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SADF veterans' digital memories  
and dissenting discourses**

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## **A Virtual Community? SADF veterans' digital memories and dissenting discourses**

**Gary Baines**

The Internet has its origins in the common language of binary digits and data communication mechanisms.<sup>1</sup> However, its development has been closely tied to the conditions and practices of public discourse.<sup>2</sup> Social discourses are not neutral or innocent; the worldview of many information and communication technology (ICT) pioneers was informed by a teleology of technological progress. However, this utopian vision was contradicted by the realities of a Cold War and the prospect of nuclear apocalypse. The digital computer technology that made the Internet possible was developed for the United States military, an institution whose culture was embedded in the Cold War's "closed-world discourses". Paul Edwards defines these as "the language, technologies and practices that together supported the visions of centrally controlled, automated global power at the heart of American Cold War politics". Edwards reckons that the Cold War and computer systems had a symbiotic relationship: the latter were developed to promote military objectives which provided justification for massive government spending. But the same systems, in turn, justified the discourse of the Cold War; they sustained the fantasy of a closed world subject to technological control. Edwards emphasizes what he calls the "technological construction of social worlds".<sup>3</sup> However, he ignores another trend of the late 1960s and 1970s whereby digital technology was subverted by the so-called "Netizens"<sup>4</sup> who sought to make the Internet an open resource. The most optimistic amongst them envisaged a "brave new world" in which

Worldwide connectivity will eradicate physical and political boundaries .... The levelling nature of online interaction as well as the universalization of information access will foster democratization ... the decentered nature of hypertext will further erode the existence of limiting hierarchies; and the engaging power and linking capabilities of multimedia will revolutionize learning ...<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Commonly referred to as TCP/IP, an abbreviation which stands for Transmission Control of Protocol/Internet Protocol. For a technical explanation of these terms, see Mark Sportack, *TCP/IP First-Step* (Cisco Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Phil Agre, 'The Internet and Public Discourse', *First Monday*, 3 (2 March, 1998), <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/581/502> (accessed 28 November 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), passim.

<sup>4</sup> A term coined to describe ordinary citizens (denizens?) who have adopted the internet as their chosen means of communication and source of information. They exhibit a deep distrust of the old media which are reckoned to be dominated by monopolies and have close relations with governments.

<sup>5</sup> Randy Bass cited in Ron Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired: The Future of the Past in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 157.

These techno-enthusiasts circumvented the closed system developed by the military-industrial-academic complex and turned it into a decentralised and interactive communication network. In other words, the Internet was “shaped both by the closed world discourse of the Cold War and the open world discourse of the antiwar movement and the counterculture”.<sup>6</sup> These countervailing tendencies still characterize the Internet, and explain why it seems an inchoate social phenomenon despite its reliance on technical precision.<sup>7</sup>

The Internet only came of age following the Vietnam War. The war was followed by the stigmatization of the US Vietnam veteran and ‘a portentous silence’.<sup>8</sup> If “the silence and disinterest of the many empower the few to shape the memory of the past for all”, as Ehrenhaus and Morris contend,<sup>9</sup> who then defines how the American public views the Vietnam War? Who are ‘the few’ to whom they refer? Typically, we would be inclined to designate the political elites and cultural brokers who are able to influence the government of the day as such. And it is these mediators who, it is argued, have managed to construct narratives of the Vietnam War in the absence of the voices of those who participated – especially of the ‘grunts’, the ordinary draftees who did most of the fighting. But it has been suggested by Leikauf that cyberspace offers an antidote to the silence of the American Vietnam veteran;<sup>10</sup> that it affords them the space to tell their stories and that they do so without much reference to the representations of the war in other media. But if this is so, it begs the question of whether the veterans are sharing experiences or engaged in discourse with any outside of their own ranks? Do they inhabit an open or closed world? And are they able to utilize the new media to shape the memory of the Vietnam War?

Like Vietnam, the Border War was followed by a relative – not absolute – silence. But in the last five years or so, there has been a resurgence of interest in the war and its legacy. This interest has been occasioned by public symbolic processes which assume various forms such as: acts of memorialization, the writing of memoirs and imaginative literature, the publication of historical accounts, the production of films, photographic and art exhibits, the performance of dramatic works and songs, as well as the proliferation of internet sites, discussion or listserv groups and blogs in social media. For the most part, the last-mentioned developments have been the work of SADF veterans or neterans,<sup>11</sup> as I am tempted to call them. A coterie of white males who served in the South African Defence Force army has gravitated towards cyberspace to challenge their perceived marginalization and stigmatization. This paper investigates

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 194, 201.

