

## THE ARMORED BUBBLE: MILITARY MEMOIRS FROM APARTHEID'S WARRIORS

**Hilton Hamann.** *Days of the Generals: The Untold Story of South Africa's Apartheid-Era Military Generals.* Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2006 (2001). xvii + 242 pp. Photographs. Glossary. Select Bibliography. Index. \$19.95. Paper. Preview available on Google books.

**Clive Holt.** *At Thy Cry We Did Not Falter: A Frontline Account of the 1988 Angolan War, as Seen through the Eyes of a Conscripted Soldier.* Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2005. xii + 194 pp. Photographs. Glossary. \$19.95. Paper. Preview available on Google books.

**Piet Nortje.** *32 Battalion: The Inside Story of South Africa's Elite Fighting Unit.* Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2003. xviii + 315 pp. Photographs. Maps. Bibliography. Index. \$18.95. Paper. Preview available on Google books.

**Peter Stiff.** *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969–1994.* Johannesburg: Galago Publishing (www.galago.co.za), 2004 (Reprint with corrections). 608 pp. Photographs. Maps. Charts. Bibliography. Notes. Index. \$42.00. Paper.

**Peter Stiff.** *Warfare by Other Means: South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s.* Johannesburg: Galago Publishing, 2001. 600 pp. Photographs. Charts. Bibliography. Notes. Index. \$45.00. Cloth.

**Peter Stiff.** *The Covert War: Koevoet Operations Namibia, 1979–1989.* Johannesburg: Galago Publishing, 2004. 512 pp. Photographs. Maps. Charts. Bibliography. Notes. Index. \$45.00. Cloth.

Cassinga Day—May 4—is a national holiday in Namibia, commemorating the 1978 attack in which South African troops killed more than six hundred Namibians at a SWAPO camp in Angola. South Africa's Truth Commission called it “one of the biggest single incidents of gross [human rights] violations” they considered (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, vol. 2, p. 3). For many veterans of the South African military, however, it is still celebrated as the largest paratroop drop since World War II and “a complete success,” with “at least 608 SWAPO fighters killed” and only four dead among the attackers (Stiff, *Silent War*, 205). The Truth Commission's careful review acknowledged that the camp was both a military and civilian installation and that many details were still uncertain, but it concluded that there was little doubt that many of the dead were civilian women and children. The commissioners note that they find it difficult to believe that this would have happened had the targets been white (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, vol. 2, p. 43). But the controversy continues, il-

lustrating the still widely divergent perspectives on the battles of apartheid's final years.

The books reviewed in this essay are a small sample of one genre of war literature: detailed accounts of battle from the perspective of those among South Africa's military veterans who have no question that they were fighting a just cause in defense of their country. Significantly, this kind of book features prominently on displays in airports in Southern Africa.

None of these authors defends the apartheid system; indeed, as far as one can gather from these books, none ever did. And they are indignant that anyone should doubt the integrity and professionalism of the South African forces. "The idea for this book," writes Hilton Hamann (xi), "came about when my youngest son, after watching a television news broadcast, said to me 'Dad, when you were in the army, why did you kill all those innocent people?'" "I was flabbergasted," Hamann continues. "The SADF I was part of was an organisation that operated according to rules, traditions and codes of conduct." The other authors all reflect similar sentiments.

Hamann was conscripted into the South African Defense Forces (SADF) in 1975 and served in the South African conventional forces in Angola that year. He later became the military correspondent for the *Sunday Times*, wrote for *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, and traveled with the SADF, Unita, and South Africa's special forces. His book is based on interviews with retired South African generals; more than the other books reviewed, *Days of the Generals* focuses on the strategic perspective, including differences among the top generals. At the other end of the military hierarchy is Clive Holt, a conscript drafted in 1987, just in time to be sent as part of a mechanized battalion (61 Mech) to the battles around Cuito Cuanavale. Holt kept a diary, and his account differs from the others both in its level of personal detail and in his account of his posttraumatic stress disorder, followed by emigration to Australia. Still, as indicated by the title ("At thy call, we did not falter"), Holt regarded his war as an act of patriotism.

Nortje, who served as regimental sergeant major of the 32 Battalion, presents his account as a tribute to the "unsung heroes" of this elite fighting unit composed principally of black Angolans and commanded by white South Africans. It is the most clearly detailed and professionally written of these books. The final three books form a comprehensive trilogy by Peter Stiff, the bestselling author of a host of similar books, as well as novels, on Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), South Africa, and the rest of southern Africa. Stiff, a London-born South African citizen, lived in Rhodesia for twenty-eight years, twenty as a member of the British South African Police and eight as a private security consultant. The Galago Web site describes him as "an old Africa hand," and the acknowledgments in his books identify him as a "good friend" of Colonel Jan Breytenbach, a legendary South African soldier whose credits include leading the 44 Parachute Brigade on their attack on Cassinga.

