

## *Book review*

# **Across the border: Surviving the secret war in Angola**

*Norman McFarlane*

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Cape Town: Tafelberg  
2022, 358 pages  
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Norman McFarlane's book about his participation in the first incursion by the South African Defence Force (SADF) into Angola (1975–1976) adds to the growing list of memoirs and reminiscences of the so-called 'Border War' that took place in Namibia and Angola from 1966–1989. Little was published on this war in the first two decades after its conclusion, but fortunately for historians of the future, this has changed since the middle of the 2000s with a steady stream of titles finding their way to the shelves of bookstores and libraries. The majority of these books published by mainstream publishers deals with the experiences of ex-members of the special forces, 32 Battalion, and the last phases of the war mostly seen through the eyes of former soldiers of 61 Mechanised Battalion. McFarlane's memoir is a valuable addition to the literature on the Border War as he was one of hundreds of thousands of ordinary national servicemen who were not part of one of these units but who participated in the longest war in South African history – not because they wanted to but because some of them felt they had no other choice. It also adds to the (as yet) meagre list of books on Operation Savannah, as the SADF's operation in Angola in 1975–1976 was dubbed.

There are a number of reasons why *Across the border* will provide valuable material for researchers on the Border War as well as for conscripts who took part in it, apart from the fact that each individual's story is in itself unique. McFarlane, who was trained as an artilleryman but who also fulfilled duties as an infantry soldier and signaller, deals extensively and regularly with the moral dilemma faced by conscripts during the Border War: how does one justify one's participation in a war that was viewed by many (and are still regarded today) as unjust and nothing but a violent perpetuation of apartheid. McFarlane had more political savvy than most conscripts, as Donald Woods, the fervently anti-apartheid newspaper editor who was at one time declared a banned person by the government and was later forced into exile, was his uncle. Although he found Woods' arguments against apartheid convincing, that did not stop him from enlisting in the army. McFarlane admits that he was not brave enough to become a conscientious objector or to abscond, and that he was swayed – as were so many others – by the steady stream of government propaganda warning against the "Rooi Gevaar" (p. 27) and the "Swart Gevaar" (p. 27) (the perceived danger posed by communism and black people to the

South African way of life). Eventually none of these things mattered; McFarlane and his comrades only wanted to survive. He also deals with the dichotomy that characterises the thoughts of many ex-conscripts today: they now know that the war was unjust but they still long for the camaraderie of their days in uniform. McFarlane discusses these issues with an honesty not found in many of the tales of soldiers who participated in the Border War.

The author furthermore highlights another important aspect that plagued many soldiers long after they had stepped out of uniform for the last time – post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). McFarlane’s experiences in what was the short and brutal war of 1975–1976 cost him dearly. He not only lost part of his hearing but his dreams are still haunted by what he had seen in Angola: the mangled rotting corpses of people killed by his unit’s artillery shells and, especially, the body of a headless boy soldier glimpsed from a passing vehicle. These feelings were exacerbated by a sense of increasing bitterness and a sense of betrayal because of the way he and his comrades were treated by the authorities.

But McFarlane’s story is also that of so many other soldiers who had fought in this and countless other wars. He relates the naivety of the young trainees, the anxiety, uncertainty and fear of young soldiers in a war not of their making. The sometimes sordid existence on the so-called ‘border’ also comes under the spotlight – the lack of food, water, cigarettes, hygiene, post from home and other comforts. The challenge of a strange and dangerous environment with its flies, mosquitos, snakes, spiders and seemingly non-sensible Permanent Force officers and non-commissioned officers today still evokes a peculiar sense of nostalgia. And then there was the utter and unheroic boredom. McFarlane goes into great detail at times, but his story never becomes a tedious read. He tells his story (which he calls a ‘memoir’ rather than an autobiography because of the unreliability of memory) chronologically in short chapters against the background of the political turmoil in South Africa. The book not only deals with McFarlane’s initial period of military service, but also with some camps he had to attend later on in his life. It is a tale to which many conscripts will be able to relate. It will also provide valuable material for historians who want to explore further the daily existence of conscripts and so-called ‘campers’ in the Border War, their feelings and their mere struggle for survival. McFarlane’s story, like that of so many others that has not been heard, is worth telling. The lyrics of a popular Afrikaans song that eventually helped to persuade McFarlane to seek help for his PTSD comes to mind, “[y]ou were never honoured, and no one will now ... write about your life” (p. 336) – unless, one wants to add, like McFarlane, you do it yourself.

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