<sup>7</sup> Agre, ‘The Internet and Public Discourse’.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Ehrenhaus & Richard Morris, *Cultural Legacies of the Vietnam War: Uses of the Past in the Present* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co., 1990), p. 226.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Leikauf, ‘Vietnam Experience Then and Now: Hypertextual Memories about America’s Longest War’, Paper presented to the ‘Whose Vietnam?’ Conference, University of Amsterdam, October 2010. Leikauf’s argument while suggestive suffers from a chronological flaw. The silence that followed the Vietnam War had been effectively broken before the veterans of that war became conversant with the internet and its possibilities for telling their stories.

<sup>11</sup> My neologism is an amalgam of the terms ‘netizens’ (see above) and veterans.

whether or not veterans' still share a sense of belonging to a community despite the demise of the SADF. It pays particular attention to whether access to ICT enables veterans with the requisite skills to exercise influence on discourse/opinion on matters of public interest pertaining to the Border War. It will also seek to examine what influence SADF veterans are able to exercise on the body politic: whether or not they are able to challenge the imperatives of transformation or reconfigure socio-political relations in post-apartheid South Africa. In short, it asks whether digital technology has, in any way, empowered them.

### ***The National Service generation: A (ma)lingering militarized identity?***

More than 600,000 white males were conscripted by the apartheid regime between 1968 and 1993.<sup>12</sup> Their common experience in the nutria brown uniform of the SADF defined them as a distinct cohort in South Africa's militarized society; then as national servicemen and now as veterans. They identified themselves as distinct not only from civilians, but from veterans of previous wars. Whilst some joined established veterans' associations such as such as the MOTH (Memorable Order of the Tin Hats) and the South African Legion, others sought out the company of those in their units who had shared their experiences. Such male bonding occurred in unit pubs, shellholes and other places where veterans got together to swap stories. This age-old practice predated the formation of the SADF – and even the Union Defence Force before it. However, such traditions and the very institutional memory of the SADF itself have been subverted by the formation of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). The question, then, is to determine whether the veterans' militarized identities and sense of community have outlived the integration of the statutory and non-statutory forces.<sup>13</sup>

War veterans comprise a speech community. Charles Braithwaite notes that the large number of terms, acronyms, place names, and military nomenclature (including slang) familiar to the American Vietnam veteran, and his ability to use them in conversation, sets his speech apart from others. Their discourse features certain linguistic markers such as the phrase “the Nam” for Vietnam. In their vocabulary, Vietnam is not a country but the space where they shared an experience. Thus, it is the common experience of the group, rather than common characteristics of the individuals, that makes US Vietnam veterans a distinct speech community. This can be seen in several aspects of the covariation of linguistic features and social context. Language features that were so prominent in the life-world of the Vietnam soldier can still be heard in the speech of those men [many] years after their original use.<sup>14</sup> Such speech patterns and symbolic acts allow veterans to create and affirm a sense of communal identity. It also serves as

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<sup>12</sup> David Williams, *On the Border: The White South African Military Experience 1965-1990* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2008), p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> The statutory forces refer to the SADF and the armies of the so-called ‘homelands’ (Bantustans) and the non-statutory forces refer to the armed wings of the ANC and PAC, Umkhonto we Sizwe and the Azanian Peoples’ Liberation Army, respectively.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Braithwaite, ‘Cultural communication among Vietnam Veterans: Ritual, Myth and Social Drama in R. Morris & P. Ehrenhaus, eds, *Cultural Legacies of the Vietnam War: Uses of the Past in the Present* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co., 1990), pp. 146-7.

an exclusionary device. The posing of the question: “Were you there?” has become a ritual of legitimacy amongst American Vietnam veterans for it allows them to vet “outsiders” or imposters.<sup>15</sup>

SADF veterans also comprise a community. As conscripts, they were subjected to indoctrination during basic training. Many of the rank and file undoubtedly bought into the idea that they were protecting the country from the combined threats of African nationalism and communism. But many, especially amongst the educated elites who often held high ranks in the citizen force, did not necessarily equate military service with defending apartheid. They subscribed to view that as professional – albeit part-time – soldiers they had a responsibility to defend the government of the day rather than the ideology that it propagated. Still, their thought processes and speech patterns reveal the lingering influence of apartheid military discourse.<sup>16</sup> To this day their language is still frequently peppered with expletives, turns of phrase and jargon learned whilst in uniform. In the army, the arm of service in which by far the majority of national servicemen rendered their duties, drilling and most commands were only delivered and learned in Afrikaans. Indeed, certain terms such as *ballesbak*, *bosbefok* and *vasbyt* seem to have no English equivalents. This is not to suggest that the two main language groups necessarily embraced one another. Indeed, differences were accentuated during training where insults such as *soutpiel* (for English-speakers) and *rocks* (for Afrikaans-speakers) were frequently traded. And conscripts often had little in common in the way of cultural and social background. But the fighting unit invariably did develop a camaraderie and loyalty to each other. For the shared experience of the group rather than the common characteristics of individuals created a sense of belonging and identity.

