faced a communist onslaught supported by the Soviets. He refers to SWAPO as Marxist rebels and believes that the ANC’s ultimate aim was to “mobilise the black population to violent revolution. Through acts of violence and subversion the USSR-ANC- SACP hoped to undermine the morale of the whites and thus destroy their will to resist.”<sup>137</sup> This connected the ANC and SWAPO with the Soviet attempts to gain power in southern Africa. His position appears to agree with the SADF’s arguments on SWAPO, the ANC and the communist threat.

The Angolan conflict was a complicated war; however, Diedericks sees it in very simplistic terms. He saw the ANC as the enemy and therefore any country that supported the ANC had to be confronted.<sup>138</sup> Diedericks did not express what he thought the ANC stood for other than it was linked to communism. He did not explain what he thought when the ANC became the new government in 1994. He states that the ANC used the border “to launch attacks against targets in South Africa and to commit various other acts of aggression.”<sup>139</sup> To him, it was necessary for the SADF to react to protect all South Africans from an outside threat. His understanding is that the SADF imposed secrecy as necessary policy in order to manage international criticism. He believes all critics had

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<sup>136</sup> Els, 12.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 11 and 35.

<sup>138</sup> Diedericks, 90.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 101.

unfounded claims, such as “South Africa’s so-called ‘destabilization strategy.’”<sup>140</sup>

Diedericks’ work on small team operations proved to be a highly successful method of clandestine reconnaissance. He gained significant acclaim within the SADF as a result. Diedericks emphasizes the adaptability and intelligence of his fellow Recce members to counter any threat.

The extent of Greeff’s understanding of the Cold War was that the Cubans and Communists were trying take over southern Africa.<sup>141</sup> His views are expressed upon seeing a fallen Cuban soldier in Angola when he states, “there we had the evidence in front of us. Strange people from a foreign country, not part of Africa at all, fighting and dying.”<sup>142</sup> These foreigners were after South Africa’s resources and were using communism to take over the minds of black population, instigating and inspiring SWAPO and the ANC terrorists and insurgents. His hope was that South Africa could demoralize the Cubans and their comrades over time, especially alongside their allies UNITA and Jonas Savimbi. Greeff promoted Savimbi to the SADF troops in a speech on November 10, 1984. “President Jonas Savimbi is seen as the best guerrilla leader of modern times – you must support him and continue the struggle Victory is certain! Viva Angola! Via Unita! Viva Pres Savimbi!”<sup>143</sup> Greeff thinks South Africa was in Angola in order to contain the SWAPO and ANC insurgents, two organizations which he believes only existed because of a Soviet communist conspiracy to take over all of southern Africa.

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<sup>140</sup> Diedericks, 10.

<sup>141</sup> Greeff, 30.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 159.

Greeff believes that the politicians held the Recces back from defeating their enemies. He recounts an intended raid on the ANC facilities that never took place for political reasons unbeknownst to him. He states, “It would have worked and it would also have struck at the heart of the ANC.”<sup>144</sup> Greeff blames the politicians for the situation. He believes the result of the war could have been very different. The SADF should have unleashed the full force of the Special Forces.<sup>145</sup> His tone was resentful and aggravated by the political decision making he did not understand. “The politicians all had their own agendas and it was definitely not winning the war in the shortest possible time.”<sup>146</sup> He was disheartened by the political maneuverings, and by his perception that his government, specifically Pik Botha, “played ‘mister nice guy’ and helped the enemy which they themselves ordered us to attack.”<sup>147</sup> Greeff does not understand what happened politically or why Pik Botha turned against them. He thinks the war could have been won through the skills of the Recces. At the same time that the Recces perceived themselves to be a weapon capable of defeating any enemy, they also saw the politicians as giving up on them.

Recce G explains the message the SADF expected him to believe about the communist counter insurgency. There were briefing sessions where the war was explained to him as South Africa defending itself against terrorism and communism. He states that “the big message was always coming through but it was reinforced in different ways.”<sup>148</sup> His description insinuates both that he is unconvinced and that the SADF attempted to indoctrinate him. The other Recces do not mention this type of event. The

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<sup>144</sup> Greeff, 268.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, xxiii.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, xxiii.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 340

<sup>148</sup> Recce G interview, 8.

impression given by the other Recces was that it was common knowledge to think about the war as it related to communism and these ideas were not imposed upon them by the SADF. Recce G suggests that these ideas were intentionally reinforced and he shows that the SADF indoctrinated the soldiers into these views.

Recce G claims he was not the only one who became aware that they had been misinformed. “People realised that Communism later on wasn’t what everybody thought it was going to be. It wasn’t going to be the *swart gevaar* or black danger that consumed everybody and everything. It was really a perception that was created.”<sup>149</sup> Recce G believes it is now common knowledge, though Els, Diedericks and Greeff do not concede that communism did not become what they had expected. Recce G reflects on his perspective at the time and challenges what was told to him.

### 3.2.3 Recces Creating Controversy

Els, Diedericks and Greeff all scrutinize the inaccuracies, stereotypes and media portrayals surrounding the Recces. The main aim of Els’ book is his unwavering effort to defend his fellow Recces and convince others to understand and respect them the way he feels they deserve. To set the record straight he confronts the gossip about the Recces. For example, there was a rumour that every recruit who joined the Recces was given a puppy at the time of their intake. The Recce would raise it and once they formed a bond, the Recce had to kill and eat it. This persistent rumor debased the Recces and stereotyped them as psychopathic, ruthless, heartless killers.

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<sup>149</sup> Recce G interview, 14.

Els confronts this gossip in his statement that “the story was utter rubbish, but it persisted and had begun to get under the skin of the men who wore the maroon berets.”<sup>150</sup> Els is frustrated by this sully of the Recce reputation and lack of recognition for their accomplishments. Their celebrity as the elite only set them apart to be targeted. They are “regarded as an almost sinister organisation of the past of which we should be ashamed.”<sup>151</sup> Els is not ashamed at all, he is proud and defends the honour of his fellow Special Forces members. His dedication to his unit means he could not remain silent. He describes the South African context in which the Recces have been denied their rightful social status.

Over the years, South Africans have heard both positive and negative stories of the Recces. They have had to rely solely on the media or ‘heroes’ in the pubs for their information that has been both vague and confusing. They were never seen by the public as the British saw their SAS, the Americans their Green Berets or Navy Seals, the French their Foreign Legion, the Nepalese their Ghurkhas and the Rhodesians their Selous Scouts. This book has been written to bring the Recces to those who have wondered about what kind of men they were, their families, their heartaches, sufferings and humorous moments.<sup>152</sup>

The contentious nature of the Border War means the Recces are not recognized in the way that they expect as elite veterans.<sup>153</sup> The Recces are some of the most heavily invested soldiers in the SADF as can be seen by the examples of Greeff and Diedericks.

Diedericks contends with the negative media and references the same instances where the Recces were maligned. Along with the implications that they were psychopaths, he mentions the same rumor regarding the puppy which was to be raised and then killed by each Recce member.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Els, 139.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 317 and 357.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, author’s notes.

<sup>153</sup> Matthysen, 10.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 14.

In the absence of information about the unit, horrendous and hairy tales were fabricated about the daring exploits of these men. Especially the personal characteristics required in becoming a *recce*, were seriously distorted. The popular tale was that in order to become a *recce*, one had to be a psychopath. The other favorite story was that on arrival at selection, candidates would be issued a kitten or puppy. During the course of selection the individual had to take care of the animal and at some stage during the training it would be expected of the person to kill it.<sup>155</sup>

These misconceptions are part of the reason Diedericks wrote his story for his children. His intention was to write the truth about the Special Forces and inform them of what had been kept confidential during the war. The confidence, trust, loyalty, and pride he feels for his fellow soldiers are expressed over and over again. For Diedericks, the unit culture was the most important aspect of the war because he feels it was “uncoupled to a particular period in history” and “a phenomenon with an enduring nature.”<sup>156</sup> He views his time with the *Recces* as an invaluable experience.

Greeff explains the duties of the *Recces* to clarify the misconceptions of their role in the conflict.

The aim of a reconnaissance mission was to collect the required information and return with it without being compromised. Shooting up the whole Angola, wiping out a company of the enemy and stagger into the base wounded and chased to exhaustion serves no purpose and only amplifies the failure of the mission. Even during sabotage missions the small team avoided contact with the enemy at all costs. This obviously led to accusations by other Operators that the *Recce* teams ‘just hid in the bush all the time.’<sup>157</sup>

This example shows how *Recce* role as small groups collecting intelligence information was not often properly understood. The indictments went from one extreme that they were shooting Angolans, to the other that they were just hiding in the bush doing nothing.

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<sup>155</sup> Diedericks, 14

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>157</sup> Greeff, 127.

Through his rebuttal of these negative interpretations, Greeff makes it appear that the Recces were constant targets for persecution.

Recce G is disillusioned by the SADF, its role in the war and its treatment of its soldiers. He talked about how the other soldiers dealt with the war differently than him. “They led such an insular life and you’re not exposed to things that are going on, and you believe everything you’ve been taught because that’s the hand that feeds you. You don’t bite that hand. But I’d seen the other side and I started challenging these things.”<sup>158</sup> This explanation by Recce G shows the difference between his account and that of Els, Diedericks and Greeff and why they are inclined to put a positive spin on the war. Recce G kept quiet about the war after it ended because he feels embarrassed by it and the negative connotations associated with the war, not because secrecy was imposed on him.<sup>159</sup> His national service was not a time in his life of which he was proud, even though he had achieved status as an elite soldier.

Diedericks is the most determined of the Recces to explain the unit culture as the most important aspect of the war. Both he and Els contest the rumours about puppy killing and accusations that they were psychopaths. Els response to this is that they are not superhuman and they do cry. Els states that bonding took place through religion and their unit pride in their efficiency and specialization. To Greeff, the Recces were the ones who upheld the South African military tradition, with a strong bond and sense of trust between Commanders and their men. Recce G explains it unceremoniously in his mention of what he called “the brotherhood type of thing.”<sup>160</sup> He believes this to be a

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<sup>158</sup> Recce G interview, 11-12.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 9.

ploy by their superiors to organize and manage the soldiers. Els, Diedericks and Greeff, on the other hand, express their significant attachment to their unit.

