Border War nostalgia, political amnesia, and a real life tragedy

Delville Linford with A.J. Venter, *As the Crow Flies: My Bushman Experience with 31 Battalion*
Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2015
287pp
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As the Crow Flies is the latest in a spate of Border War books to hit the shelves and, no doubt, will be devoured by an ever growing and appreciative audience. The authors of these books put pen to paper for a complex set of reasons. Some do so to come to terms with a difficult and harrowing period of their lives. Others do it to "set the record straight" and give meaning to the sacrifices which they and their comrades made on behalf of a government that was the pariah of the world. Yet others, do so to provide a record of their service for posterity. The events that took place in the Border War were often seminal in the lives of the participants. Sometimes the narratives they produce are confessional, but more often, they are used to justify their actions in a brutal war. Delville Linford and many others of his time see themselves as honourable, apolitical soldiers, fighting for the government of the day.

Few who experienced the trauma of the "Bush War" will readily admit that they fought to uphold the apartheid system. Many will reason that they risked their lives and that of their men to halt the advance of communism and buy time for the politicians to negotiate an equitable settlement. The context of this book is very different from the world that we inhabit today. The author hails from a period when many of his peers honestly believed that they were fighting to uphold Christian and "Western civilised" values against a barbaric, violent, backward and chaotic enemy, influenced and manipulated by the dreaded scourge of communism. They saw themselves as likeable, noble individuals who merely responded to the "terrorist" and communist threat with a calm, measured, well-trained and capable force. Military service was heroic, an opportunity for personal growth and a necessary sacrifice for the common good. For many, it was a rite of passage and a coming of age in pursuit of a noble cause.

Linford sums up many of these sentiments in one concluding sentence:

> So ended the year of our Lord 1975. I was glad to have been a part of such a remarkable and exhilarating adventure and was more than happy that the Good Lord had thought it fit to bring me out of the whole thing unscathed. I was also enormously pleased that I was able to play my small part in the history of the Bushmen people and 31 Battalion (p 252).

The backdrop for the narrative is set in 1974, during the period just before the Portuguese withdrawal from Angola. The South Africans launched a hasty and ill-prepared invasion of Angola called Operation Savannah. In this ill-conceived operation, Delville Linford, the author, was in command of Combat Group Alpha, a

ragtag assortment of ex-FNLA deserters and two Bushmen companies. By all accounts, Delville Linford was an accomplished career soldier having joined the military in 1953. He later graduated with a BMil from the Military Academy in 1957. His formal training and area of expertise was with the artillery until 1972. In 1973 he was appointed senior South African liaison officer to a Portuguese sector commander at Serpa Pinto, Angola. It was during this period that he learnt of how the Portuguese effectively used Bushmen in a counter-insurgency role. His time with the Portuguese was short lived but instructive. He returned to South West Africa in 1974 where he started training the Bushmen based at Omega, later called Battle Group Alpha, as part of Operation Savannah.

The story of the Bushmen who fought for South Africa in the Border War began long before they became part of the South African Defence Force (SADF) in 1974. Their military service started with the Angolan-Portuguese colonial government. The Portuguese Intelligence Service began to recruit Bushmen in 1966 to bolster the intelligence and reconnaissance needs of their security forces. These Flechas, or arrows as they became known, grew to a complement of over 2 000 by 1974. The Portuguese took advantage of the long-standing animosity between black Africans and Khoisan to facilitate the recruitment of the latter to do their military bidding. The Flechas took to their new role with aplomb and soon graduated from mere intelligence gatherers to become fully fledged soldiers. They wore Portuguese uniform and went into battle with modern assault rifles and equipment. In exchange for their new found status and safety (their families were accommodated on various bases), many accepted Christianity and gave their unflinching loyalty to the Portuguese.

Inevitably, the demise of the Portuguese colonial government in 1974 brought about danger for all those who had cooperated with the colonial forces. During the seven months between the collapse of the Portuguese government and the granting of independence to Angola, many Flechas and their families were persecuted, threatened or killed by the vengeful liberation movements. Political circumstances and survival forced the Flechas, yet again, into the hands of those seeking to maintain colonial hegemony. The Angolan Bushmen sought and found refuge across the border in South West Africa.

The Flechas were about to re-enter a new perplexing phase of the African war. Their confusion was mirrored in the distorted loyalties of the men who were now about to fight and die for South Africa. The Bushmen, who had recently fought for the Portuguese colonialists, found themselves abandoned when their former paymasters beat a hasty retreat to the safety of Portugal. They found few friends in the black African population surrounding them. Rather than suffer the revenge that was surely forthcoming, they made for the relative safety across the border into Caprivi and the welcoming hands of the SADF. Their distrust of black Africans according to Steenkamp, "was so great that even in later years, in spite of the SADF's efforts to change their attitude, they were reluctant to go on a patrol unless it was led by a

white officer…"[1] Adding to the confusion was that formerly intractable enemies of 14 years were now allies and it took some effort to convince the Bushmen that they would now be fighting side by side with their long-standing foes, the FNLA and UNITA, against the MPLA.