This does not mean that SADF veterans are a homogenous group. Yet, their identities have been fashioned, to some extent, by their military experiences. Indeed, some have a large emotional investment in remembering what they accomplished whilst in uniform. Some might even said to be fixated or obsessed with defending the reputation of the SADF as a fighting force. This seems especially true of those who participated in well-known engagements or operations. I have been struck by how many veterans have collections of books on the Border War on their shelves. Apart from histories of their units, many have copies of Steenkamp’s *South Africa’s Border War*,<sup>17</sup> Heitman’s volumes such as *The Angolan War: The Final South African Phase* (equally sought after),<sup>18</sup> and some of Peter Stiff’s numerous titles.<sup>19</sup> Some are assiduous collectors of memorabilia related to the war.

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Braithwaite, “‘Were YOU There?’ A Ritual of Legitimacy Among Vietnam Veterans”, *Western Journal of Communication*, 61: 4 (Fall 1997), pp. 423-447.

<sup>16</sup> André van der Bijl, ‘Poetry as an Element of the Apartheid Military Discourse’, *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 39: 1 (2011), pp. 56-84.

<sup>17</sup> Willem Steenkamp, *South Africa’s Border War 1966-1989* (Gibraltar: Ashanti, 1989). This has become something of a collector’s item.

<sup>18</sup> H-R. Heitman, *War in Angola: The Final South African Phase* (Gibraltar: Ashanti, 1990). An equally sought after collector’s item.

<sup>19</sup> These include Peter Stiff, *Nine Days War* (Alberton: Lemur Books, 1991) and *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations 1969-1994* (Alberton: Galago, 1999).

Veterans have mixed – even contradictory – memories of their experiences: whilst some look back with sentimentality on this period of their lives, others would rather forget it altogether. Whether these experiences are fondly remembered on account of the camaraderie of the masculinised military environment or regretted as time wasted in defending an unjust system, they left a lasting impression on soldiers. Indeed, to imagine that veterans have been able to make a seamless transition to civilian life or attain closure if they suffered psychosocial trauma is unrealistic. For the experience of waging war – especially an unjust one in the name of a discredited ideology and illegitimate regime – has left certain veterans with a residual sense of guilt or shame.<sup>20</sup> Yet other veterans clearly enjoyed the experience and found it positively life-transforming. The issue for veterans, then, is not whether the war was right or wrong but that they were involved. One way or the other, national service proved to be consequential for veterans as individuals, as well for South African society at large.

SADF veterans' (ma)lingering militarized identities are closely tied up with what it means to be "white" in post-apartheid South Africa. In certain respects, veterans constitute a special category because their choices were limited by conscription. But they were and remain moral agents. They share in the collective responsibility for upholding the apartheid system by virtue of their racial identity or whiteness. This whiteness assumes many guises. There is an assertive whiteness which takes pride in what was accomplished under colonial and white minority rule. This is typified by the viewpoint that South Africa owes its relative economic strength and political stability to infrastructure and institutions established during the period of white supremacy. In its more arrogant (read: racist) form, this suggests that blacks are incapable of running the country. Conversely, there is an abject whiteness of the kind advocated by Samantha Vice. Vice suggests that white South Africans 'cultivate humility and silence, given their morally compromised position in the continuing racial and economic injustices of this country'. She holds that this will allow blacks the sole curatorship of the body politic and serve as atonement for white privilege.<sup>21</sup> Such withdrawal strikes me as being decidedly counter-productive in the democratic order where all citizens are part of the moral community and have the right to hold the government of the day accountable for its actions. Engagement is preferable to a retreat into silence which is likely to impoverish debate and short circuit dialogue. White silence can cloak a lack of remorse for the injustices of the past, as well as provide an excuse for ignoring the cumulative effects of the country's structural inequalities on the majority of its population. Whether constructive or not, all voices should be heard.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas certain SADF veterans have sought to reconcile themselves to the political transition and commit themselves to making the "new" South Africa work, others have remained indifferent or opposed to the changes. Some have employed their enormous

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<sup>20</sup> Gary Baines, 'Blame, Shame or Reaffirmation? White Conscripts Reassess the Meaning of the "Border War" in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Interculture*, 5: 3 (October 2008), pp. 214-227.