Els, Diedericks and Greeff wrote to contest the misrepresentations of their unit and validate their actions. Particularly for Els, it is to gain recognition for the heroic deeds of the Recces despite how the war ended with their enemies becoming their government. These men are proud of what they think are impressive accomplishments. It is their hope to repair the tarnished reputation of the Recces. Recce G wants to explain the way that he challenges the conceptions of the war that were imposed on him. The image of the Recces is an important point for all these sources to emphasize.

In terms of the causes of the war, only Recce G mentions the briefing sessions and pep talks where they were told what to believe and in retrospect acknowledged that communism did not become what everybody thought it would be. This perspective was not considered by Els, Greeff and Diedericks. For Els, the war effort was for the preservation of a Christian-based society for everyone. Diedericks believes that the SADF did what was right for all South Africans. Greeff concurs that the SADF was only fighting communists through his accusations that SWAPO and the ANC were communist-inspired. The only one to contradict this is Els, whose brief mention of “the rising tide of African nationalism” provides a glimpse into a possible alternate understanding. They all, however, believe that they were fighting for each and every South African against a common communist enemy.

The significant unanimity and corroboration between the accounts of Els, Diedericks and Greeff provides evidence for the existence of a Recce culture. Their differentiation with Recce G reveals their inclination to maintain their connection and

positive relationship with the unit and its members, rather than become an anonymous pariah that contradicts their version of the Border War. Recce G is willing to discuss the problematic aspects of the war and claim that the ideas of brotherhood and communism to motivate soldiers to fight. The affirmative representation of the Recces by Els, Diedericks and Greeff, reemphasizes their unit's image and reputation and responds to the negativity and controversy that they have had to face.

### **3.3 32 BATTALION**

32 Battalion, also called Three Two, Buffalo Battalion and the Terrible Ones, was an elite group of ex-FNLA black Angolan soldiers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and white South African officers and NCOs.<sup>161</sup> It earned its reputation as an elite unit over time due to its fighting record, which was considered the best in the whole SADF since the Second World War.<sup>162</sup> 32 Battalion spent years inside Angola, at times pretending to be UNITA, to cordon off the north of the Namibia-Angola border and make it difficult for SWAPO to infiltrate. Like the other elite units, 32 Battalion became the center of controversy when their existence was made public in 1981 by Corporal Trevor John Edwards, who accused them of atrocities against Angolan citizens.<sup>163</sup> 32 Battalion's later involvement in the townships led to its condemnation by the ANC which resulted in its disbandment. It was the most covert unit with the most to disclose in the aftermath of

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<sup>161</sup> A number of soldiers of other nationalities fought with the unit. There were British, former Rhodesian, Belgian, French, Australian, and New Zealand soldiers.

<sup>162</sup> Piet Nortje, *32 Battalion: The Inside Story of South Africa's Elite Fighting Unit* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004), xiii.

<sup>163</sup> John Edwards was "a British citizen, who joined the battalion after leaving the Rhodesian Army... He made his way via Lusaka to the United Kingdom, and in an interview with the *Guardian* newspaper, accused the unit of committing brutal atrocities against Angolan citizens." Nortje, 54.

the war. Veterans of 32 Battalion have decided to share their perspective in the Border War discourse, promote their skills and success as the SADF's premier fighting force and respond to the criticism and misinformation surrounding their unit.

The unit's secrecy, controversy, status within the SADF and disbandment at the end of the war are major topics of conversation within the veteran interviewees in the *Missing Voices Project*. There are two books by 32 Battalion veterans that will be consulted: Piet Nortje's *32 Battalion* and Nico van der Walt's *To the Bush and Back*. Nico van der Walt also participated in the *Missing Voices Project*, and his interview adds depth to his perspective. 32 Battalion had its own Reconnaissance Wing which is represented in the interviews of the *Missing Voices Project* by Angela McIntyre. She interviewed Coen Riekert, Willem Ratte and Kevin Fitzgerald from the 32 Battalion Recces. The similarities in their views are the result of the cohesive nature of their tight-knit group.

The books and interviews of 32 Battalion do not continue the pattern established by the Parachute Battalion and the Reconnaissance Regiments chapters. The 32 Battalion interviewees do not differ to the same degree as Rogers and Recce G differed from the books of their fellow unit members. The interviewees were not disillusioned with the SADF, though they express frustrations with the South African government's decision making in the aftermath of the war. Their main focus was to define what they did, establish their proficiency as elite soldiers and how they view what took place during the war.

A divide still exists between the books and interviews of 32 Battalion. The books have a specific interest in how the Border War and 32 Battalion are represented. The

messages communicated by the books are more measured and succinct because they have been through an editing process, have a greater level of commitment to their account of war and a positive spin on the 32 Battalion that they want a public audience to know. The interviewees do not repeat a consistent message and do not concerned have a specific message or agenda.

32 Battalion was a clandestine battalion that was independent from the rest of the SADF. It began as Bravo Group, when ex-FNLA Angolans began their training with Colonel Jan Breytenbach for Operation Savannah.<sup>164</sup> Breytenbach's insistent requests finally succeeded in its gradual incorporation into the SADF. He proposed a politically advantageous idea to the leadership. The unit would be used as a foreign legion which meant casualties would not need to be publicized and therefore would have no effect on South African voters. The SADF constantly struggled to limit battlefield casualties and hide this secret war from the South African public.<sup>165</sup> The SADF, therefore, fully accepted 32 Battalion into the SADF. Its covert nature was maintained and it was most often on the frontlines. Its members were the most expendable to the SADF and the government because they did not want to lose favor with the voting white South African public. Many soldiers chose to join 32 Battalion in order to seek out military action.<sup>166</sup> "The very existence of 32 Battalion remained one of the SADF's best-kept secrets, known in January 1981 to only a handful of people, even within the military."<sup>167</sup> 32 Battalion was publicly exposed on January 30, 1981 by Corporal Trevor John Edwards, when he "accused the unit of committing brutal atrocities against Angolan citizens." The

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<sup>164</sup> Matthysen, 15.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>166</sup> Recce Group interview, "Missing Voices Oral History Project," (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 2008), 11.

<sup>167</sup> Nortje, 54.

unit's existence was revealed and extensive public fallout ensued, which quickly made 32 Battalion the most controversial unit in the SADF.<sup>168</sup>

Breytenbach utilized a well-established military approach of regimental spirit to unite his multi-national, multi-tribal group. His self-proclaimed strategy was to instill a sense of loyalty to the unit rather than to any country or political agenda. 32 Battalion were, in the main, professional soldiers. A small number of national servicemen were seconded to the unit as signalers, medics, cooks and drivers. SADF veterans from other units describe 32 Battalion in its infancy as a ragtag, lawless, even terrorist-like, group of ex-FNLA Angolans.<sup>169</sup> When these Angolan soldiers joined 32 Battalion, they were already highly motivated soldiers. They had fought the MPLA since the 1960s and saw them as the new colonizers of Angola. They were fighting in their own country for their own liberation cause.

32 Battalion was disbanded on March 26, 1993 by the de Klerk and his cabinet, all members of the National Party, at the request of the ANC.<sup>170</sup> Their disbandment was a result of the negotiations running up to the 1994 elections and the ANC's concern after an incident in Phola Park on April 8, 1992. This was a significant controversy where, according to Nortje, members of 32 Battalion were accused of raiding "the Phola Park squatter camp in the East Rand, a pro-ANC area, killing two women, raping three and injuring more than 100."<sup>171</sup> Their disbandment is a leading concern in the first-hand soldier accounts.

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<sup>168</sup> Nortje, 54.

<sup>169</sup> Gert Nel interview, "Missing Voices Oral History Project," (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 2008), 8.

<sup>170</sup> Nortje, 280.

<sup>171</sup> Mary McGovern and Bronwen Manby, *South Africa half-hearted Reform: the Official Response to the Rising Tide of Violence* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993), 65.

Piet Nortje, author of *32 Battalion: The Inside Story of South Africa's Elite Fighting Unit*, reported for compulsory military service in 1978, completed a Junior Leader's course and became one of 13 volunteers for the newly inaugurated 32 Battalion Recce wing. He remained with 32 Battalion after the reconnaissance wing was disbanded, and was appointed sergeant major in charge of training at Buffalo Base in the Caprivi. Nortje, at age 23, became the youngest Regimental Sergeant Major in the SADF's history. He remained with 32 Battalion for a decade while it transitioned from a mishmash of former Angolan rebels and young South African conscripts into an integrated, accomplished SADF unit. He was not involved with 32 Battalion when it was deployed to the townships, befell even greater political controversy and was disbanded. Nortje joined the SANDF and carried on to complete 25 years of continuous military service before his retirement in 2003.

As a career soldier who spent the majority of his service with 32 Battalion, Nortje feels it was his duty to preserve the history of what he considered South Africa's most exceptional fighting unit. Nortje's book reveals his interpretation of South Africa's role in the conflict and, through his gathering of many declassified documents, explained 32 Battalion's exhaustive contributions to the war.

Van der Walt's *To the Bush and Back*, is a narrative, personalized account; a contrast from Nortje's heavily researched endeavour. As a young Afrikaner, to fight and become a soldier had been encouraged by his church, school and family. By the time van der Walt was conscripted he was prepared and enthusiastic to participate in this war. Called up in 1987, he had wanted to become an officer in order to join an operational

unit.<sup>172</sup> Van der Walt had aspirations to join a special unit and was impressed by 32 Battalion for its operational duties. “I intended to join 32-Battalion which, at the point, was known only as a special combat battalion that deployed primarily ex-Angolan soldiers.”<sup>173</sup> His interest to join them was rare given the requirements to learn Portuguese and work with black troops. In his interview with McIntyre in the *Missing Voices Project*, van der Walt focuses on explaining his views on the black Angolan troops and providing a deeper sense of 32 Battalion as an integrated, cohesive unit.

