

## COMING TO TERMS WITH THE “BORDER WAR”

### IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

GARY BAINES

National Arts Festival, Winter School Lecture, 1 July 2008

If you are a white, male South African between the ages of about 35 and 60 it is very likely that you donned the nutria brown uniform of the South African Defence Force (SADF).<sup>1</sup> Between 1967 and 1994 approximately 300 000 young white males were conscripted by the SADF. As far as most of these conscripts were concerned, there was no option other than heeding the call-up and performing national service or *diensplig*. Failure to do so meant harsh penalties. The alternatives were to object on conscientious (actually religious) grounds and face a six year jail sentence, or flee the country. And the obligation did not end with national service as conscripts were assigned to citizen force or commando units that were liable for periodical call-ups for camps that might have included deployment in the “operational areas” from 1974 or tours of duty in the black townships from 1984. Those - like myself - belonging to this national service generation were part-time soldiers for much of their adult lives. Most served willingly, some with patriotic fervour. Others did so reluctantly and with little enthusiasm.

The SADF gradually extended the period of conscription from 9 months to two years as increased manpower demands were made upon a cohort of white males. If conscription was the only form of discrimination against young white males,<sup>2</sup> it was certainly not universally resented. Indeed, many (including some mothers) welcomed national service as a rite of passage whereby boys became men. However, conscription caused considerable political “fallout” on account of the growing number of casualties in SADF ranks. The toll of those killed while on active duty or during national service remains unclear.<sup>3</sup> But there can be little doubt that the National Service generation paid a price for defending the system of white rule (whilst those who collaborated with or who were co-opted by the SADF have paid a much greater price). Yet, even from the mid-1980s when the call-up entailed the possibility of patrolling the townships, it was still regarded by the majority of conscripts (and their

families) as a necessary commitment to make in order to ensure the continuation of white power and privilege.

The term “Border War” or *Grensoorlog* assigned to the conflict waged in Angola/Namibia was ubiquitous in white South African public discourse during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>4</sup> As a social construct it encoded the views of (most) whites who believed the apartheid regime’s rhetoric that the SADF was shielding its citizens from the “*rooi/swart gevaar*”; the supposed coterminous threat of communism and black nationalism. When the military conflict ended in 1988 and national service was subsequently phased out, former soldiers found themselves having to make sense of the time they spent in uniform. Many could not understand why they had been asked to sacrifice so much only to surrender power to those whom they had previously regarded as “the enemy”. Some were convinced that their erstwhile leaders had betrayed them. However, most remained silent: either out of a (misguided?) sense of loyalty to the old regime and fellow soldiers, or for fear of being brought to book by the new government. This became readily apparent when few “ordinary” ex-SADF soldiers testified before the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

The meaning of the “Border War” is not fixed; it has had to be constantly renegotiated during the country’s transition. This lecture asks how conscripts have chosen to remember their experiences of the “Border War” in view of the changing political landscape to which they have had to adjust. For it now seems that many are prepared to disavow “political correctness” and reconciliation. Some former national servicemen have insisted that they won the war (when they actually only won some of the battles/engagements). They have taken to rehearsing the arguments of retired generals who hold that by fighting the Cubans, Russians and the liberation movements, the SADF held the line until communism collapsed and thus made a political transition under more favourable circumstances possible. They have expressed the view that their contribution to building the “new” South Africa has not been recognized.<sup>5</sup> Are such astounding/extraordinary claims an attempt to ensure that the victors’ version of the story of the “Border War” does not prevail? How are we to understand their perspectives on the past?

In the remainder of this lecture I propose to examine how former SADF conscripts have sought to come to terms with their experiences by way of: (1) inserting themselves into the history of the “Border War” on the printed page, (2) establishing alternative forums in cyberspace for disseminating their stories; and (3) contesting the official version of the past commemorated in public spaces such as Freedom Park.

