

## Book Reviews

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## Boekresensies

### The genesis of the South African foot soldier

#### **Willem Steenkamp, *Assegais, Drums and Dragoons: A Military and Social History of the Cape, 1510-1806***

Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2012

376 pp

ISBN 978 1 868842 479 5

R267.00

The history of South Africa's armed forces dates back to just more than a century ago, because the unitary state was formed only in 1910, and the Union Defence Forces (since 1957 known as the South African Defence Force, and since 1994 as the South African National Defence Force) was established only in 1912; nevertheless, the country's military history can be traced back many centuries. The first clash between European soldiers and indigenous inhabitants took place at Saldanha Bay in 1510, between Portuguese seamen and members of a local Khoina clan. After Jan van Riebeeck established a refreshment station at the Cape in 1652, the next century and a half saw the Cape under Dutch/VOC (Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie, i.e. Dutch East India Company) control. The second British occupation of the Cape in 1806 ushered in a new era in the history of that colony, as well as for the whole of southern Africa.

When the South African Infantry Association decided that it wanted a book published on the South African infantryman, they had no need to look further than Willem Steenkamp – journalist, tour guide, expert on the military history of southern Africa, and author of several books; including noteworthy publications on the war in Namibia and in Angola (1966-1989), such as *Adeus Angola* (1976), *Borderstrike: South Africa into Angola* (originally published c. 1983; re-published 2006) and *South Africa's Border War 1966-1989* (1989).

Throughout the millennia, it has been the infantryman who has always borne the brunt of fighting in wars. Today, of course, this is also true of the infantry woman. Consequently, many casualties suffered in most wars have been infantrymen; and foot soldiers indeed suffer greater extremes of danger, discomfort and fatigue than most other combatants. The first ever "soldiers" in pre-historic times, were "infantrymen", and today, notwithstanding all the technological developments and other innovations, the infantry are still crucial in most conflict zones. Computers and cyber warfare, unmanned vehicles on land, in the air, and on and under the sea have changed the nature of battle space, but ultimately, the eyes, ears and decisions of men and women on the ground, often in close proximity to the enemy (which may include other/opposing men and women and/or improvised explosive devices) are needed to ensure success in areas of conflict. This also holds true for the years 1510 to 1806, which are the focus in Steenkamp's *Assegais, Drums and Dragoons*, a book that examines the role of infantrymen at the Cape, but at the same time, develops into an absorbing military and social history of the Cape Colony under Dutch rule.

This excellently researched book is not a learned treatise on warfare or a military textbook, but rather an informal history of South African infantrymen of all races and nations throughout the recorded social history of the Cape in the course of three centuries, albeit that the history and analyses are well documented; see in this regard the many endnotes (pp 331 364), as well as a fairly comprehensive bibliography (pp 365 370). Thanks to the index (pp 371 376), the serious student of military history can easily gain much from the wealth of information that is contained in the book.

Steenkamp succeeds in telling his story without fear or favour and he focuses on events, rather than on the exploits of individual regiments, except where it is necessary. The narrative is told in an entertaining and instructive way, and the book has fulfilled all the aims set out in the Foreword and Introduction, including indicating and fostering “the respect that real fighting soldiers often conceive for one another after they have laid down their arms, a respect that transcends differences of race, religion and belief that politicians, propagandists and others seek to keep alive to serve their own base purposes. They have yet to learn that if you unfairly denigrate your former enemy, you denigrate yourself in the process as well” (p viii).

*Assegais, Drums and Dragoons* is a mixture of social and military history. As Steenkamp correctly points out, the Cape’s soldiers were shaped by a bewildering variety of influences and events that go back many years. The book is also, in essence, about the genesis of the South African foot soldier of today; a type of soldier who grew to what he (or she) is today through an evolutionary process that took several centuries.

Steenkamp follows a chronological approach and presents the history of infantrymen against the background of a military and social history of the Cape by way of fifteen chapters. He starts off by describing the clash at Saldanha Bay in 1510 (already referred to above); describes the Dutch/VOC’s role at the Cape since 1652, including its defensive measures; the guarding of the Cape and its vital sea route; military life in the Cape; the gradual demise of the VOC; the (first) British conquest of the Cape in 1795 (and the role that infantrymen played both on the side of the British and the Dutch during the short campaign); the Cape under Batavian (Dutch) rule from 1803 to 1806; and the (second and final) British conquest of the Cape in 1806 with special reference to the battle at Blaauwberg on 8 January 1806 (a relatively small clash, and yet one of the most crucial battles ever fought on South African soil) and, once again, the role played by foot soldiers.

Then follows an epilogue, in which Steenkamp asks “What if ...?” with reference to the battle at Blaauwberg. There are also six very informative appendices, dealing with the VOC and slavery; the controversy with regard to the naming of the Khoina and Bushmen; routine at the Castle of Good Hope in the 1720s; an analysis of the battle at Blaauwberg; the military units involved in the clashes at Muizenberg (1803) and Blaauwberg (1806), and their uniforms; and the later careers of the key figures referred to in the book. The book also includes five very useful maps and 37 illustrations (of some of the main characters referred to in the text, of uniforms, and depictions of some of the battles that are described).

Since 1806, there have been many, many conflicts in what is today South Africa and in almost all of them, infantrymen have played a major role, from the frontier wars in the Cape Colony to the Anglo Boer conflicts; and in two world

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wars, South African infantrymen fought outside the borders of their country against imperial expansionist and racist regimes. Hopefully, sooner rather than later, the military and social history of the Cape from 1806 onwards, but also of South Africa, will be told as expertly as has been done by Willem Steenkamp in his excellent *Assegais, Drums and Dragoons*. This book, which underlines the importance of knowledge of military history for the understanding of our chequered history in general, is highly recommended.

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