### 3.3.1 32 Battalion Unit Culture

Nortje represented the unit culture of 32 Battalion as one of unit loyalty above all. He credited Breytenbach with the creation of this esprit de corps, and with the purpose of reconciling “disparate groups whose loyalty was first and foremost to their unit rather than any cause or country.”<sup>174</sup> It was not only about the training; Breytenbach understood that “the white instructors becoming part of the unit – identifying fully with it by actually being posted to the unit.”<sup>175</sup> They became integrated just as Breytenbach had hoped and designed, which thereby enabled him to shape them into a highly efficient and effective unit. This made the identity of this unit special and their unbeaten battle record added greatly to their confidence. Their unit motto, “Forged in Battle”, reflected the “raw grit that became synonymous with the battalion.”<sup>176</sup> Nortje emphasizes that 32 Battalion was the only unit that maintained a constant presence within Angola from 1975 till the peace

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<sup>172</sup> Van der Walt, *To the Bush and Back*, 17.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>174</sup> Nortje, 58.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>176</sup> Nortje, 79.

accords in 1988. With the most cross-border operations and most often on the frontlines in combat, 32 Battalion considered themselves the most aggressive, cohesive and integrated SADF unit.

Nortje's fondness, loyalty and sense of belonging to the 32 Battalion are a significant aspect of his writing. He recounts their military operations and contributions to every major SADF campaign.<sup>177</sup> Nortje believes the members of 32 Battalion were the "unsung heroes,"<sup>178</sup> who became "a political punchbag, consigned to the trash heap by the last apartheid government as soon as this became politically expedient."<sup>179</sup> The strong use of language shows the extent to which he feels this unit was unjustly disgraced.

Van der Walt initially joined 32 Battalion because he thought of it as an elite group that performed combat operations. To fight alongside black troops was not an issue for him, even though he cites it as a rarity at that time. He considers the uniting factor "a strong anti-communist sentiment."<sup>180</sup> He reiterates this statement in his oral history interview, along with his immense trust in the black Angolan troops. "I saw these soldiers as SADF soldiers fighting with us, and fighting communism, because that's what was also said you know, that we were fighting communism in Angola."<sup>181</sup> Their conviction of a communist enemy was the common thread between everyone in the unit.

Van der Walt expresses a motivation to write for the benefit of his fellow unit members. He thought his time and experience as a Junior Officer of 32 Battalion would provide deeper insight and understanding of "those who were caught in that phase of

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<sup>177</sup> Nortje, xv.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, xv.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, xiii.

<sup>180</sup> Van der Walt, *To the Bush and Back*, 109.

<sup>181</sup> Nico van der Walt interview, "Missing Voices Oral History Project," (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 2008), 10.

history.”<sup>182</sup> His conception was that 32 Battalion were caught in the midst of a difficult time period rather than that they contributed to how events unfolded. Van der Walt’s continued connection to the unit as the vice-chairman of the 32 Battalion Veteran’s Association influenced his desire to work to ameliorate the public media image of 32 Battalion.

Coen Riekert joined the Recces of 32 Battalion because he wanted the full experience of the war, which meant being involved in the fighting. “I thought that apart from Special Forces perhaps these would be the guys to join if you want to get involved in Operations, because they were involved in everything.”<sup>183</sup> Riekert also thought of membership in the unit as an important aspect of the experience. He states, “I actually wanted to go back there and just to be outside and the camaraderie and so on ...it’s a totally different setup and I missed the guys and the excitement of the army.”<sup>184</sup> The intensity of his reminiscing shows how important 32 Battalion, unit loyalty and his connection to his comrades were to him. Riekert describes an acrimonious relationship between 32 Battalion and the rest of the SADF. “There was a bit of animosity I think, possibly a bit of jealousy on the side of some of the other units because they weren’t involved as much as 32 was.”<sup>185</sup> As a group, 32 Battalion were strengthened by the belief in their reputation as the unit with the most combat experience and greatest success in the field.

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<sup>182</sup> Van der Walt, *To the Bush and Back*, forward.

<sup>183</sup> Coen Riekert interview, “Missing Voices Oral History Project,” (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 2008), 8.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

Willem Ratte was posted to the Recce wing of 32 Battalion in 1980. His impression of the unit from the outset was that they were self-assured and in control.<sup>186</sup> Due to the fact that the Recce group often had separate missions from 32 Battalion, there was a sense that they were on their own and needed to develop their own identity. Savate, which was also the name of the town where the battle took place, was part of *Operation Tiro-a-Tiro* in which 32 Battalion suffered the most casualties at any one time, and is described by Nortje as “in classic 32 fashion, they had won the day, even with all the odds against them.”<sup>187</sup> Ratte describes Savate as well and its significance as a moment that “changed the outlook of the people in the battalion, they knew they could do something like this, it created a sense of pride which is very important in any unit.”<sup>188</sup> Their growing confidence in their skills helped them unify and identify as members of a reputable and undefeatable battalion.

Kevin Fitzgerald chose to join 32 Battalion Recces when he heard that the unit saw the most fighting in the SADF. He states, “as soon as I heard that I thought I must get myself picked.”<sup>189</sup> He knew that it was mainly black Angolans but that had no impact on his decision. Fitzgerald describes his experience as a member of this unit:

The Recce group [of 32 Battalion] were pretty dogged and determined and didn't just simply say okay guys it's starting to get a bit difficult, it's time we called the choppers in to come and pull us out, and we try again in a week or so time, that kind of mindset didn't exist with them, you persisted and got your operation done... the only time you stop is if a bullet stops you, and that is just about it.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Recce focus group interview, “Missing Voices Oral History Project,” (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 2008), 11.

<sup>187</sup> Nortje, 153.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, 23.

This passage exemplifies the extreme nature of 32 Battalion's determination in this war. The Paratroopers and Recces did not express their determination in the war effort to this extent. Fitzgerald believes no one would have had this experience in any other SADF unit. "The uniqueness that you found in the unit and the uniqueness that was in the Recce group was something incredible. Rank didn't count, what counted was who you are on your own merits as a person."<sup>191</sup> The unit culture of 32 Battalion was significantly different from all other SADF units. Fitzgerald also explains that 32 Battalion was non-hierarchical; therefore the black soldiers and white officers interacted without a constant consideration of their rank as a dividing factor.

The members of 32 Battalion and its Recce wing were motivated to join the unit based on its reputation that it saw a greater amount of frontline action. Nortje and van der Walt wanted specifically to be part of 32 Battalion because of the operational deployments. In the interviews, Riekert and Fitzgerald were initially motivated to join 32 Battalion to participate in operations.

### 3.3.2 32 Battalion Politics in the War

The political reasons for the war are considered by Nortje, van der Walt, Ratte, Fitzgerald, and Riekert. They mention the communist threat and its connection to SWAPO and the ANC. Nortje considers a possible connection between the Border War and apartheid. He states that the SADF kept their deployments into Angola covert because of the international focus on apartheid. He does not, however, relate the war in Angola to the defence of apartheid.<sup>192</sup> His version of SWAPO's history focused on its

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<sup>191</sup> Recce focus group interview, 27.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 54.

communist ties. “Up to the end of 1962, SWAPO members received no foreign military training, but a number of them were schooled in Marxism, trade unionism and politics at institutions in the former USSR.”<sup>193</sup> Nortje researched SWAPO and communism rather than relying on what he had been told by the SADF. His research produced the same result and he believes that communists, whether they were Cubans, Soviets, the MPLA, or SWAPO, were the primary reason for the war.

Van der Walt feels the Border War represented the notable role of South Africa in the Cold War. He believes that those who analyze the war retrospectively do not seem to grasp that the communist threat was a reality. What he understands of the Cold War was explained to him since he was a child. In school they told him, “The Red Bear was crawling closer and closer to our country.”<sup>194</sup> In church it was made clear to him that “the honourable thing to do was to go and defend our nearest and dearest and Christianity itself against the Red Anti-Christ.”<sup>195</sup> Even at home he would watch “television series with titles like ‘*Recce*’ and movies such as ‘*Boetie on Manoeuvres*’,” which conferred on him a favorable impression of war.<sup>196</sup> Van der Walt feels that the apartheid issue obscured what should be a focus on South Africa’s anti-communist struggle. Van der Walt was immersed in anti-communist thinking and in the idea of impending war; therefore the Soviet association with SWAPO and the ANC meant they were the enemy and he was ready to fight for the SADF.

During the course of the war Van der Walt was exposed to different perspectives. He talked to an Angolan FAPLA-lieutenant who “was not too enamoured with

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<sup>193</sup> Recce focus group interview, 5.

<sup>194</sup> Van der Walt, *To the Bush and Back*, 13.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, 13.

communism and believes that it was to blame for the sorry state his country found itself in.”<sup>197</sup> Van der Walt mentions how this new experience increased his own suspicions of the war effort. “I had already started suspecting that we had both just been pawns in a big battle between foreign powers.”<sup>198</sup> Van der Walt was completely ensconced in his world in South Africa, and with this lack of exposure to an outside perspective.

Ratte discusses the politics of South Africa in relation to Pik Botha, the Foreign Minister at the time. Ratte believes Botha never took a stand in the war or in the defence of South Africa. He thinks the South African government should have retaliated against the negative media to defend the SADF and especially 32 Battalion. He is perturbed that “the media smeared us in the propaganda wars made against us.”<sup>199</sup> His participation in the oral history project is his way to reclaim what was not said a decade earlier. He claims that “Pik Botha was definitely a traitor right from the word go.... he was working actively against us.”<sup>200</sup> Ratte’s strong statements blame Pik Botha for the change in South Africa’s government, and accuse him of corruption and conspiracy. Ratte believes that despite 32 Battalion’s achievements in the war, Botha’s political scheming were the reason the SADF and the NP lost to the ANC.

Kevin Fitzgerald and Willem Ratte participated in the same interview. Throughout the interview they affirm their accordance with one another’s position. Fitzgerald also discusses the discrepancy between the military objectives and the political objectives. “The political leadership just was not fighting the war as it should have been

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<sup>197</sup> Van der Walt, *To the Bush and Back*, 170.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 43-44.

fighting, and there was no reason why it couldn't...there was no limitation."<sup>201</sup> Fitzgerald believes the politicians held them back from winning the war. He does not understand why South Africa did not put all their resources into the war effort.