As was the case with the *grensliteratuur* of the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>6</sup> aspirant writers during South Africa’s transition produced texts with an autobiographical component when seeking to make sense of their experiences of the war. Mark Behr’s novel *Die Reuk van Appels* (1993) - translated as *The Smell of Apples* (1995) - tells of a young white Afrikaans-speaking boy being groomed to follow in his father’s footsteps as a soldier in the militarized society that was apartheid South Africa. It frames the Border War within “a brutal patriarchy that victimizes mothers and sons”.<sup>7</sup> The timing of the author’s revelation that he served as a spy for the security forces while a student at the University of Stellenbosch so as to coincide with the publication of his book, underlined the cathartic purpose of Behr’s writing. His confessional narrative functions as an admission of guilt and act of exculpation on his part. But such “confessional fiction” is invariably ambivalent and frequently accommodates rather than confronts the culpability of the author.<sup>8</sup> For confessing complicity is not the same as admitting culpability.

Few former national servicemen deigned to testify before the TRC because most believed the institution to be politically biased and that they stood to be vilified if they admitted to human rights abuses. They were wary and suspicious of the TRC despite its assurance that the testimonies given during its hearings were “neither an attempt to look for perpetrators, nor a process that will lead to the awarding of victim status.”<sup>9</sup> Karen Whitty explains their reluctance to testify in the following terms:

Bound by a sense of honour to their fellow troops, and the patriarchy still espoused by white South Africa, few men have

come forward and spoken about their experiences, however barbaric and mundane, in South Africa's border wars.<sup>10</sup>

Some reported that the lack of public knowledge about the war created suspicion of their stories, while others were summarily dismissed as sympathy seekers or outright liars by former SADF generals and their apologists.<sup>11</sup> Thus ex-soldiers felt betrayed when the very authorities that they were convinced would defend them and provide security left them in the lurch. If trauma involves a betrayal of trust and the abuse of relations of power,<sup>12</sup> then it is not surprising that many veterans embraced silence and victimhood. Consequently, the TRC “left the experiences of ‘ordinary’ soldiers largely invisible - not merely forgotten but ‘wished away’” as a report of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) declares.<sup>13</sup>

Official amnesia was reinforced by war veterans’ self-imposed silence. However, this does not necessarily imply that former conscripts were able to deal with their own sense of guilt. Tony Eprile’s novel *The Persistence of Memory* (2005), addresses the manner in which the memories of “ordinary” soldiers come back to haunt them. Eprile has his narrator-protagonist (an inept soldier and something of an anti-hero), Paul Sweetbread, testify before the TRC as a rebuttal witness to former SADF Captain (now Major) Lyddie who claims amnesty for atrocities committed after a ceasefire had effectively terminated South Africa’s occupation of Namibia. Lyddie had implicated Sweetbread in a calculated massacre of PLAN (Peoples’ Liberation Army of Namibia) combatants returning home from across the border following the announcement of the ceasefire. Lyddie’s self defence amounted to offering stock answers and eschewing responsibility for his actions: “War is war. It is not a picnic. When elephants fight, the grass and trees suffer.” He claimed to regret any loss of life but insisted that his job was to defend his country and his people. “We all believed in what we were doing,” he says pointedly, “That’s why we gave the best years of our lives to the army”.<sup>14</sup> The story serves to illustrate the dilemma faced by conscripts if they fingered their superior officers in war crimes in which they themselves were implicated. They were not about to admit culpability for the very acts for which their superior officers repudiated any responsibility. This might prove self-

incriminating if the new government pursued recrimination rather than restitution.

Since the political transition, there have appeared a number of publications in English penned by former conscripts who relate stories about aspects of military service in the SADF. These include Barry Fowler's *Pro Patria* (1995), Anthony Feinstein's *In Conflict* (1998), Rick Andrew's *Buried in the Sky* (2001). Clive Holt's *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter* (2005), and Steven Webb's *Ops Medic: A National Serviceman's Border War* (2008). It would appear that the passage of time for reflection has given soldier-authors the space to understand their experiences and shape them into narratives. A number have undoubtedly found their writing cathartic and thereby achieved a degree healing and reintegration into post-war society. Others are still dealing with traumatic memories. These confessional texts of (sometimes) reluctant soldiers seldom admit complicity in upholding the apartheid system, and in the event they do it is not on account of ideological convictions or patriotism but rather because they believed that they were duty bound to do so. Their life stories are told as if they were devoid of a political context.