<sup>21</sup> Samantha Vice, 'How Do I Live in this Strange Place?', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 41: 3 (2010), pp. 323-42.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Villet, 'The importance of having a voice', Mail & Guardian online, 4 November 2011, <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-11-02-the-importance-of-having-a-voice> (accessed 5 December 2011).

social capital for the good of all. They have welcomed South Africa's return to the community of nations and the benefits of globalization – understood here as deterritorialized and detemporalized interaction. These “benefits” include a return to international sporting codes and the lifting of travel restrictions and economic sanctions. Others have left the country. Indeed, white South Africans have become a very mobile group since 1994 and have relocated all over the world and many of these veterans have become part of the South African diaspora who have taken their skills elsewhere. These include those that been recruited by private security companies that have assumed many of the tasks previously performed by the armies of nation-states or international peacekeeping forces. But wherever these veterans find themselves, they appear to have a need to connect with those who had similar experiences. And this has been made possible by new technologies, especially via the ether.

### ***SADF veterans as a Virtual Community***

SADF veterans might have been latecomers to digital technology as they did not grow up with the internet. But most have ended up on the right side of the digital divide. And the breaking of their silence about the Border War coincided with the exponential growth of web technology. Many made the transition from web 1.0 with its static HTML and its passive viewing of content (such as in websites) to web 2.0 with its greater degree of interaction and mobility with relative ease. They have also made the change to web 3.0 which involves participatory information sharing like that facilitated on social networking sites (such as Facebook and Google and Twitter groups) equally well. Such new media competencies enable the multidirectional exchange of information that has turned to the state-centric model of knowledge dissemination on its head.<sup>23</sup>

Some ex-SADF conscripts have gravitated to the apparent political neutrality of cyberspace to tell their stories in order to contest their invisibility in post-apartheid South Africa. The camaraderie of cyberspace has largely replaced face-to-face meetings such as unit reunions or gatherings of veterans. Groups of war veterans who have served in the SADF, belonged to a specific unit, or did border duty have established a network of sites to exchange memories and, in some cases, provide platforms for advice on matters like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Most sites have disclaimers to the effect that they have no political affiliations and claim to be apolitical – although a few advertise their (invariably right-wing) political stripes and reminisce nostalgically about their time in the army. Such sites provide the (cyber)space for soldiers to tell their stories thereby contesting what Gear calls the “silence of stigmatized knowledge”

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<sup>23</sup> Martin Pogačar in Anna Maj & Daniel Riha, eds. *Digital Memories: Exploring Critical Issues* (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2009), p. 25.



carried by ex-combatants.<sup>24</sup> These sites are obviously male domains, the type that Kendall likens to the “virtual pub”.<sup>25</sup>

SADF veterans who interact in cyberspace constitute a “virtual community”.<sup>26</sup> Web site hyperlinks, multiple postings, and cross-citations undoubtedly reinforce the idea that Web authors and their readers share membership in a Net-mediated community. New intermediaries make it possible to develop and distribute content across old boundaries, lowering barriers to entry. Whereas the traditional press is called the fourth estate, this space might be called the “interconnected estate” – a place where any person with access to the Internet, regardless of living standard or nationality, is given a voice and the power to effect change.<sup>27</sup> Eric Schmidt & Jared Cohen postulate that the most revolutionary aspect of this change lies in the plethora of platforms that allow individuals to consume, distribute, and create their own content without being subjected to supervision or censorship.<sup>27</sup> Thus ICT provides the means for internet users to ‘communicate within and across borders, forming virtual communities that empower citizens at the expense of governments’.<sup>28</sup>

But what influence is the ‘virtual community’ of SADF veterans able to exercise? Dean argues that there is no longer a ‘consensus reality’ according to which contested questions of fact can be resolved. She suggests that, instead, there are multiple contending realities which keep contested issues from being decided. Furthermore, the ease with which individuals who hold similar views can communicate with one another allows them to provide the requisite social support for one another.<sup>29</sup> In another words, Dean reckons that there has been dissolution of the boundary between the margins and the mainstream. This implies that groups marginalized in the realm of *realpolitik* are able to challenge the consensus established by hegemonic groups. However, Barkun believes that while the boundary has become more permeable it still exists and that virtual communities remain on the fringes of the power brokering of interest groups and political elites.<sup>30</sup> Whilst the focus of both Barkun and Dean’s studies is conspiracy theorists operating in cyberspace, their arguments have a wider application. Network information technology can allow ordinary people and marginalized constituencies to challenge the authority of political elites and cultural brokers.