Riekert is vague in his description of who they were fighting. "Basically they were the enemy and we were the good guys and we had to sort them out sort of thing...nothing in-depth, it wasn't a political indoctrination whatsoever."<sup>202</sup> His main concern with communism is that he believes it would have changed the lifestyle to which he had become accustomed. He states that he would prefer to keep South Africa that way.<sup>203</sup> The extent of Riekert's commentary on the politics of the war is that he had to control the spread of communism and keep South Africa the way it was.

### 3.3.3 32 Battalion Creating Controversy

In terms of censorship and secrecy, Nortje mentions the SADF's attempt to mend the public fallout after Edwards exposed the existence of the battalion. "The SADF allowed a number of journalists to visit Buffalo and write about this truly unique group of soldiers in broad terms, but none were privy to the incalculable contribution made by 32 Battalion to the South African war effort."<sup>204</sup> Nortje's main concern is that 32 Battalion receive the recognition it deserved and that the secrecy added to the public's misinformation on the unit. He does not directly address the concerns that led to public debate.

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<sup>201</sup> Recce focus group interview, "Missing Voices Oral History Project," (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2008), 47.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>204</sup> Nortje, 256.

Van der Walt understands why the politicians needed to maintain the secrecy of the war. He wrote, “The unit’s operations were so sensitive in nature and relied mainly on the element of surprise, it is understandable that its activities had to be kept secret as far as possible.”<sup>205</sup> In the case of 32 Battalion, it was kept secret even from other units, which led to friendly fire casualties when their Angolan members could not be distinguished from FAPLA. Most national servicemen in the early 1980s had no idea that 32 Battalion existed. These incidents led to tensions between 32 Battalion and other units. Van der Walt does not consider this an issue and agrees with the secrecy policy.

32 Battalion was condemned for fighting in the townships. They were seen as “black troops of foreign origin supporting the last vestiges of the white regime.”<sup>206</sup> Nortje’s response to this accusation is that the 32 Battalion were simplistically told by SADF Chief General Jannie Geldenhuys: “You are here to play a different role than the one you are used to.”<sup>207</sup> Nortje does not discuss the details of what that role involved. He believes that they had neither any choice in the matter nor any proper guidance about what actions to take. Those who were deployed did not refuse the order or express any reservations in carrying out their duties.

Van der Walt regards 32 Battalion’s involvement in the townships representative of their loyalty to the SADF. “As far as the unit was concerned, 32 Battalion stayed professionally loyal to the government of the day from 1990 to 1993 – just as it had in the preceding 14 years in Namibia and Angola.”<sup>208</sup> He explains that the SADF were in the

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<sup>205</sup> Van der Walt, *To the Bush and Back*, 109.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid*, 256.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid*, 257.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid*, 192.

townships to normalise the conflict situation between the ANC and its rivals.<sup>209</sup> He strongly believes the government was wrong for disbanding them.

Ratte explains what took place in the townships according to the transgressions of the ANC. He disagrees with the ANC's tactics and believes they used horrific tactics to achieve their political aims. He describes a video of a necklace murder in detail in order to point that out. According to Ratte, it was "really gruesome and typical of what the ANC did at that stage in the townships to intimidate the people."<sup>210</sup> This provides fodder for the idea that the 32 Battalion were political scapegoats and furthers the stance of 32 Battalion that they did nothing wrong.

Members of 32 Battalion reiterate the SADF stance on how they should view the ANC, SWAPO, the Cassinga raid, the international and public controversy, township duty and censorship. They see SWAPO as communist terrorists working in association with Soviets. These ex-32 Battalion members feel they acted loyally to government in the townships. They believe they helped to handle the conflict between the ANC and IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party) and mention the ANC brutality and its practice of necklacing. These veterans hold a deep sense of betrayal by the government for not allowing them to use their full capabilities to win the war and later the disbandment of 32 Battalion. They believe that the politicians purposefully conspired against them and abandoned them to be governed by their enemies.

The members of 32 Battalion had a unique position as a group which consisted primarily of Angolans of the former FNLA. Their accounts insist upon 32 Battalion's status as an exceptional fighting unit, unmatched in its engagement on the frontlines. The

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<sup>209</sup> Van der Walt, *To the Bush and Back*, 192.

<sup>210</sup> Recce focus group interview, 43.

soldiers assert that they were a cohesive multiracial elite fighting force. All these examples of 32 Battalion members do not question the communist threat. These were men who wanted to be part of the action and viewed this unit as the vanguard for adventure, camaraderie, status and combat.

The texts of the Reconnaissance Regiments, the Parachute Battalions and 32 Battalion are representative of the first-hand accounts of white ex-SADF elite on the Border War. In most cases they are deeply nostalgic for military life, the camaraderie and the social status gained from their elite unit. They speak of their desire to have been part of the elite, their time once they were members, and their resolve that they would go back to fight for that unit and their comrades no matter what the cause. The cause of the war consequently became the unit itself, and the vague sense of a communist threat peripheral to their storyline.

The confessional narratives of the elite soldiers are meant as a personal redemptive story. The media portrayals of the elites are a major reason for their need of a reappraisal of the Border War. The Recces, Parabats and 32 Battalion were the most motivated to defend and maintain the reputation of the SADF. Their memories, histories and identities are significantly connected with the Border War. They were the most affected by negative portrayals of the SADF because they were the ones carrying out the contentious actions. They feel they acted out of loyalty to the government and for the protection of all South Africans.

The comments and convictions of many of these elite ex-soldiers indicate that they feel deceived, betrayed and abandoned by the SADF and the old dispensation. They unwittingly fought the war for the politicians, and then were abandoned to a bleak future

whilst their enemies, whom they believe they could defeat, preside over them in the new dispensation. Their post-colonial disillusionment has contributed to the intensity with which they have focused on the Border War; it defined their interpretation of the political changes and how they have come to view the ANC. Their accounts tell the story of a war that they feel is misrepresented to the public.

## **CHAPTER 4      NON-ELITES: THE DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES OF NATIONAL SERVICEMEN**

The non-elites are all soldiers who were not members of the 32 Battalion, the Recces and the Paratroopers.<sup>211</sup> The regular national serviceman had a different experience during the Angola conflict than those who served in the elite units. In their books and interviews, the three elite units have established their distinguishing features and unit culture which revolve around their reputation as undergoing heavy selection process, undertaking specialized operations and frontline combat, and being the best soldiers of the SADF. These qualities are not reflected by the non-elites, at least to the same extent.

This chapter explores the distinctions of the national servicemen's perspective as they address their interest in the cause they fought for, their place within the military hierarchy, their encounters with the elite battalions, the politics and the secrecy surrounding the war, and why the discourse on the Border War became a trend long after the war ended. The national servicemen who participate in the Border War discourse illustrate that the war do not have the same significance to them. They do not place the same positive spin on their unit and the war, are not disturbed by negative media portrayals, are not involved in the controversies and therefore do not have to explain themselves, and therefore have different motivations to speak or write from the elite

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<sup>211</sup> 32 Battalion had a very different operating culture, as did the Recces and Parabats, and were almost all Angolans with white South African officers. They spent years inside Angola, at times pretending to be UNITA, to cordon off the north of the Namibia/Angola border and make it difficult for SWAPO to infiltrate. They were later used in the more conventional operations. The Recces and 32 Battalion were more often grouped together as the unconventional fighting arm of the SADF, while the Parachute Battalions supported the conventional troops and came into contact with them more often.

soldiers. The national servicemen want the war to be remembered correctly in order for people to know what they did and what it meant to them.

This is illustrated through the perspectives of the national servicemen who participated in the Missing Voices interviews conducted by Mike Cadman and in the books of Gerrie Hugo and Ross Hesom.<sup>212</sup> The books were published in 2007 and 2009 respectively, while the interviews were conducted by Mike Cadman in August - September 2007. These recent books and interviews are a vital part of establishing the non-elite message and contribution to the ongoing Border War discourse. Their knowledge and perspective disagree with the elite literature. The generals are not contrasted in this chapter because it is focused on the soldier perspective. The elite interviewees Brian Rogers and Recce G agree with certain concerns of the non-elites. Therefore, the reference to elite is primarily targeted at the publications of the elites, since the elite interviews also disagreed and contradicted those accounts. This separates the elites who published as conveyors of a specific, controlled account of the war. The elite interviewees will not be the focus of this contrast because they do not propagate the status and identity of the elites, nor do they have a consistent message to use as a contrast. The military memoirs and interviews of non-elites included in this chapter portray a different depiction of the war than the elite publications.

The elite publications tell a bowdlerized account of the war in contrast to those who feel freer to speak. The elite publications' positive view of the war is related to their public image and a reputation that they want to re-establish. This chapter discusses the common themes and overall messages of these SADF national servicemen as they

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<sup>212</sup> Gerrie Hugo's *Africa Will Always Break Your Heart* was self-published with AuthorHouse in 2007 and Ross Hesom's book, *From Boys to Men: A Victim of Conscription* was published in Manitoba, Canada by Breelan Books in 2009.

compare to the elites. This discussion highlights the polarization of the two main perspectives. Analysis of the national servicemen's books and interviews provides new insights into the distinctive characteristics of this divide.

The non-elite interviewees differ in their expression of unit loyalty while they relate some examples of the merits of loyalty and bonding with their comrades. The examples are vague compared to the numerous emotional examples given by the elites. The authors of the elite literature ensured that their readers were aware of their unit, their specific responsibilities within their unit, how dutifully and loyally they served that unit, and their tight-knit rapport with their comrades. Non-elite lack of combat experience meant they were not exposed to certain knowledge of the war and did not experience the frontline and clandestine operations to the same extent. The non-elites did not have as extensive experience in Angola as the elites, therefore their stories are often lacking in that perspective. Much of the war took place in a fairly inaccessible part of the world, where only the elites fighting the war were privy to the most covert information.

The overall message that comes through about the national servicemen is that they did not have the same apparent agenda as the elites. The overall commonality between the non-elite is their interest in commenting on all facets of the war itself: secrecy, township duty, apartheid, and the exaggerations and manipulations of the SADF's political rhetoric. They do not express the same idealization of their own soldiering abilities, their unit, and their participation in operations and logistics. The national servicemen only participated in a limited capacity, if at all, in combat which correspondingly altered the entire scope of their war experience. Even though they are not elites, they were well trained soldiers who could also possess a deep commitment to

their units. The infantry units received three months of basic training. For the units meant for border duty there were another six months of intensive training.