At one level the book tells of the remarkable exploits of a band of disparate soldiers who were flung headlong into an ill-prepared conflict. Linford was an accomplished, orthodox soldier who found himself commanding an unconventional army during an operation that demanded a grasp of unconventional methods to be successful. The ever ingenious Linford took the opportunity to conduct the necessary training for his men while they were deep inside enemy held territory. His resolve is testament to a leadership style that thrives on adversity and sees opportunity rather than succumbing to seemingly insurmountable odds. The obvious military acumen of Linford, together with the resourcefulness and courage of the men he commanded, allowed them to reach the outskirts of Luanda, although heavily outnumbered and ill-equipped for such a major task. The narrative surrounding the adventures of this small band of warriors is compelling and the obstacles they encountered and surmounted along the way makes for a fascinating study of what is militarily possible, even in the face of enormous odds.

At another level, this is the story of an unfortunate group of indigenous people who were trapped by surrounding warring factions, and who had little option but to choose a side. If one is to believe Linford, then the unfortunate Bushmen were first forced to choose the Portuguese and then the South Africans in order to survive. Linford sees the South Africans as the Bushmen's saviours, the heroes who came to their rescue when the Flechas were fleeing the murderous Angolan liberation movements. He seldom questions the ideological motives and consequent policies that underpinned the war, nor its devastating effect on the people caught up in the conflict. He does not question the price of a safe refuge in South West Africa when the Bushmen, once again, offered their services against the insurgents under the banner of the SADF. When South Africa gave up South West Africa for independence, the Bushmen were again betrayed only to be shunned by a post-apartheid democratic South African government.

Autobiographies of this kind amount to primary sources, and as such, they occupy a special niche in the Border War historiography. They contain valuable insights gleaned only by witnesses of the actual events as they unfolded. However, first-hand accounts have limitations beyond the obvious restriction of viewing the proceedings through a keyhole. Autobiographies can be highly subjective and subject to emotion, nostalgia, justification, exaggeration and a myriad of other influences that render the narrative as a less than perfect reflection of the past. Primary sources by their nature are full of prejudice and errors and it is best not to rely on them as the last word but rather to seek corroboration and clarity and indeed correction, from

1. W. Steenkamp, *Border Strike! South Africa into Angola, 1975–1980* (Just Done Productions, Durban, 2006), p 50.

other sources. It is useful to understand the purpose for which the book is written, because often, perhaps even unwittingly, the author pens his story to serve his own purpose rather than that of history. Books such as these, together with other primary documents, will provide the foundations on which historians will be able to build their research and produce more objective material via rigorous research. Their task will be to extract the many layers of evidence contained in the book. Some of it, the witting or the intentional message of the author, but more interestingly and valuable, his unwitting or unintentional meaning. It is this which reveals the character, beliefs, attitudes and values of the author and the principles and customs of the society he and his soldiers hailed from.

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An unconvincing memoir

Dirk Mudge, *All the Way to an Independent Namibia*
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R395.00

Although a brief, but perceptive biography of Dirk Mudge, based on considerable research, appeared in Afrikaans in 1999,[2] it was good to hear that Mudge, the most important internal leader in the process leading to Namibia's independence, had followed other Namibian politicians and written his memoirs. First published in Afrikaans in 2015, these now appear in an English translation, with a Preface by Piet Croucamp. Though some of his Preface makes no sense, one can agree with Croucamp that Mudge "contributed more than most to leading those on the inside into a brave new world called democracy" (p 15). Unfortunately, *All the Way to an Independent Namibia* badly needed an editor to eliminate repetition and confusion and improve Mudge's highly descriptive, often rambling style.[3] In his account of his life, which he interweaves with potted history, he includes material from motions, debates and speeches, often quoting them and making some chapters almost unreadable. More

2. A.J. van Wyk, *Dirk Mudge: Reenmaker van die Namib* (J.L. van Schaik, Pretoria, 1999), reviewed in *Historia*, 45, 1 (May 2000). For a revealing interview with Mudge conducted by Tor Sellstrom in 1995, see http://www.liberationafrica.se/intervstories/interviews/mudge/?by-name=1
3. For example, he says his career in politics began in 1955 and then almost immediately afterwards, in 1960 (pp 22–23); he goes on to tell us that he was a party organiser for the 1955 election (p 67) and won election to the Legislative Assembly in 1961 (p 69). He writes that the "rebellion" [sic] at Sharpeville "set the world on fire" (p 70), and that "in those days SWAPO was not a banned organisation…" (p 114), yet later tells us that it was never banned. Crocker was not Reagan's Deputy Chairman of Foreign Affairs (p 356); and the figures Mudge gives for UNTAG are incorrect (p 393).