SADF veterans might not wield political power per se but their connectivity enables them to champion causes and issues that are regarded as directly affecting them. Perhaps more important than any prospect of political mobilization is the likelihood that

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<sup>24</sup> Sasha Gear, ‘The Road Back: Psychosocial Strains of Transition’ in G. Baines & P. Vale, eds. *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa’s Late-Cold War Conflicts* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Lori Kendall, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Marc Smith & Peter Kollock, eds. *Communities in Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Eric Schmidt & Jared Cohen, ‘The Digital Disruption’, *Foreign Affairs*, 89: 6 (Nov/Dec 2010), p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 8-9.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 185-6.

virtual communities share and fashion (new) memories out of connectivity based on common interests or ideology.<sup>31</sup> This memory work might well compete with “official” narratives propagated by the state and enable SADF veterans to become instrumental in the generation of a new historical consciousness.

The democratic access of the internet promises direct and unmediated access to the past. Rosenzweig speaks of “cultural disintermediation” by which he means that people with an interest in the past make direct contact to information without the mediation of historians, archivists and librarians.<sup>32</sup> The Web offers its users an opportunity to produce their own versions of history and place them in the public domain where no one regulates access, and no gatekeeping organizations police content or methodology. Consequently, Featherstone posits the emergence of a “new culture of memory” in which the existing “hierarchical controls” over access would disappear. This “direct access to cultural records and resources from those outside cultural institutions” could “lead to a decline in intellectual and academic power” in which the historian, for example, no longer stands between people and their pasts.<sup>33</sup> Needless to say, historians have not been readily prepared to embrace the vision in which everyone becomes his or her own historian.

SADF veterans have not only created a myriad of websites with historical content about the Border War, but have also seized the opportunity to write and edit numerous entries pertaining to the war on Wikipedia. Despite the inclination of scholars to dismiss Wikipedia as a flawed enterprise that attaches no value whatsoever to specialist knowledge, we should not overlook the fact that powerful search engines such as Google rank Wikipedia entries highly in their lists. Thus veterans who contribute to such forums are able to provide a perspective on the past which allows them to challenge the verdict that they were on the losing side of history and rewrite it to some extent. There are very often more savvy with new media than the historians who write the text books or the political functionaries who disseminate the “official” view of the SADF’s place in history. The Web clearly demonstrates that meaning emerges in contestation or dialogue, and that culture has no stable centre but rather proceeds from multiple ‘nodes’.<sup>34</sup>

I have begun to examine various sites of interest to those who served in the SADF. Certain of these form part of the Southern African Military Web Ring. Its anonymous manager declares it “a ring of web sites that contain information on (or about) the Southern African military scene, past or present”. This description is purposefully vague but conceals an agenda that is not clearly articulated. These sites are not confined to the Border War. They includes sites related to the Anglo-Zulu War, the Anglo-Boer (or South African) War, the Rhodesian Bush War, etc., as well as a number of international conflicts. I have listed a sampling of the SADF-related sites and provided brief annotations in the Appendix. They are hosted by ex-SADF servicemen based in South

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<sup>31</sup> Pogačar in Maj & Riha, *Digital Memories*, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired*, p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> Mike Featherstone, ‘Archiving Cultures’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 51: 1 (January 2000), pp. 166-178.

<sup>34</sup> Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired*, p. 177.

Africa and abroad. I have made contact with some of the site owners or hosts with a view to ascertaining, inter alia: how long their sites have been functional, how many signed-up members they have or ‘hits’ they receive, etc. I have begun to develop a sense of who comprises the audience for these sites. For the most part, it would seem that they are fellow veterans. But it is likely that open sites are also accessed by military aficionados and buffs, as well as veterans of other wars. I will also explore the motives of the webmasters: why they established their site and what they hope to achieve as a result? I will also attempt to analyse the content of the stories and the discourse employed on these sites so as to ascertain whose interests they serve? And I will attempt to ascertain whether there are common points of departure between service providers and consumers of these websites and social networks.