The non-elite books and interviews show interesting similarities to the elite interviewees, distinct from the perspectives seen in the elite literature. This is important because it makes the vast array of differences more comprehensible. The elite publications are all very positive in their reflections on the war and the SADF. These units consisted of the men who excelled in the SADF, and their identities and social status became entangled with the controversial aspects of this war and the SADF. They were the most connected to the frontline fighting and therefore most likely to suffer the same general condemnation. Previous chapters established the constructs of the elite identity through specific characteristics and versions of the war. Adding these works of the non-elite into the discussion highlights the noticeable contradictions between the elite interviews and elite autobiographies. They had a personal interest in alleviating this situation by presenting themselves as authorities.

The elites who published had a personal interest in alleviating this situation by presenting themselves as authorities. The non-elite wish to tell their equally important stories and they present them in terms of how they were affected and what they thought about the war. From the non-elite perspective, the discourse covers new topics concerning the problematic aspects of the war, such as their struggle with PTSD, the difficulties that resulted from the secrecy and controversy surrounding the war, the lawlessness of the elites, racism within the SADF, their refusals to do township duty, the exaggeration of a communist onslaught, the indoctrination and dehumanization of the soldiers during basics and the connection of the Border War to the ANC anti-apartheid

liberation struggle. From the elites, only the interviews from Brian Rogers and Recce G cover some these same topics because they also disagree with the main message of the elites.

#### **4.1 CONSCRIPTION AND NON-ELITE STATUS**

Between 1977 and 1994, National service was the two-year duty of all white South African men turning eighteen.<sup>213</sup> National servicemen were called up on a mandatory basis, with severe consequences for those who refused service. Conscripts had the option of deferral if they chose to go to university first. The meaning of National Service is explained in The Cape Education Department's 1986 Cadet Training Manual: "National Service may virtually be regarded as a modern initiation school. It is generally considered that the Defence Force makes a man of boys."<sup>214</sup> Communities put significant effort to prepare boys for the moment of call-up. The Border Wars in both Angola and Mozambique began following Portugal's decolonization in 1974; conscription had already been in place since 1967. The SADF made that requirement into an obligatory two years of national service in 1977. The conscripts in general were examples of the men who would not otherwise have joined the army. Their perspective provides a valuable contrast to the elites, some of whom also began as conscripts, but who excelled and become more invested in their reputation as fighters in the SADF.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> It was only one year of national service conscription between 1967 and 1977.

<sup>214</sup> Jacklyn Cock, *Colonels & Cadres: War & Gender in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1991), 71.

<sup>215</sup> 32 Battalion were mostly former FAPLA from Angola and many members of the Recces were also Anoglan, Mozambican, Rhodesian or British.

The interviews discussed below were conducted by Mike Cadman, with National Serviceman (name withheld), Sven Kreher, Frans van Niekerk and John Dovey. The non-elite memoirs that will be used are Gerrie Hugo's *Africa Will Always Break Your Heart*<sup>216</sup> and Ross Hesom's *From Boys to Men: A Victim of Conscription*<sup>217</sup>. The following survey of their background, the major aspects of their national service and the main focus areas of their dialogue will provide context for what they will add to the national servicemen's message. These four interviews and two military memoirs point to the contrasts between elites and non-elites, which reflect important differences concerning township duty, reasons for the war and censorship.

National Serviceman decided to withhold his name to avoid controversy; Mike Cadman dubbed him National Serviceman with capitalized letters to distinguish his name from general references to national servicemen in his text. National Serviceman was called up in 1982 and assigned to the armour unit 1 SSB. He explains what he and those around him believed at the time, what they were told, and what happened to them. His comments on 32 Battalion, the Recces and the Parabats are descriptive of how these three units belong in a different elite category compared to the rest of the SADF.

Sven Kreher was a national serviceman called up in 1978-79 to 10 Light Anti-Aircraft Unit. He was unenthusiastic towards the army throughout his time with them. Once he finished his two year conscription he successfully evaded call-ups and camps. Kreher describes what aspects of his army experience affected him the most and how little they matter to him. He is a direct contrast from the elites because he feels no personal investment in the SADF.

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<sup>216</sup> Gerrie Hugo, *Africa Will Always break Your Heart* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2007).

<sup>217</sup> Ross Hesom, *From Boys to Men: A Victim of Conscription* (Winkler, Manitoba: Brelan Books, 2009).

Frans van Niekerk was called up in 1980, became a member of 6 SAI and served the majority of his time in northern Namibia. He had many call-ups after he served his two year conscription, on his second time he was sent into the townships, which he considered a different scenario than the Border and did not understand why the SADF was there. He spoke up to headquarters regarding his misgivings about SADF policing in the townships. Van Niekerk discussed the concerns of the national servicemen, how they viewed the Border War and township duty in separate categories, how they perceived the elites, and well as some of his distinctive personal actions and reflections.

English-speaking John Dovey performed his national service from 1984-86, starting in 1 SSB through basics training. Afterwards, he participated in a Special Forces selection and was not selected, therefore ending up at 5 SAI. He spent some time in northern Namibia, but when the State of Emergency was declared in July 1985 he was sent into the townships. Dovey owns the publishing company Just Done Productions. This company publishes many SADF veterans' autobiographies, including those of Andre Diedericks and Jack Greeff, as well as poetry, Afrikaans writing and general fiction. Dovey references conversations with these authors and explains his interpretation of their reasons for writing about the Border War. Dovey's knowledge of the war came from his experience as well as the present-day discourse. He is involved in the SANDF and divulges his opinion on many of its present members. He thinks "the old school guys refuse to see that there were flaws in the old SADF."<sup>218</sup> Due to their disposition as military men and current members of the SANDF, as well as the elites, they would prefer the old SADF to remain how they would like to see it: as an emblem of military

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<sup>218</sup> John Dovey interview, "Missing Voices Oral History Project," (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2008), 28.

excellence.<sup>219</sup> Dovey discloses that those who have a vested interest in how the SADF is remembered tend to portray it with “rose coloured spectacles on.”<sup>220</sup> His interview is an indispensable resource in this chapter’s attempt to specify, through comparison, the message of the elites.

Ross Hesom was first conscripted in 1984 and became a young national serviceman in the Technical Service Corps until 1986, afterwards joining the Citizen Force from 1987 to 1994. Hesom focused on the more difficult issues surrounding censorship and the political background of his country. These are topics which Hesom feels the Border War literature had not yet covered.

Gerrie Hugo was a national serviceman during Operation Savannah. To a large extent this influenced him to join the Permanent Force and to become a career officer. He served as an Intelligence Officer at various operational units for a total of 16 years. One of the main reasons he broke rank was due to Operation Orpheus, where the SADF attempted to assassinate the leadership of the ANC.<sup>221</sup> He realized that his “seniors had absolutely no scruples in utilizing and deploying members of the SADF in order to achieve their racist aims and agendas.”<sup>222</sup> Hugo’s book provides a strongly oppositional perspective to that of the elites.

Hugo and Hesom wrote their stories with a focus on what was neglected or purposefully evaded in the Border War literature. They had a predetermined interest in what they wrote: to reveal new information and perspectives on the war. The interviewees do not have the same level of targeted reasoning in their decision to speak.

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<sup>219</sup> John Dovey interview, 28.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>221</sup> Hugo, 143.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 145.

They simply articulated a need to reveal that which has not been previously communicated about the war and their own interpretation of events.

The soldiers included in this chapter were either uninterested or unsuccessful in obtaining elite status during the SADF, thus framing their experience of the war as non-elites from the beginning. Their service was compulsory while those who qualified for the elites wanted to do it. They were less engaged in combat, less severe in their defence of the SADF's actions, and less likely to discuss their fighting capacities and identification with their unit in their accounts of war. They are more inclined to discuss the problematic topics such as PTSD, racism in the SADF, township duty refusal, and that the fighting in Angola was related to the defence of apartheid. The non-elites bring the discourse of the publishing elites' perspective into the context of the wider variety of ex-SADF member perspectives on the war and distinguish the unique facets of the elite perspective on the war.

The national servicemen do not reference their unit or the quality of the soldiers around them. They express the basic sense that any soldier possessed that they developed friendship with those participating alongside them. They convey this bonding as the one positive and enjoyable aspect of their conscription. Dovey and van Niekerk reminisce over the relationships they developed in the army and the sense of loyalty and camaraderie to their fellow soldiers. Dovey states, "You end up fighting for your buddy next to you, and not for any greater scheme of things."<sup>223</sup> This is the understanding of the war from their everyday operating mentality. Van Niekerk reiterates this feeling. "You become a little family, you're on an expedition now" and "being a group like that was

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<sup>223</sup> John Dovey interview, 18.

actually nice.”<sup>224</sup> Their enjoyment of the group dynamic and friendships meant that they had a positive recollection of their time in the war. Their friendships and loyalties were on an individual basis rather than a bond over their mutual elite reputation and unit.

Kreher makes an important distinction between his unit and his understanding of the other units in the SADF. He explains that soldiers who were members of other units had different agendas and more contact situations.<sup>225</sup> The other groups provided a different level of involvement in the war than he experienced, which he believes would have had an effect on the soldiers’ political orientation. “I don’t remember being part of a group... that had a very strong political viewpoint.”<sup>226</sup> Due to their staunch political positions, Kreher thought that people from those other units “wouldn’t give you very much the feedback that I’ve been giving you today.”<sup>227</sup> He believes that there were certain units that were more politicized, and the fact that he was not a member of one has made him less politically affiliated. As a consequence, he sees how this made him more disposed to provide feedback in his interview. His association of the unit itself with an apolitical stance is the only instance in this thesis when a soldier’s account has directly made this connection.

National Serviceman began his national service with no concept of the units or of which were considered elite. “I didn’t even know what 1 SSB was. I suppose you’re young and you’re reckless and you just think all the army is the same.”<sup>228</sup> Upon enlistment, many of the elites were well informed of the SADF hierarchy and most predetermined their interest to become a member of a particular elite unit. They chose

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<sup>224</sup> Frans van Niekerk interview, 8 and 19.