The most popular of the "confessional" texts has proved to be Jacqui Thompson's collection of conscripts' reminiscences published under the title *An Unpopular War* (2006).<sup>15</sup> It is an inappropriate title as the Border War was never unpopular amongst the majority of conscripts or with the white populace at large. However, citizen force members increasingly sought to evade call-ups, especially when they were pressed into backing the South African Police (SAP) efforts at crushing resistance in the townships. Even during successive states of emergency during the 1980s, military service was still regarded by the majority as a necessary price to pay for white rule.<sup>16</sup> The moral ambiguity conferred on the war by white South Africans has happened retrospectively. Many of those who once supported the war do not now think it was worth fighting and this is evident in some of the stories told to Thompson. These stories are recounted with a blend of honesty and self-delusion, candour and scepticism, and self-deprecating humour. Some are suffused in nostalgia for the "good old days" while, contrarily, evincing a modicum of guilt about the

part that the narrators played as perpetrators of violence and terror. But the overwhelming impression is that these ex-soldiers see themselves as having simply performed their duties.

Obviously not all soldiers who wish to tell their stories have managed to get into print. Thus some SADF veterans have ventured into the apparently neutral terrain of cyberspace to tell stories that might be deemed “politically incorrect” in the “new” South Africa. For them the camaraderie of cyberspace has largely replaced bonding/drinking sessions in pubs and reunions of veterans’ associations. In fact, these informal networks (often via email listservs or websites hosted outside of the country) serve as something like virtual veterans’ associations. Such veterans have established a network of sites to exchange memories and, in some cases, provide platforms for advice on matters like PTSD.<sup>17</sup> They constitute “cyber-communities” in which hyperlinks, multiple postings, and cross-citations facilitate communication between individuals who shared similar experiences. Certain web authors and their readers share membership of a “virtual” community that serves to validate their identities as erstwhile soldiers.

Why should former SADF national servicemen have gravitated to the internet in order to share their stories? Do they see themselves as contesting their invisibility in post-apartheid South Africa occasioned by their forgotten war and what Sasha Gear calls the “silence of stigmatized knowledge”?<sup>18</sup> Such knowledge maintains an uncertain status even though it might enjoy wide circulation in the ether or other unregulated networks of communication. However, groups sidelined in the realm of *realpolitik* are unable to challenge the consensus or prevailing silence established and maintained by cultural and political brokers. This is because virtual communities remain on the fringes of the power brokering of interest groups and political elites.<sup>19</sup> These ex-conscripts have created internet sites that mostly disclaim political affiliations, although a few webmasters advertise their (invariably right-wing) political orientations and reminisce nostalgically about their time in the army. They have arguably contested the prevalence of legitimate/official knowledge,

and created the (cyber)space to make their previously discredited voices heard in post-apartheid South Africa.

The earnestness of this quest by conscripts for reaffirmation of their contribution to the “new” South Africa is suggested by the recent controversy over the Freedom Park memorial wall. Rather than adopt the SADF memorial at Fort Klapperkop built to honour all those who had lost their lives in defence of the Republic of South Africa<sup>20</sup> as their own, veterans have ignored its very existence. Indeed, many would now probably regard it as a symbol of the futile sacrifices made to sustain a regime that did little to acknowledge their efforts. Unlike the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial Wall in Washington D.C., it does not serve as a place of remembrance or mourning for friends and families of the deceased. The Fort Klapperkop memorial is barely known to ex-servicemen’s organization, let alone the general public. When the Freedom Park Trust announced the erection of a wall of names to honour those who had fought for freedom and humanity at the site on the crest of Salvokop, a pressure group led by Afriforum executive Kallie Kriel and singer Steve Hofmeyr sought to have the names of “Border War” veterans killed while fighting for their country included in the roll of honour. The group also objected to the fact that the memorial wall was to include the names of Cuban soldiers who died in Angola fighting the SADF.<sup>21</sup> Their request for “fair treatment” was dismissed by Wally Serote, the CEO of the Freedom Park Trust, on the grounds that SADF soldiers had fought to preserve apartheid and defeat the struggle for liberation.<sup>22</sup>

The group responded to this perceived snub by erecting its own memorial at the access road to Salvokop in January 2007.<sup>23</sup> The plaque mounted on the memorial bears the following inscription:

“For All Those Who Fell heeding the Call of Their Country... including those whose names are not on the Freedom Park wall. So We May never Forget the Dearly Fought Freedom of all Ideologies, Credos, and Cultures and their Respective Contributions to our rich South African Heritage.”