### ***Discursive Laagers and Dissent: The dissonance of disembodied voices***

I have borrowed the concept of a discursive *laager* from Theresa Edlmann.<sup>35</sup> A *laager* is the Afrikaans word for the defensive system of creating a circle of ox-wagons to protect descendants of the Dutch and other settlers who trekked into the African sub-continent’s hinterland from attack by indigenous peoples. It is often used as a metaphor for a closed, defensive, adversarial mentality. Such a mentality informed white South Africans’ perceptions of a threat (total onslaught) posed by African nationalism and communism (the *swart* and *rooi gevaar* of Nationalist ideology) during the 1970s and 1980s. Edlmann contends that the insular and circular nature of these *laagers* produced discourses that shaped the social and psychological narratives of the people who lived through those times; narratives which were interior to the *laager* at the time but continue to shape the thinking of its adherents. While the deep imprint of these discourses can be found in the lives and socio-political realities of all who lived through those times, the current narratives that white South Africans, and conscripts in particular, use to make sense of them are varied. Some continue to reinforce the *laager* (from within and without), some reveal confusion and a struggle to find a coherent narrative, others are rendered silent (a consequence of personal trauma or political circumstances), while a few are exploring the means to work through and beyond the discourses of the past in order to make sense of the present. Whatever form they take, Edlmann argues that these varied narratives have remained largely unacknowledged and unresolved in the post-apartheid South African context.

I am not a “neo-luddite” who complains ceaselessly about the negative impact of the new technology’s impact on social discourse. But these discursive laagers are the virtual equivalent of gated communities in South African suburbs. Hence I have some sympathy for Michael Ignatieff who laments what he terms the “perverse effects” of digital technologies. As he puts it, ‘Instead of creating a shared public space of common

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<sup>35</sup> Theresa Edlmann, ‘Divisions in the (Inner) Ranks: The Psychosocial Legacies of Apartheid Era Militarisation’, Paper presented to the Southern African Historical Society Conference, Durban, July 2011.

discourse, information technology seems to be increasing people's shrillness, malice, and unwillingness to listen to differing opinions. It also empowers anonymous denunciation, removes responsibility from opinion, and places reputation at risk'.<sup>36</sup> This lack of accountability by disembodied voices – very often influential bloggers who write under pseudonyms – is symptomatic of the development of closed discursive communities amidst the disaggregation of public opinion. Thus, it is my argument that digital technologies and new media contribute to the insularity of discourses by members of virtual communities – such as the SADF veterans. For these technologies disseminate views amongst those who share ideological persuasions and political convictions.

As we have noted, SADF veterans shared a commonality based on *circumstance and shared experience*. There is a tendency to privilege participation. The mantra of the soldier is:

How can you understand? ... You were not there ...<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, on a You Tube site for Bok van Blerk's video of the song "Die Kaplyn", QuiGonJinn2 comments:

Net ons wat in die weermag was weet wat dit is.<sup>38</sup>

SADF veterans insist that "having been there" is a prerequisite for providing an authentic account of their military experiences. These types of statements assert that only those "who were there" are entitled to speak and that, conversely, anyone without first-hand knowledge of what it was like in the SADF has no right to comment or criticize. But as Jay Winter has argued in *Shadows of War*, 'experience is much more fruitfully defined as a set of events whose character changes when there are changes in the subject position of the person or group which had shared those events'. He adds that '[r]elegating the rest of us to silence must be seen as a strategy of control, of cutting off debate, of ad hominem assertions of a kind unworthy of serious reflection'.<sup>39</sup>

Another common theme in the discourse of SADF veterans in cyberspace is the camaraderie of war; the bonds forged between soldiers who have to rely on one another in the heat of battle. SADF soldiers became "buddies" or "brothers in arms" when they lived with and fought for one another for extended periods in a hostile environment. Like families, they also "prayed together". Danie van den Berg repeats the cliché that was used by many NCOs during training: 'Die Army is nou jou Ma en Pa, troep!'<sup>40</sup> But the notion of the military unit as a surrogate family is problematical. There is no

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Ignatieff, Review of Cass Sunstein's *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, What Can Be Done?*, *Foreign Affairs*, 8: 6 (Nov/Dec 2010), p. 200.

<sup>37</sup> Facebook page for *Grensoorlog / Border War 1966-1989* group on <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=103819570796>.

<sup>38</sup> <http://diekaplyn.co.za>

<sup>39</sup> Jay Winter, 'Thinking about Silence' in Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio and Jay Winter, eds. *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> The South African Bush War, The South African Soldier, "Life as We Knew It: The Old SADF – 1977", <http://www.geocities.com/sa-bushwar5/> (accessed 19 January 2006).

shortage of authority (“father”) figures in the armed forces but seldom is there room for the appropriation of feminine qualities or nurturing maternal role models. It is precisely the separation from women in war that (some) men like. This affords them the space to badmouth their own women and to assert masculine power over women who get caught up in the combat zone. The hoary old war adage that the weapon of war serves as a replacement for a partner suggests the sexually charged nature of killing. Such images are at odds with that of the family. Thus the valorization of the military as a surrogate family, of the notion of brothers in arms who fought not for an ideology but mainly for one another, is riddled with contradictions.