<sup>225</sup> Kreher Niekerk interview, 19.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>228</sup> National Serviceman interview, 1.

their unit for specific reasons; such as a desire to fight in the frontlines or jump out of a plane. These national servicemen show no interest in a particular field of the army.

Hesom talks about his basics training as a process of dehumanization and militarization. He describes the dehumanisation phase as one where he learned he was treated like he was no longer an individual. The army expected him to forget everything he had ever learned and no longer make personal decisions.<sup>229</sup> The elites were the most successful in the selection process and their books attempt to defend their humanity as much as possible. For example, their rebuttals on the puppy rumour and Els' impassioned words "Recces do cry!"<sup>230</sup> The elites are offended by remarks on their inhumanity, while Hesom wrote to prove that the army dehumanized its soldiers.

Hesom discusses the way the unit culture was a part of what bonded them as soldiers. "Being allowed to wear this was confirmation that we had completed basic training and we were worthy of carrying the unit colours. 'We were soldiers'."<sup>231</sup> Hesom believes the sense of hierarchy was primarily used to motivate and connect the new soldiers. They were meant to become a strong band of brothers that were fighting for each other if for no other cause. Hesom thinks this sense of camaraderie was a manipulation of soldiers by the army. He mentions how the conscripts were treated more humanely after becoming a fully-fledged Technical Services Corps Soldier wearing the unit colours. He considers this breaking down and building technique "the next step in the psychological manipulation that the SADF used to train its soldiers."<sup>232</sup> His words indicate the extent to which his perspective became negative and disillusioned. He was an

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<sup>229</sup> National Serviceman interview, 70.

<sup>230</sup> Els, 139.

<sup>231</sup> Hesom, 91-92.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, 94.

enthusiastic young conscript like many, but his attitude changed upon his realization of the SADF's tactics.

It is the nature of a soldiers' experience that close bonds, friendships and trust will form while in the army.<sup>233</sup> This phenomenon is neither SADF-specific nor elite battalion-specific. What is elite-specific is the unit culture itself, how the Parabats, Recces and 32 Battalion members describe their unit and the importance of that sense of belonging. The national servicemen certainly bonded with their comrades, but do not emphasize the importance of their unit. Hesom claims that the elites' connection to their unit was a form of manipulation by the SADF. Through the process of initiation into the SADF their attachments to their brotherhood and elite status were meant to motivate and galvanize them for the war.

Relative to the elites, the non-elites do not express pride or selection in their unit choice, reflect a greater resistance and indifference to the war effort, wish to "get it done with and get it in the past," and are not motivated to engage in combat situations.<sup>234</sup> Authors Hesom and Hugo express moral disagreement with the SADF's psychological manipulation of soldiers through basics training, ideological lectures and the sense of identification by unit.

These national servicemen were questioned about their encounters with the elites by Cadman. Their responses offer insight into the realities and exaggerations of how the elites have represented themselves. The Recces and 32 Battalion are acknowledged as the separate, elite entities of the SADF. Not one national serviceman account questioned their

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<sup>233</sup> Eyal Ben-Ari, "Masks and Soldiering: The Israeli Army and the Palestinian Uprising" (*Cultural Anthropology* 4, 4 (Nov., 1989): 372-389), 374.

<sup>234</sup> Kreher interview, 2.

skills and status. National Serviceman expressed his personal opinion of the differentiation between the Special Forces and the rest of the army:

Our Special Forces were brilliant and whatever, but our general troops which I was part of, to be honest with you, we definitely weren't special ... I met a lot of the Recces and I met quite a few of the 32 Battalion guys and I met quite a few of our pilots because they were all English so I used to drink... I really think those guys were all special, but the conventional troop like me of the infantry, I think in general we weren't really great.<sup>235</sup>

The Recces and 32 Battalions are described as proper and professional soldiers, those who would stay in Angola for an entire year, live off the land, and who knew what they were doing.<sup>236</sup> National Serviceman regarded them as the ones fighting the war, compared to those around him who he did not believe were terrific soldiers.<sup>237</sup> He compares them to the Permanent Forces, who were told they were quite special and that they were the best, but National Serviceman believes his type of infantry unit were much less capable troops.

National Serviceman recounts his negative impressions of 32 Battalion and the Recces as well. He describes the fact that villages were burnt to the ground, killing women and children, and he believes it was the Special Forces or 32 Battalion who were responsible. He thinks "they were ruthless" and "lunatics," and that they "didn't fight a conventional war."<sup>238</sup> 32 Battalion and the Recces express great pride in their unconventional capacities and believe that their methods and actions were out of necessity. National Serviceman said of the unconventional forces of the SADF, "they definitely didn't stick to any rules or regulations or anything, I don't believe, of

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<sup>235</sup> National Serviceman interview, "Missing Voices Oral History Project," (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2008), 7.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 13 and 25.

conventional war, and that's a problem."<sup>239</sup> Even in this instance where this national serviceman views the Special Forces favourably, he feels that it was problematic that there were no restrictions on their actions. National Serviceman is willing to say what the elites would not have said of themselves.

## **4.2 VAGUE POLITICS**

The National servicemen interviewed were not given many details about why they were in the war. These men were told there was a communist enemy threat, without clear understanding of the distinctions between the ANC, SWAPO, FAPLA, and the foreign forces they encountered from Cuba, Russia and East Germany. As they understood it on a basic level, SWAPO were the ones who fought in Angola and northern Namibia and who wanted to take Namibia from them. If South Africa lost Namibia then it would fall to communism and South Africa would be next. To them, there was a sense of a common, identifiable enemy for all South Africans that merited the war. The specific ideology did not matter as long as they had to protect Namibia from the foreign Soviet, Cuban, and East German threat. Many of the national servicemen reflecting on these views now see these views as an exaggeration and SADF propaganda. None of the elites discounted the communist threat.

Dovey grew up with anti-communist rhetoric. He thought communism meant all his land and possessions would belong to the government and there would be no religion. The ideology of communism, however, did not motivate him as much in the war effort as the idea of SWAPO's takeover of Namibia. "Communism and all that, the link, that

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<sup>239</sup> National Serviceman interview, 25.

wasn't the real...not for us, not from what I saw."<sup>240</sup> The political aspects of the war were not part of the everyday life of a soldier. These soldiers saw much less combat with their enemies since they spent most of their time in northern Namibia. Their attitudes reflect a similar pattern to the elites, that they were soldiers not politicians, which indicates that this was an explanation common to all ranks within the SADF.

Kreher states that he did not think politically about the war at the time, yet he now believes indoctrination and propaganda were used to make them believe there was a greater communist threat.<sup>241</sup> He says he knew that the picture presented of a communist threat to South Africa was an exaggeration. He believes the most that would happen was "that we'd be subject to terrorist attack, and that our lives would be in danger and that it was far more, I think, that side of it that there was an infiltration coming into the country wanting to change the regime."<sup>242</sup> Kreher does not believe that communism was a threat for South Africa and that the ANC and apartheid were not connected to the war. Kreher states that throughout his time in the SADF, "I don't remember debating the ANC; I don't remember debating Mandela at all. At all."<sup>243</sup> No one was discussing the ANC or apartheid because they did not see the distant war in Angola as a deciding factor in whether the ANC came into power or not. Kreher felt no inclination to fight the war, but only because he did not want to be in the army, not because of a political stance.

Even at the time of the war, National Serviceman had not believed the communist onslaught. He clarifies his stance that although he knew the South African soldiers were there to maintain a buffer between South Africa and the communism in Angola, he did

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<sup>240</sup> John Dovey interview, 14.

<sup>241</sup> Sven Kreher interview, 16.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 14.

not believe it. “I didn’t really believe in this, that there was a Red under every bed and under every tree. That was propaganda. But yes we did have that propaganda, yes.”<sup>244</sup> National Serviceman thought this was a vague threat, one that only the Afrikaners believed. Even while he fought the Cubans and East Germans in Angola, National Serviceman never understood the real reason why the SADF was there. He did not know who the actual enemy was until they people directly attacked him. “The only time you know if the oke is shooting at you, then you know, look this is the enemy.”<sup>245</sup> National Serviceman is unconvinced and questions the SADF’s rhetoric, unlike the elites, who were entirely persuaded by the idea that the communist threat was legitimate during that time.

Hugo’s perspective on the Angolan conflict with regards to communism, the ANC and SWAPO began like other conscripts because of what he was told by the SADF. He explains how he was easily convinced by this political propaganda and had no reason to question it. “I became aware of the magnitude of the communistic inspired threat against South Africa. I was taught that the black people of South Africa were being used as pawns by the Soviet super-power in their quest for world domination.”<sup>246</sup> At the beginning of his time with the SADF, Hugo had believed the ANC was a Soviet-inspired terrorist organization and this idea had motivated him to fight the war.

In the following passage Hugo outlined his mentality as a conscript and his reflection on those views:

This enemy of ours was also black and in any event they all looked the same. I was still totally blind and deaf to the political aspirations, sufferings and hardships of the majority of our population. I was like that out of choice. I knew there were

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<sup>244</sup> National Serviceman interview, 2.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>246</sup> Hugo, 120.

a lot more to them than I initially thought and that they lived under appalling conditions. But I thought them to be an ungrateful bunch of bastards that me and my mates fought and died for. We fought for them to be free. What a load of bullshit. We actually believed that.<sup>247</sup>

This was Hugo's perception the SADF's explanation of the war. He contests the idea that the SADF fought for all South Africans in the Border War and believes only the white South African communities would benefit from this war effort. Hugo's disillusionment with the SADF and the South African government came gradually, beginning with Operation Orpheus in 1986-87, which "aimed at neutralizing the leadership of the ANC's alternative structures" within South Africa.<sup>248</sup> This meant a targeted assassination of the ANC's leadership and their replacements until the organization was thoroughly dissolved from the inside out.<sup>249</sup> It was in this operation that Hugo witnessed his seniors "had absolutely no scruples in utilizing and deploying members of the SADF in order to achieve their racist aims and agendas."<sup>250</sup> This disturbed Hugo morally and this perception continued to be reinforced throughout the late 1980s by the exploits of the SADF. Hugo's book is a rare example of a Border War military memoir that critiques the apartheid system, engages with reflections on the nature of the South African system, and does not agree with the premises of the war. This is important because it explores the issues that the elites would not even acknowledge.