Hofmeyr and his supporters correctly recognise that those groups that are relegated to the margins of society and whose histories become peripheral to that of the nation are likely to become politically powerless in the present. For the question of whose version of history becomes institutionalised is a political one.<sup>24</sup> But he fails to realise that the sharing of a common history is itself a form of manipulating the past to serve a political purpose. This is evident from the plaque's explanation of the alternative memorial's symbolism:

“This triangular monument's various sides symbolise the fact that history is not one-sided. It is erected to ensure that those who will, as a result of Freedom Park's one sided usage of history are not being honoured, will get the recognition they deserve. Even though this monument does not cost the R16 million that Freedom Park cost,<sup>25</sup> it is a sincere effort to pay homage to those who died in conflicts.”

It then, rather pointedly, quotes a statement attributed to Serote: “Because at the depth of the heart of every man beats the love for freedom.” The citation of the Freedom Park CEO suggests Serote's insincerity and even hypocrisy in not including SADF members on the wall of names. The erection of this cheap counter-memorial was a token but symbolic act by a group of former SADF national servicemen protesting the exclusiveness of Freedom Park's remembrance of conflicts in the country's past. And their case that the Trust has been inconsistent in paying tribute to fallen heroes seems to be borne out by the fact that combatants on both sides of the South African (or Anglo-Boer) War are included on the wall of names.

To conclude: It has been my contention that ex-SADF national servicemen believe that they have not been acknowledged for doing their duties and making sacrifices on behalf of their country. They obviously believe that the time is right for a re-evaluation of their roles in the country's recent conflict. Some wish to rid themselves of the shame of being regarded as vanquished soldiers. Others have embraced victimhood so as to disassociate themselves from being seen as complicit in an oppressive system. My appraisal (and tone?) does not amount to an outright rejection of such claims but rather insists that they be subjected to critical scrutiny. Neither silence nor ignorance is conducive to coming to terms with the “Border War”.



---

<sup>1</sup> This statement requires some qualification as the call-up was extended to “coloureds” and Indians after the creation of the tricameral parliament that accorded these groups token rights and added responsibilities of citizenship. White Namibians were also conscripted by the SADF and from 1980 national service was extended to all races (excluding Owambos because they were deemed to be Swapo supporters) who were assigned to the South West African Territory Force (SWATF) and Koevoet.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Vale, ‘The Cold War and South Africa: Repetitions and Revisions on a Prolegomenon’ in G. Baines & P. Vale (eds), *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa’s Late-Cold War Conflicts* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008), p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> In a statement to Parliament in 1982, the then Minister of Defence Magnus Malan reckoned that the SADF had a casualty rate of 0,012% (or 12 in every 100 000) of the average daily strength of its armed forces in South West Africa. It is not clear whether this figure includes casualties from accidents and suicides but this figure is a gross underestimate of the actual situation. My research suggests that the number of national servicemen who died in accidents or by their own hand whilst in uniform outnumbered those killed in action by about 3:1 and that the total number of troops killed during the 1970s and 1980s numbered about 5 000. This figure does not include black members of the SADF or its surrogate forces. Willem Steenkamp’s estimate of 715 SADF personnel killed in action between 1974-88 is clearly too low. See his ‘The Citizen Soldier in the Border War’, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3 (December 2006), p. 20. John Dovey’s Roll of Honour lists 1 986 SADF members killed on active duty over the period 1964-94 (but has no data for 1980 & 1981). See [http://www.justdone.co.za/ROH/stats\\_Static.htm](http://www.justdone.co.za/ROH/stats_Static.htm). Peter Stiff’s roll of honour of those killed in active service (see Appendix to Steven Webb, *Ops Medic: A National Serviceman’s Border War* (Alberton: Galago, 2008) is based on the names listed at Fort Klapperkop supplemented by his own research. His tally is more than that of Dovey and about double that of Steenkamp.

