

Jan Breytenbach, *Forged in Battle: The Birth and Growth of 32 Battalion from former Enemies and Terrorists into Decorated Soldiers*

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Colonel (retired) Jan Breytenbach is the author of a number of books about his role in the Border War. *Forged in Battle* is an account of how (the then commandant) Breytenbach transformed a motley crew of erstwhile MPLA and subsequently FNLA combatants into a disciplined fighting unit known as Bravo Company. In the process these soldiers switched their allegiance from Daniel Chipenda to Breytenbach and his fellow white South African Defence Force officers who trained and led them through a series of battles against FAPLA and Cuban forces from August to December 1975. This is the story of Battalion 32 before the unit adopted the symbol of the Buffalo and the motto “forged in battle”. The metaphor of the blacksmith’s forge might refer to the fashioning of Bravo Company’s fighting prowess, but it could equally refer to its transition from bandits with shifting allegiances to soldiers loyal to the unit and its commanding officers.

The South African invasion of Angola commenced in August 1975 with a deliberate decoy action. Zulu Group which comprised Breytenbach’s Bravo Coy and Lindford’s Alpha Coy followed a circuitous route to take Pereira de Eca to create the impression that the attack had been launched from the north. This ruse was supposed to allow for plausible deniability should questions be raised about the identity of white men in rag tag uniforms flying the FNLA colours. Masquerading as mercenaries, they lived off the land “liberating” provisions from captured areas while reliant on the SADF to provide ammunition and fuel. A convoy comprising an odd assortment of army issue, purchased and captured vehicles was reinforced by Eland armoured cars for the advance on Sá de Bandiera. Bravo Group’s defining moment was the intense fighting for the town of Catengue where it first encountered stiff resistance from FAPLA, reinforced by Cubans (p 111). Zulu Group captured a series of towns in Angola’s south west provinces and was welcomed as “liberators” in Benguela, Lobito and Novo Redondo. Hereafter they linked up with Foxbat Group in an attempt to capture Cela. But Bravo Group was extricated from the frontline before the battle of Bridge 14 and the SADF was ordered to withdraw from Angola.

The objectives of Operation Savannah were never clear to the commanders on the ground who were hamstrung by the indecisiveness of their superiors who, in turn, were not privy to the political decision making of the Vorster government. But the resulting confusion is obvious from Breytenbach's account of the campaign. As the invading columns advanced north rapidly it appeared that the authorities contemplated pushing on to Luanda and expelling FAPLA from the capital city before the official handover of authority by the withdrawing of Portuguese colonial forces (scheduled for 11 November 1975). When it became clear that this goal could not be achieved without escalating the commitment in manpower and material, the SADF was ordered to cut its losses and withdraw from Angola. The unclear strategic objectives were thus a concomitant of confused political objectives. It was never clear to Breytenbach which Angolan faction they were supposed to be supporting. His superiors sent mixed signals: sometimes UNITA and at other times the FNLA was the ally of choice. Nor was it readily apparent whether Bravo Coy was furthering the SADF's own agenda or that of the Angolan guerrilla movements. Breytenbach sarcastically refers to Chipenda as "the boss" and had repeated "run ins" with UNITA leaders, coming close to executing one who crossed him (p 149).

Breytenbach tells a rollicking tale of bravado and derring do. The pace does not let up until chapter 11 when he pauses to reflect upon the nature of courage and cowardice. This follows an incident in which a paratrooper left the scene of a fire fight after a protracted engagement with FAPLA. The paratrooper approaches Breytenbach and candidly admits to being unable to cope with his mounting fear. This appears to be a clear cut case of cowardice in the face of heavy enemy fire. Breytenbach, however, is forgiving and compassionate. What appears as indulgent philosophising is actually a self justification for not disciplining the paratrooper for dereliction of duty. He ends his aside by expressing his conviction that physical and moral courage stems from divine assistance (p 123). One can only conclude that the deity deserted the paratrooper in his hour of need.

For the most part, Breytenbach does not indulge the shortcomings of those who served under or over him. He is equally critical of the FNLA and UNITA leaderships. He regards them as opportunists who were more concerned with establishing their own fiefdoms than in looking after the welfare of their followers. Chipenda is depicted as a coward who is not prepared to lead his men in battle but is quick to claim the victories of those fighting under the FNLA flag. His unflattering characterisation of Chipenda is typical of Breytenbach's propensity to take no prisoners; to spare no one his criticism when he believed it was warranted. Breytenbach did not kowtow to his superiors, who relished the prospect of an "independent command". He was a maverick with a keen sense of (mis)adventure, and it was precisely these qualities rather than his leadership skills that prevented him from being promoted higher in the ranks of the SADF. Still, Breytenbach is something of a cult figure in certain circles of SADF veterans. The telling and retelling of his exploits during Operation Savannah and later Operation Reindeer (the 1978 attack on Cassinga) about which he has also written, have turned him into one of most legendary figures of the Border War.

Breytenbach's status has been purposefully cultivated by a string of publications. The process commenced with the 1986 edition of *Forged in Battle*.

Although capable of admitting his errors of judgment and self deprecation (with a tinge of humour), Breytenbach is undoubtedly the hero of his own story. The other dramatis personae are called by their first or nicknames – an incomplete list of names inserted at the end of the book identifies them by full name and rank. The list comprises the names of only officers and non commissioned officers. While certain of these characters appear larger than life, B Coy's foot soldiers feature as anonymous figures in Breytenbach's story.

It was precisely their anonymity that made B Coy (and, later, 32 Battalion)'s troops expendable. After being decommissioned, the soldiers of 32 Battalion were granted 15 year tenure to an abandoned asbestos mine at Pomfret in the arid and inaccessible northern Cape. Here they established a rudimentary settlement and were expected to subsist on a nominal army pension without access to transport and health care. This was regarded as a betrayal by certain SADF officers who had served in 32 Battalion. Indeed, a number staged a symbolic demonstration where they presented F.W. de Klerk with 32 silver coins. Rather surprisingly, Breytenbach has not updated his Epilogue and made mention of these developments. He apparently felt very strongly about how his former charges were treated by the outgoing National Party government. And he recognised that the value of these black Angolans lay not in their own accomplishments on the battlefield but in their ability to prevent the loss of lives of white conscripts. In short, they were cannon fodder for the apartheid state. And yet, Breytenbach, like many other retired SADF officers, is an apologist for the self same state. Such contradictions are part and parcel of the Breytenbach legend.

The decision of the publishers to print a second edition of *Forged in Battle* suggests that the demand for Border War books has not eased off. The number of titles devoted to 32 Battalion alone attests to this. Breytenbach himself has authored another, more expansive text called *The Buffalo Soldiers: The Story of South Africa's 32 Battalion, 1975-1993* (Galago, 2002). Piet Nortjie has published two books that amount to an attempt to write the definitive unit history. These are *32 Battalion: The inside Story of South Africa's Elite Fighting Unit* (Zebra Press, 2004) and *The Terrible Ones: The Complete History of 32 Battalion*, 2 volumes, (Random House, Struik, 2012), respectively. These are complemented by Louis Bothma's *Buffalo Battalion: South Africa's 32 Battalion – A Tale of Sacrifice* (Self published, 2008). Then there are two narrative accounts that provide personal perspectives, namely: Nico van der Walt's *To the Bush and Back* (Self published, 2008) and Marius Scheepers' *Striking inside Angola with 32 Battalion* (30° South Publishers, 2012). All of these books add to our knowledge of 32 Battalion, but *Forged in Battle* remains the publication that newcomers to this corpus of work are likely to read first.

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