These national servicemen do not all question the war effort. The interviewees Dovey, National Serviceman, Kreher and van Niekerk do not believe the war was for the defence of apartheid or that it was part of a black liberation struggle of their future ANC government. Kreher and National Serviceman were not convinced of the communist

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<sup>247</sup> Gerrie Hugo, *Africa Will Always break Your Heart* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2007), 98-99.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 145.

threat. They carried out their national service only because it was compulsory. Dovey and van Niekerk made the same arguments as the elites that the war should be understood from the perspective of the time when the communist threat was a reality. They also contend that they were soldiers and therefore apolitical. Ideology did not matter to them as much. The national servicemen contend with their views on the war and attempt to figure out what is the truth. They do not have a pre-set agenda or storyline to disseminate.

#### **4.3 ENFORCED AND PERSONALLY IMPOSED CENSORSHIP**

The enforced secrecy by the SADF was the main reason the national servicemen chose to share their stories and personal memories. They feel there were many aspects of the war their families and the South African public did not know. These six national servicemen all describe the process by which they began to realize the war was more intensive than it was initially described to them and their families. Without much briefing, they found themselves in northern Namibia and across the border in Angola where they could actually be fighting and die. They had not expected to be involved in combat and they were greatly surprised that there were Cubans, East Germans and Soviet soldiers involved in the conflicts. The national servicemen's knowledge of the war was restricted by their limited experience of combat and time in Angola.

These national servicemen saw very little action, especially in comparison to the elites. Van Niekerk states "And like I said, because I did not see action there, real action, I also could not understand really what was going on."<sup>251</sup> They were informed on a need-

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<sup>251</sup> Frans van Niekerk interview, 28.

to-know basis and some soldiers were taken across the border before they even knew that Angola was their destination. National Serviceman confided that it was “a war that we’ve both hidden. We’ve hidden part of the reality and so has the ANC because they also did horrific things.”<sup>252</sup> He believes everyone hid certain aspects of the past in order to avoid blame.<sup>253</sup> It is important for this national serviceman to cast his insight into the Angolan War and what happened precisely because it was a secret war.

In Dovey’s opinion, secrecy is a fundamental aspect of the war. He states, “We had our heads bashed in about the idea of secrecy.”<sup>254</sup> He thinks the reason that many veterans remained silent was due to the SADF’s constant reiteration of a need for secrecy. For van Niekerk, when South Africa changed dramatically in 1994, he decided it was better to not talk about his national service to anyone. “I’m being very honest if I say that I don’t speak to people about this, because I already know that they hate the past SADF, for what is written about them now.”<sup>255</sup> Van Niekerk prefers to hide that he was a SADF veteran in order to avoid confrontation. Secrecy remained an issue for personal reasons after it was no longer imposed. For the elites, it remained a secret due to loyalty to their remaining connection to their unit and their comrades.

Hugo chose to reveal information while secrecy was still imposed by the SADF and the government. “I spoke out on numerous occasions in public and had to hide from the wrath of my comrades of old.”<sup>256</sup> It is important to note that a major concern of soldiers who allege and proclaim army transgressions is the backlash from ones’ comrades and fellow unit members. Hugo is also frustrated by others who spoke out;

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<sup>252</sup> National Serviceman interview, 18.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>254</sup> John Dovey interview, 6.

<sup>255</sup> Frans van Niekerk interview, 31.

<sup>256</sup> Hugo, 210.

because he believes they were selective with the truth.<sup>257</sup> To him, it was an uncomplicated condition: either they turn their back on apartheid, or they do not.

Hesom is frustrated by censorship during the war; however, it was the persistence of secrecy after the war that contributed to his resentment towards the SADF. He describes his return to civilian life where he could not speak about what he saw or did during his national service due to the Securities Act.<sup>258</sup> He describes it as a document everyone were forced to sign shortly before leaving for the border, which meant “under penalty of law, if it was found that we were divulging military secrets to anybody, we would be jailed for treason.”<sup>259</sup> When the soldiers returned home, they were unable to communicate and express themselves properly without revealing information. This led to an even greater societal divide between the veterans and civilians. Many of the veterans’ difficult experiences were misunderstood and forgotten. These difficult circumstances greatly affected Hesom and many others who and contributed to his decision to write this book 20 years after his service ended.

The elite versions of events are rarely negative towards their unit or SADF while these national servicemen use the opportunity to explain why they have remained silent. In their interviews with Cadman, they express what they believed at the time, what they were told, and what happened to them. They did not experience fighting in Angola to the same extent as the elites; therefore they have less information to provide on the controversies such as the Cassinga raid or the Battles of Cuito Cuanavale. The SADF had enforced their silence, however, even once there was no legislation to stop them from publishing after 1994 the veterans found other reasons to remain quiet. It was imbued in

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<sup>257</sup> Hugo, 211.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid, 186.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid, 186.

them to the extent that silence became their natural reaction to the controversy over the war in the following decade. For the national servicemen who were approached by the *Missing Voices Project*, they decided to speak out because it was important for the public to know and remember the correct version of the war, one that they know better due to their involvement.

In addition, John Dovey's interview speculates on the trend of publishing by the veterans of the Border War. Cadman asked "why it is now that there appears to be a trend that people want to start telling their stories?"<sup>260</sup> He responds that he believes these veterans are now in their forties, in their mid-life crisis, and their children are old enough to ask them what they did in the war. He clarifies that these circumstances meant the veterans also became consumers of the literature. "I know that what I'm selling now there was not a market for this five years ago. There's all of a sudden a market."<sup>261</sup> The veteran's time in the army was a defining moment for them. For the most part, Dovey believes these men were generally quite proud of their service as a life-defining personal experience. Some veterans only realized that they could write their memoirs after journalist Peter Stiff exposed many covert SADF actions in *The Silent War*. As a direct result of Stiff's book, Dovey mentions the specific examples of Paul Els and Jack Greeff who feel they can publish without concern over secrecy. Dovey reiterates Greeff's conversation with him: "the only reason that he could tell his story is because some of the detail that he thought was too secret to speak about had already been brought up by Paul and by Peter Stiff."<sup>262</sup> Dovey states their motivation to write, despite the risk, is because

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<sup>260</sup> John Dovey interview, 28.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>262</sup> John Dovey interview, 29.

they feel they know the facts and want to change the way other people incorrectly viewed the war.

Dovey's exclusive viewpoint as a publisher of these books demonstrates that there are many factors involved, various trends, and difficulties in decision making process of the soldiers. His message, along with those of National Serviceman, Sven Kreher, Frans van Niekerk, Ross Hesom and Gerrie Hugo, establishes that they did not have the same message as those of the elites. Their intentions for writing or speaking out are not based on their own reputation, inclination for social status, or need to counter what was said about them, the SADF or specific actions or events in the war.

The national servicemen focus on their own experience of the war and discuss their personal contentions with the war. This is in contrast with the group-focused nature of the elite accounts. The non-elites do not feel the need to defend or explain their actions in the war because they were not publicly incriminated in the controversies or rumours to the same extent as the elites. There are specific features of the elite identity of the Parabats, Recces and 32 Battalion. These are the intensity of their pride in their unit and their soldiering abilities, their acceptance of the SADF's reasoning of the war and South Africa's role in it, their assertion of themselves as soldiers not politicians, and the ANC and apartheid do not connect to the Border War discourse, whilst fighting in the war was an important life experience for them and they fought alongside black soldiers for the protection of all South Africans. The books and interviews of the six national servicemen provide a divergent view from that of the elites.

Unlike the well-defined sense of an elite unit culture, the national servicemen do not indicate a strong sense of identification with a specific unit. The national servicemen

do not emphasize the quality or level of their skills as fighting soldiers, which show it was the prerogative of the elites to make these topics their focus. The national servicemen express the importance of the friendships they developed; however that is not the focus of their accounts. Compared to the emphasis place on it by the elites, their unit is not what the national servicemen want to highlight regarding their Border War memories.

The non-elite had a limited experience of operation duty and combat, which means they did not experience or see the same amount of action in Angola as the elites, therefore are not aware of the clandestine operations. Their units do not establish, to the same extent, their unique culture and identity with colors, berets, and symbols that they could show off with authority on trips back home. The politics and reasons for the war are explained by the national servicemen in vague terms. As soldiers, they believe the ideological and political were not their concern. Except for Hugo and Hesom, apartheid and the ANC were not part of their experience of the war. More often than the elites, they question what the SADF told them about the war effort, especially the extent of the communist threat.

These national servicemen are very conscious of the issue of secrecy because it was a challenging aspect of their post-war experience. Some of them went back to normalcy and no longer spoke about the war, while others chose the opposite extreme and revealed the secrets of the war before it was customary to do so. Hugo's disagreement with the SADF led to his self-exiled status and anti-SADF memoirs. The elites do not have these same variations; they are all actively pro SADF. They do, however, express their disheartenment over the disbandment of the SADF and certain

battalions, the lack of recognition and the political maneuverings they believe led to their alleged loss of the war.

The national servicemen's narratives are overall more compatible with each other compared to the way that the elite interviews disagree with the elite books. The books of Hugo and Hesom focus more attention on the SADF's manipulation, indoctrination, and immoral mismanagement of its soldiers. They discuss the connection of the Border War to the apartheid system. The interviewees want to tell their personal stories, as well as discuss their frustrations over the secrecy surrounding the war. The national servicemen are the most conscious of what has not been said about the war, including refusals surrounding township duty, the problematic lawlessness of the Special Forces, the racism that existed within the SADF, the English-Afrikaner stereotypes, and the apartheid connection to their fighting in Angola. This was the national servicemen's attempt to sort out the legacy of the SADF as it affected them in post-war, post-apartheid and post-TRC South Africa.