Another recurrent theme in the digital discourse of SADF veterans is of sacrifice; of the dutiful soldier who put his life on the line and in some cases paid the ultimate price for his country. His act was sacrificial rather than self-serving and so society owes him a debt of gratitude. This can be illustrated by a posting by “Dave” on the Facebook site entitled *Grensoorlog/Border War 1966-1989*:

We are the National Service generation. The youngest is about 35 years old and the oldest in their sixties. We built the new South Africa! We are the generation that gave our time and ourselves for the nation in various ways. Some of our fathers and grandfathers wore medals during WW2 and some of us also received the Pro Patria Medal on occasion. Presently our involvement in this war is mostly knocked underestimated and being criticized [sic].<sup>41</sup>

This is an excerpt from a lengthier statement that extols the contribution of the “National Service Generation” to the “new” South Africa. Variants of the statement are to be found on many internet sites. The emphasis in such statements is that the 18-year old troop served the government of the day; that they simply performed their duty and did not fight in order to preserve apartheid. Those who followed the orders of their leaders should have no reason to feel guilt or shame. Such sentiments are tied to the notion that national servicemen were called to battle”. This, in turn, evokes the warrior myth; the rite of passage of the soldier who becomes a man; who defends his country and conducts himself in a way befitting the rules of war. However, the myth of the warrior is an anachronism in the twentieth century conscript army, more especially in the case of the apartheid army that sought to uphold a system declared a crime against humanity. There is no attempt to question the reasons for taking up arms or the legitimacy of such actions. To do so or to take an alternative (non-patriotic) position on the war would involve the acceptance of guilt and shame. Or it would amount to an admission that soldiers died in vain; that it was a futile or “wasted war”.

There are also sites that pay homage to deceased SADF soldiers. For instance, the South African Roll of Honour maintained by veteran John Dovey serves as a record and tribute to all those who lost their lives in the line of duty.<sup>42</sup> This virtual wall complements the newly-erected SADF Memorial Wall situated in the precinct of the Voortrekker Monument. The latter was built with privately-donated funds following the

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<sup>41</sup> This is to be found on the Facebook group Grensoorlog/Border War cited above. It has also been published as an Appendix to Jan Breytenbach’s, book *Eagle Strike! The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga 1978* (2010).

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.justdone.co.za/ROH/>

refusal of the trustees of Freedom Park to include the names of SADF members on its wall of names.<sup>43</sup> It serves as some sort of compensation for SADF veterans who believe that their role in the building of the “new” South Africa has not been adequately acknowledged.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper has suggested that connections forged between SADF veterans in cyberspace have managed to preserve their sense of belonging to a community – albeit a virtual one. It has contended that ICT stores digital memories and prolongs the life of a speech/discursive community after it has been effaced from the “real” world. But, in so doing, it may also serve to reinforce the existence of discursive laagers where these veterans share memories of common experiences or use language that is not readily comprehended by the uninitiated. Finally, this paper has suggested that connections forged between SADF veterans in cyberspace have served to articulate discontent with the country’s political transformation from which they feel marginalized as white South Africans. It remains to be seen whether the growing noise of the dissonance of these disembodied voices is ever likely to achieve a critical mass (or reach a crescendo) that would prompt mobilisation in respect of the interests of SADF veterans.

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<sup>43</sup> Gary Baines, ‘Site of Struggle? The Freedom Park Fracas and the Divisive Legacy of South Africa’s Border War/Liberation Struggle’, *Social Dynamics*, 35: 2 (September 2009), 330-344.

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## APPENDIX

### Websites related to the SADF/Border War

Various websites of interest to those who served in the SADF have been compiled into an annotated list. This list is by no means definitive or exhaustive.

#### 1. Sentinel Projects

<http://www.geocities.com/sadfbok/index.html>

Created by expatriate Barry Fowler who seeks to document SADF experiences. Fowler has published *Pro Patria* (1995) and *Grensvegter? South African Army Psychologist* (1996) which is his account of working as a clinical psychologist on the “border” in 1987. The site has links to two online publications: “Bad Guys” which is an edited collection of personal accounts of military service in the SADF (some of which are published in *Pro Patria*) and “1 Mil” which is an account of “Clinical Psychology at 1 Military Hospital (1986-7)”.