All these books are based on personal experience and/or on extensive interviews. Nortje, Stiff, and Hamann also cite a wide variety of written sources, including internal documentation from the SADF. Notably, none seems to have made any systematic effort to talk to Africans other than those in the SADF, whether civilian witnesses or veterans of the guerrilla forces, although Stiff cites two veterans of the SWAPO guerrilla forces in his book on Koevoet. They are uniformly dismissive of the Truth Commission as biased, and of news accounts of “atrocities” as inflated or even fabricated. Except for Stiff’s overview of largely internal covert operations (*The Silent War*), all of the books conclude with a “Roll of Honour” of South African soldiers killed. These are accounts of war from the perspective of participants apparently untroubled by doubts concerning either the cause or the means employed. Nevertheless, with these caveats in mind, it would be a mistake for the historian to dismiss these books and the genre they represent as irrelevant. In addition to providing much detail that may at some future point be cross-referenced with other memories or documentation, they are often inadvertently revealing.

For example, reflecting the views of the generals he interviewed (Magnus Malan, Constand Viljoen, Jannie Geldenhuys, Andries Liebenberg, and George Meiring), Hamann’s work shows significant disagreements on strategy and tactics both within the SADF and between the SADF and other security agencies. Perhaps the most striking illustration of these differing perspectives emerges with their attitudes toward Koevoet, the counterinsurgency unit in Namibia that fell under police rather than army command, in which case Hamann cites generals Viljoen, Geldenhuys, and Meiring. Viljoen told him, “They had a cruelty about them that certainly didn’t further the hearts and minds of the people.... [In the army, by contrast,] we realised, in a revolutionary war it is not a case of how many people you kill but rather the battle for the minds of the people” (65). Geldenhuys added, “They would go into an area, ‘clean’ it up, then collect the bodies and drag them through the the town behind their vehicles” (65). Yet Hamann’s own account shows that the military, too, commonly measured success and failure in terms of kill ratios. (The books by Stiff and Norje reveal the same perspective.) Thus Hamann describes the stalemated series of battles at Cuito Cuanavale, which led to successful negotiations on the independence of Namibia, by summing up the “scoresheet.” On the Cuban/Angolan side, he notes, 4,785 men were confirmed as killed in action, while the South African troops lost only thirty-one (97). Ironically, neither Hamann nor Holt (who cites only slightly different numbers [109]) even mention Unita troops, who provided the cannon fodder in these battles for the mechanized South African units.

In his volume on Koevoet, Stiff dismisses the generals’ critique of Koevoet as “scurrilous” and inspired by professional jealousy of the unit’s success (95). *The Covert War*’s more than five hundred pages recount the internal counterinsurgency war in Namibia, including detailed narratives of

many “contacts” between Koevoet and guerrillas. Stiff notes that Koevoet was modeled on the successes of the Rhodesian Selous Scouts (the subject of an earlier book by Stiff). Practically every description of a contact is accompanied by its kill count; Stiff reports that from its foundation in 1979 through 1988, Koevoet killed 2,812 insurgents and captured 463. They lost more than 160, a greater number than that lost by any other South African unit since World War II (318–19). Stiff concludes by denouncing the National Party leadership in the 1990s for failure to speak up for Koevoet, allowing them, particularly the black Namibian members of the unit loyal to the South African authorities, to be “demonized” by the press (486).

The other books in Stiff’s trilogy constitute a comprehensive inventory of South African covert operations, including those by the elite Recces (the common term for South Africa’s special forces, the Reconnaissance regiments) and a wide variety of other units, from security police to surrogate forces on both sides of the South African border. While the works may not match the tribute in the unsigned foreword, apparently by the author himself, claiming that “there will never be anything better researched and definitive on South African secret operations” (*Silent War*, 15), they are nevertheless detailed and revealing. In many cases the actual names of operatives are not given, but some have been subsequently disclosed. Gary Branfield, for example, who was killed in Iraq in 2004, was then confirmed by Stiff as being the “Major Brian,” a former Rhodesian policeman who was responsible for the assassination of the ANC’s Zimbabwe representative Joe Qqabi in July 1981. Stiff’s accounts go back as far as the 1960s, with Rhodesian and South African intervention in the Biafran revolt in Nigeria, and extend up to the abortive right-wing intervention in Bophuthatswana just before the 1994 elections in South Africa.

Stiff’s observations should be read with the caveat that the information comes from those actually involved, who may or may not be inclined to tell the truth. But it does confirm many operations previously denied by South African officials, and provides details that may serve as data for careful comparison with other sources by future historians. In *The Silent War*, for example, Stiff reports on a range of actions: a commando raid on Dar es Salaam in 1972, South African recce involvement in Mozambique in cooperation with Rhodesian SAS in the period before 1974, the South African commando raid on Matola in 1981, supplies to Renamo in Mozambique after the 1984 Nkomati Accord, and raids on Lesotho, Botswana, and Swaziland. Among many other topics, *Warfare by Other Means* documents the buffoonish coup attempt in Seychelles in 1981, covert support for “homelands” leaders, the death squads of the Security Police and the Civil Cooperation Bureau, and the assassination of Anton Lubowski. One chapter recounts the use of Rob Brown, a former Australian and Rhodesian professional soldier, to found “Veterans for Victory” in opposition to South African draft resisters, and to serve as liaison with right-wing religious groups supporting Renamo.