The national servicemen provide scope for the broader spectrum of perspectives and discourse on the Border War. They demonstrate their understanding of events that the elites' perspective is too narrow and implicated to substantiate on its own. These national servicemen accounts prove that there are distinctive characteristics that define the elites. The national servicemen transmit a broader range of qualities in their writing that reflect their non-elite status. Kreher's point that he was not part of a politicized unit indicates that the elite units were the ones who were political and would not readily share their perspective and knowledge of the war. What they were willing to write and say compared to the information provided by the elites differed in ways that indicate the elites have a

specific focus in their books to revive their reputation within the same socio-cultural military context that existed during the war.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Following the SADF withdrawal from Angola/Namibia, white South African veterans began reconstructing what took place during the war through personal narrative or participation in oral history work. They have stories of trauma and victimhood, perspectives that have remained entrenched in the past, confrontations with uncomfortable truths, and undisclosed information they no longer wish to conceal. All these accounts have several important factors in common. Those who have revived the Border War discourse are white ex-SADF members, from the Chiefs of the SADF to the unenthusiastic conscripts. They all want some form of public audience to tell what happened to them. They all have aspects of the Border War history to contest, and they do so retrospectively within a post-apartheid, post-SADF and post-Cold War South Africa.

The Border War's significance to these men under discussion can be attributed to its aftermath. The independence of Namibia, its democratic elections and the consequent parallels in South Africa altered the socio-political landscape of the veterans' white communities. From the veterans' perspective, the changes were rapid, unexpected and momentous. Many veterans had considered the ANC to be their primary enemy and yet the ANC became their government after the war. The comparisons between the three main perspectives of the generals, elite soldiers and national servicemen reveal the distinctions of their varied understanding of the politics, the controversies, and their personal role in the war.

These ex-SADF members explain the politics of the Border War in various degrees of detail. The vagueness of the national servicemen in their explanations of who

they were fighting shows how little concern they had for the politics of the war. Some of them did, however, react when they were sent into the townships because they could no longer rationalize the communist threat. Upon reflection, they criticize the SADF's exaggeration of communism. They question why they had fought at all. The national servicemen, especially Hugo, express a stance greatly opposed to that of the elites.

The generals are on the other extreme of the political spectrum. They provide detailed accounts and are confident in their knowledge of their enemies and why they were fighting. They believe in the reasoning behind the war effort and express no misgivings upon reflection. They argue that the SADF performed dutifully and achieved its goals. This is similar to the elites, and both groupings readily explain how they were apolitical actors that followed orders to the best of their abilities.

These differences highlight divergent roles within the SADF and attachment to the military. To become an elite or general you had to have the desire to be a more significant part of the war. The foundation of the elites' motivation in the war became the other members of their unit and the adventure of the war effort itself.<sup>263</sup> Loyalty to their unit was a significant aspect of this war for the elites. The national servicemen experienced camaraderie and friendships that they maintained after the war, which were of great importance to them. The generals were intensely loyal to the military. This was the social context within the war and it has shaped their reflections on their military service.

The worse consequence for an ex-SADF member if he spoke out against the SADF would be the response of their brothers-in-arms. This was Hugo's experience after he asserted his contrary views on numerous public occasions and was forced to "hide

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<sup>263</sup> William Minter, "The Armoured Bubble" 50, 3 (December 2007), 152.

from the wrath of my comrades of old.”<sup>264</sup> Those who have remained connected and attached to their friendships, units and the military repeat the same

Each group had its own reason why it speaks out about the controversies surrounding the war. The elites have been the focus of major controversy, and in the aftermath of the war each unit feels specifically targeted. The controversies include the paratroopers’ attack on Cassinga, the Recces’ covert cross-border operations and reputation as psychopathic puppy-killers, and the 32 Battalion’s status as a secretive force within Angola that was considered an unconventional foreign entity. These were the controversies and negative representations of their units which the elites chose to contest. Their views on the controversies defend their unit’s reputation, in which they are deeply invested.

For the generals, their controversies were on a greater scale as they confronted the major aspects of the SADF’s involvement in Angola, Namibia and the townships. They mainly refute the negative press and media’s attacks on them and create a sense of their own, along with the SADF’s, victimhood in the implications that they were involved in the political decision-making. They were personally implicated in the secrecy, censorship and involvement in the political decision-making concerning the war. The generals were vague in their references to the media, the public and foreign critics, in that they did not specify who or where the criticisms were coming from. They create a scenario, in which they were under a constant barrage of criticism, which attempted to show that the SADF could do nothing right and the whole world was against them. They want to improve their public image and reassure those who agree with them by making the same strong arguments in favor of the SADF’s intentions and role in the war.

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<sup>264</sup> Hugo, 210.

The national servicemen did not feel criticized; in fact they were more likely to make the same criticisms. They engaged in reflections and critiques of the SADF's actions. They discussed the connection of the defence of apartheid to the war, their frustrations with the secrecy imposed on them, their refusals to comply with township duty and how racism took place within the SADF.

The conflicting accounts of the three perspectives show the controversies with which the veterans now have to contend. They represent a broad spectrum of controversial topics, which shows the multitude of reasons that could motivate former SADF members to participate in the Border War discourse. Some accounts try to remove the negative image of themselves as perpetrators. The national servicemen are more likely to be the ones making the accusations. Hugo accuses the SADF of defending apartheid. Hesom, Dovey and Kreher question the extent of the communist threat. Unlike the generals and the elites, the national servicemen were not defensive nor did they profess any sense of negative press. This contrasts with that the generals and elites who project a specific narrative intended to reflect positively on the SADF and their roles in the Border conflict.

The resentment of the elites towards the politicians is a result of their level of dedication to the war effort. They suspect the politicians of conspiracies and accuse them of working directly against their military success. The elites do not feel they had done anything wrong in the war. Township duty showed their loyalty to the government, which they feel was betrayed when 32 Battalion was disbanded. Their plight was blamed on their abandonment by their politicians in Pretoria.

The SADF generals express no concerns over the undoing of the apartheid regime, the loss of Namibia, or the arrival of the ANC as the new dispensation. They assert that they achieved their goals, since the SADF was apolitical; its task was to create favourable conditions for political negotiations. Geldenhuys and Meiring state that they had no part in the political decision making process, while Malan passes responsibility on to Pik Botha and maintained that the politics and the military of South Africa were distinct entities.

The national servicemen profess no enduring loyalty to the SADF. They do not feel abandoned or betrayed by the SADF to the same extent as the elites. Some are disillusioned with the government while others bring up new issues such as PTSD, the issues of secrecy, and racism within the SADF. The national servicemen are not as concerned as the elites or as positive as the generals, instead they are frustrated by the government and the SADF that they were not provided support in the aftermath of the war. The generals, the elites and the national servicemen all believe that if South Africa's force had not been restricted by the government they could have defeated their enemies.

The generals' arguments are the most consistent. Malan, Geldenhuys and Meiring echo each other when they discuss the SADF's disconnect from politics in Pretoria and how their aim was to create the scenario in which peaceful political negotiations could take place and allow for Namibian independence. The national servicemen's accounts are much less uniform. They do not have the same sense of common unit culture or the reputation as the elites. They question and contest what the SADF told them and discuss topics that are not mentioned by the elites and generals.

The elite status of their unit was formative in the young conscript soldiers' identities. Their elite unit defined their role, their unit culture, their social experience, the controversies for which they would be held responsible, the action they would see in Angola, and the operations in which they could participate. When the reflections of the elites differed, the divide was between those who had authored military memoirs against the interviewees of the *Missing Voices Project*.

The oral history work adopts a different tone than the publications in terms of their intentions for their participation in the Border War discourse. The oral history interviewees do not have a well-defined message to convey. They want to overcome the secrecy surrounding the war, add to and contend with the existing perspectives on the war, and pursue their own therapeutic nostalgia as they make public how the war affected them. The elite authors have a greater intent and dedication to tell a specific version of the war, one that is based on their own reputation, their desire to counter negative views of their actions and unit, and their interest in gaining recognition for their unit.

This survey of the first-hand perspectives of white South African soldiers and generals on their participation in the Border War has interpreted their reconstructions of the war. Through this process, the distinctions between them have been exposed. The main categorizations are the generals, elites and national servicemen as well as those who participated in oral history interviews versus published books. Distinguishing these features clarifies how each account approaches the Border War and where the new publications and interviews fit within the discourse.

The few who decided to partake in this discourse have provided a glimpse into the impact this war had on a whole generation of white South African men. They indicate

why this history was revived and is now an ever-increasing genre for publication.<sup>265</sup> This was a defining moment in many of their lives. For example, Diedericks wrote his book primarily for his daughters to understand his role in the war before he died. The fact that his memoirs were focused on his time in the war shows the extent to which it was a significant portion of his life. Many feel the need to justify their actions due to the negative media and press, the controversies, and the contested nature of the war. Others were influenced by the imposition of secrecy during the war to remain silent afterwards. The publications and veterans who urge each other to write have created a trend that others continue to follow. There are efforts by some, mainly the elites and the generals, to propagate a specific version of the war that views the individual's unit and/or the SADF with every possible positive spin. These accounts attempt to counter the negative implications of what has been written or said about the SADF.

The authors and interviewees attempt to renegotiate and reconcile what their identity was within the military with their contemporary realities.<sup>266</sup> This process is common for all ex-combatants, but made all the more complex due to the significant political changes taking place within their society. The South African social and political context in the aftermath of the war led many soldiers to feel abandoned and betrayed by their government, believe their politicians conspired against them, withhold their experiences of the war, doubt the war effort, feel defensive of their role in the war, and rely on their fellow veterans as the only ones with whom they could confide and reminisce. This post-war situation is specific to South Africa and the veterans, especially

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<sup>265</sup> Eve Fairbanks, "Trophies and Treasured Times" (*Mail & Guardian*, 25 Nov. 2011. Mail & Guardian Online. 8 Jun. 2012. <<http://mg.co.za/article/2011-11-25-trophies-and-treasured-times>>).

<sup>266</sup> Baines, *Beyond the Border War*, 260.

the generals, profess their feelings of victimization. Few soldiers express regret over their actions during the war, instead, they are nostalgic and reminisce with positivity.

Since the majority of accounts that have appeared are from the elite battalions, many are reliving the social status and recognition they experienced while in their respective units. At the moment, the white South African veterans are the ones writing the history of the Border War. Though there is not a wide body of research on this topic and it without doubt requires further study, the perspective of the white South Africans is coming through to a greater extent than any others who experienced the war. The next endeavour of Mike Cadman's oral history work will be the black perspective within the SADF. As of yet, however, it is the white community that is revisiting this war and many of them have a vested interest in reconstructing this history.

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