#### 2. SADF Scrapbook.

[http://www.geocities.com/sadf\\_scrapbook/index.html](http://www.geocities.com/sadf_scrapbook/index.html)

A sister to the Sentinel Project site. Includes official and unofficial SADF documents, and related materials (including Catherine Draper’s honours project on PTSD).

#### 3. The South African Army Experience (aka The South African Soldier)

<http://www.sa-soldier.com/data/index.htm>

Established by expatriate James Dekker in February 2004. Originally intended only as a personal site but expressions of interest convinced him to include other submissions. He seeks to preserve the stories of SADF national servicemen as a reminder of what they went through during their period of service. Professes no political motivation and appears to have no axe to grind. Has links to a disparate range of sites. These include the Carte Blanche programme “The War Within” broadcast in June 2001 which deals with PTSD; a Cuban account of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, and the author’s own experiences as a “troopie”.

#### 4. The South African Veterans’ Association (SAVA)

<http://www.veterans.org.za/>

Dubs itself a “non-governmental, non-profitmaking Veteran Service for Survivors of the 1970’s-1990’s conflicts”. Site co-ordinator is ex-paratrooper Marius Van Niekerk, an expatriate who resides in Sweden. Chiefly concerned with providing a site where veterans can learn about PTSD and seek help in order to come to terms with their traumas. Includes the SAVA Truth Project which is dedicated to documenting soldiers’ stories about the Angolan War. Van Niekerk has produced the film “In My Heart of Darkness” which tells the story of his journey into Angola with veterans from both sides of the erstwhile battle lines.



5. Unofficial SADF Information Page

<http://www.geocities.com/Yosemite/Forest/1771/index.htm>

Despite its disclaimer that “material is published here without comment, leaving the reader to draw their own conclusions”, there are biases evident in the comments and selection of accessible texts. The anonymity of the webmaster is a cause for suspicion.

6. The South African Bush War 1966-1989

[http://www.geocities.com/sa\\_bushwar/](http://www.geocities.com/sa_bushwar/)

Another site which professes impartiality with the words: “The sole purpose of this page is to collect, preserve and present the military history of the SOUTH AFRICAN BUSH WAR (SABW). It does not support any political motive, and strives to reflect this important chapter in South Africa's history from all forces and freedom movements involved ...”. The site is the work of Marius van Aardt.

7. South African Soldier

<http://www.sa-soldier.com/data/>

The blurb holds that “this website is a documentary about the SADF. A tribute to all who served, and a reminder to those who have long since forgotten.” The primary aim of this project seems to be to rekindle the memories of those conscripted by the SADF. Provides a space for veterans to display photographs of their war experiences. The anonymous webmaster professes to have no political motivation for the project.

8. SA Magte Klub/SA Forces Club

<http://www.samagte.co.za>

Site dedicated to SADF soldiers who died in Angola. The founder, Frikkie Potgieter, dubs it a non political, non-profit making voluntary organization of security force members who served between 1912-1994, viz. primarily white members of the SAP and SADF. Organization created in 2004, based in Port Elizabeth. Forum postings irregular.

9. The War in Angola (in Miniature)

<http://www.warinangola.com/>

The website established in September 2007 is dedicated to researching and recreating the battles between the adversaries of the Angolan (or Border) War. An attempt is made to marry the historical and gaming functions of the site. The Webmaster Johan Schoeman produces a biweekly newsletter by the same name and has assembled an array of material from various sources. The site also hosts a discussion forum of topics selected by the host.

10. South African Roll of Honour Database

<http://www.justdone.co.za/ROH/>

Site maintained by John Dovey that pays tribute to deceased members of the SADF. Dovey also hosts another site called SA Military Units and has produced a number of issues of an ezine called Army Talk. This has now mutated into a discussion group located at: <http://groups.google.com/group/armytalk/>

## **Social Networking Sites related to the SADF/Border War**

### 1. Grensoorlog/Border War 1966-1989 Facebook Group

<http://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/grensoorlog/>

The group has 3 968 members (as of 29.11.2011), mostly males, many of whom are professionals (e.g. teachers). Not all members are SADF veterans and not all are necessarily active participants. Some are 'lurkers' and 'stalkers'.

### 2. SADF Living History Facebook Group

<http://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/5698430669/>

The site's blurb reads: "The SADF Living History Group was established to make sure that the exploits of the SADF during the Border war will not be forgotten. We also pay tribute to all the men and woman of our then security forces." The group has 120 members (as of 28.11.2011).