In contrast to Hamann and Stiff, who cover a broad range of South African military operations, Nortje and Holt focus more narrowly. Nortje's book is by far the most detailed. It shows, in his words, "the extent of a single unit's contribution to every major campaign [...]. . . a band of brothers who spilled their blood together, shed it for South Africa and were truly forged in battle" (xv). Notably, this unit, founded by Jan Breytenbach in August 1975 during South Africa's first major invasion of that country, consisted primarily of Angolans, veterans of the branch of the FNLA (National Front for the Liberation of Angola) led by Daniel Chipenda in the 1975–76 conflict, many of whom had earlier been members of the Popular Movement of the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). Although 32 Battalion has been the subject of two previous books by Breytenbach, Nortje's is far more comprehensive. Nortje acknowledged that the unit was not exactly desegregated: the officers were white, and there were separate amenities on the bases for white and black. But, he adds, "on the battlefield, and during deployment, no form of discrimination on grounds of race was ever practised" (47).

Nortje recounts 32 Battalion operations in Angola, where they were the South African unit most often on the front line, operating both separately and in conjunction with Unita, and, on conventional operations, with other South African units as well. It was, he notes, the "only SADF unit besides Special Forces that maintained a constant presence in Angola from 1975 through the signing of a peace treaty in 1988" (256). In addition to providing meticulous accounts of military operations—in contrast to other accounts, these include details on Unita participation in joint operations at Cuito Cuanavale—the author includes an appendix of unit songs, in Portuguese and in African languages, with English translations. The book also features more than forty detailed maps, and, like the books by Stiff, an ample selection of color photographs. Nortje reports casualty figures for many operations, but, unlike Stiff, he does not seem to revel in them.

Holt's is the shortest of these books. It is also the most restricted in scope, confined to his two years as a conscript, and particularly his first-person account of the battles around Cuito Cuanavale. He is the most conscious of the horrors of war, recounting his growing insensitivity to death and the competition to collect war souvenirs, such as a full set of an enemy uniform. He also describes his frustration at the secrecy surrounding their presence in Angola, and the damage to morale from the artillery and air attacks from Angolan and Cuban forces. Despite the psychological distress he reports, however, he has no doubt that he and his fellows were doing their patriotic duty.

In short, there is much of interest to be found within these works. Even more striking for this reviewer, however, is what is not there. There is neither justification nor critique of the apartheid system. Although there are repeated references to the bias of the Truth Commission, there is no real effort to engage with the content of testimony there. There are no reflections

on guilt or on the nature of the South African system, or even acknowledgement that such reflection might be called for, as in classic works such as Antje Krog's *Country of My Skull* (Times Books, 1999). It is as if these writers are living within an armored bubble, insulated from any consideration of the meaning of the death and suffering they and their fellows inflicted. All deny that they were fighting for "apartheid," but they are remarkably vague on what they thought they were fighting for. The phrase that repeatedly comes to mind while reading these books is the subtitle of Hannah Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial: "the banality of evil."

It is clear, at least, that these writers were not defenders of the Afrikaner nationalism of the stereotypical "white tribe of Africa." The image of South Africa portrayed in these books encompasses not only English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking whites born in South Africa, but also recent immigrants such as Peter Stiff himself and the other ex-Rhodesians who flocked to the South African military after 1980. It even includes the black Angolans recruited into the 32 Battalion, although Nortje notes that their army identification numbers had the special prefix SP (for "soldado preto," the Portuguese term for "black soldier"). The social context that molded these authors most deeply and inspired their loyalty most intensely appears to have been the military itself; indeed for some of these writers (and those they interviewed) the "cause" appears to have been the excitement of war itself. Stiff refers to Jan Breytenbach's initial involvement with the Rhodesians in Mozambique as "simply the best war around" (*Silent War*, 86), and his descriptions of combat sometimes give the impression of a sports announcer recounting the scores and exploits of his favorite team. For Nortje and Holt, the cause became their brothers in battle, a common experience in almost every war. Even Hamann and Stiff, who for most of their careers wrote about war rather than participated in it, were in effect "embedded journalists," very much a part of the social world of the military they reported on.

In effect, the military was the "country" they thought they were defending and the social context that defined their reality and protected them from contradictory perspectives. Unlike conscripts who came to oppose the war or other white South Africans who in various ways came to doubt the system or join the struggle against it, these writers represent another option. A decade after the end of political apartheid, they are still living in the mental bubble that apartheid created for them. The unanswered question is how large a group they, with their loyal readers, represent.

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