<sup>4</sup> I have attempted to unpack the multiple meanings of the term in my Introduction to Baines & Vale, *Beyond the Border War*, pp. 5-8.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, ‘Some Thoughts of a NSM!!!’, *Army Talk Magazine* (Just Done Publications), Issue #1, April 2008, pp. 12-13, reproduced as Appendix N in Jan Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike! The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga 1978* (Sandton: Manie Grove Publishing, 2008), pp. 585-7.

<sup>6</sup> Henriette Roos, ‘Writing from Within: The Representation of the Border War in South African Literature’ in Baines & Vale, *Beyond the Border War*, p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> Lesley Marx, ‘Bodies and Borders: Vietnam/Namibia’, *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, vol. 8, 1 (2007), p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Henriette Roos, ‘Die Afrikaanse Prosa 1998 – 2003’, in H.P. van Coller (ed), *Perspektief en Profiel Deel 3* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2006), p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> *TRC Report*, vol. 4, p. 221.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Whitty, Review of Clive Holt, *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter*, Accessed on 22 August 2005,

[http://www.iafrica.com/pls/procs/SEARCH.ARCHIVE?p\\_content\\_id=474801&p\\_site\\_id=2](http://www.iafrica.com/pls/procs/SEARCH.ARCHIVE?p_content_id=474801&p_site_id=2).

<sup>11</sup> For instance the testimony of conscript Kevin Hall has been carefully scrutinised and rebutted by Hilton Hamann, *Days of the General* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2001), pp. 221-3 and Magnus Malan, *My lewe saam met die SA Weermag* (Pretoria: Protea, 2006), pp. 474-6.

<sup>12</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2003, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Sasha Gear, *Wishing Us Away: Challenges facing ex-combatants in the ‘new’ South Africa* (Johannesburg: CSV, 2002), accessed on 14 June 2006, <http://www.wits.ac.za/csvr/papers/papvtp8e.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Tony Epriple, *The Persistence of Memory* (Cape Town: Juta & Co, 2004), p. 252.

<sup>15</sup> J.H. Thompson, *An Unpopular War: From Afkak to Bosbefok: voices of South African national servicemen* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2006) went through six reprints in almost as many months and was subsequently translated into Afrikaans as *Dit was oorlog: van afkak to bosbefok: Suid-Afrikaanse dienspligtes praat* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> This is borne out by numerous surveys of white public opinion undertaken by independent agencies and the Defence Ministry’s public relations division.

---

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Army Talk at <http://moo.sun.ac.za/mailman/listinfo/armytalk/> which hosted a chatroom utilised mainly by ex- Citizen Force SADF members. But it is likely that such sites are also accessed by military buffs, as well as veterans of South Africa's and other recent wars. These sites are obviously male domains. This site seems to have been shut down or relocated, and its mailing list discontinued.

<sup>18</sup> Sasha Gear, 'The Road Back: Psycho-social Strains of Transition for South Africa's Ex-combatants' in Baines & Vale, *Beyond the Border War*, p. 254.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Barkun, *A culture of conspiracy: apocalyptic visions in contemporary America* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 185-6.

<sup>20</sup> *Paratus* Special Supplement, vol. 30. no. 7 (July 1979).

<sup>21</sup> This is now a fait accompli as the names of more than 2 000 Cuban soldiers have since been added to the wall.

<sup>22</sup> *Pretoria News*, 17 January 2007 ('Include us, says ex-SADF members').

<sup>23</sup> *The Herald*, 17 January 2007 ('Alternative 'freedom' wall unveiled').

<sup>24</sup> David Glassberg, 'Public History and the Study of Memory', *The Public Historian*, 18, 2 (Spring 1996), p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> The figure has apparently now reached R762 million.