

Review Article

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Besprekingsartikel

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Daniel Steyn and Arnè Söderlund, *Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa's Seaborne Raiders 1978-1988*

Helion & Co., Solihull and GG Books, Rugby (co-publishers), 2014

437pp

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Ian Liebenberg, Jorge Risquet and Vladimir Shubin (eds), *A Far-away War: Angola, 1975-1989*

Sun Press, Stellenbosch, 2015

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Gary Baines, *South Africa's "Border War": Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories*

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**The war for Southern Africa (1966-1989) that continues
to fascinate and haunt us**

*André Wessels**

Abstract

In this review article certain aspects of the history of the War for Southern Africa of 1966 to 1989, as well as its consequences, are evaluated critically by looking at three

* André Wessels is a senior professor and Head of the Department of History at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein; and also a visiting professor at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. His research focuses on twentieth-century South African military history. He is the author, co-author or editor of nine books, and the author or co-author of more than 120 articles in peer-reviewed journals.

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recent publications on interrelated topics. The most controversial of the three publications deals with the highly-classified operations conducted from 1978 to 1988 by the South African Special Forces in Angola and Mozambique – with invaluable assistance provided by the South African Navy. The second book focuses on the war in Angola in the years 1975 to 1989, looking at the conflict from the South African, Russian, Cuban and East German point of view, and also includes an invaluable list of sources that deal with the war. The third book explores, inter alia, the impact that the years of conflict had (and still have) on South African society and culture. These three publications form part of the continued outpouring of books on the years of struggle in southern Africa, but are of a much higher standard than some of the many popular works of recent years.

Keywords: Namibia; Angola; liberation struggle; civil war; South African Defence Force (SADF); South African Navy; Special Forces; Cubans; South West African Peoples' Organisation (SWAPO); memorialisation.

Opsomming

In hierdie oorsigartikel word sekere aspekte van die geskiedenis van die Oorlog vir Suidelike Afrika van 1966 tot 1989, asook die gevolge wat dit ingehou het, krities geëvalueer aan die hand van drie onlangse publikasies oor verbandhoudende temas. Die mees omstrede van hierdie boeke handel oor die hoogs geklassifiseerde operasies wat vanaf 1978 tot 1988 deur Suid-Afrikaanse Spesiale Magte in Angola en Mosambiek van stapel gestuur is, danksy die deurslaggewend belangrike hulp wat deur die Suid-Afrikaanse Vloot verleen is. Die tweede boek fokus op die oorlog in Angola in die jare 1975 tot 1989, belig dié konflik vanuit die Suid-Afrikaanse, Russiese, Kubaanse en Oos-Duitse oogpunt, en bevat ook 'n waardevolle lys van bronne wat oor die oorlog handel. Die derde boek ondersoek onder meer die impak wat die jare van konflik op die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing en kultuur gehad het (en steeds het). Hierdie drie publikasies maak deel uit van die voortgesette stroom boeke wat oor die stryd in suidelike Afrika gepubliseer word, maar is van 'n beter kwaliteit as sommige van die talle populêre publikasies wat verskyn.

Sleutelwoorde: Namibië; Angola; bevrydingstryd; burgeroorlog; Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag (SAW); Suid-Afrikaanse Vloot; Spesiale Magte; Kubane; South West African Peoples' Organisation (SWAPO); herdenking.

Introduction

Fifty years after the war in South West Africa (SWA; since 1990 officially known as Namibia) broke out, the outpouring of books dealing with this devastating conflict continues. From a South African point of view, the war “up north” and “on the border” was, and still is, usually referred to as the Border War;¹ from a Namibian

1. For the problems with regard to the nomenclature surrounding the South African military involvement in SWA and Angola see, for example, A. Esterhuyse, “The Strategic Contours of the South African Military Involvement in Namibia and Angola

point of view their liberation struggle can rightfully be called the Namibian War of Independence; but then one also has to take into consideration the fact that this war, in due course, spilled over into Angola and even into Zambia and (until 1989) became intertwined with the Angolan Civil War of 1975 to 2002. However, in a broader geopolitical and strategic context, and in terms of the decolonisation of southern Africa, it can also be referred to as being part of the Great Southern African Liberation War/Struggle of 1961 (when guerrillas first became active in Angola, which was then still a Portuguese colony) to 2002 (when Jonas Savimbi was killed in Angola, after a very long civil war). In this article various terms for the war(s) will be used, but for the most part it will be referred to as the War for Southern Africa, depending on the context of what is being discussed. For the purposes of this article, the War for Southern Africa will be limited to the years 1966 to 1989.

A few books were published in the wake of the end of hostilities in 1988/89; for example, Willem Steenkamp's *South Africa's Border War 1966–1989* (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1989), but especially since about 2006 there has been a proliferation of books, for example, unit or regimental histories such as Piet Nortje's *The Terrible Ones: A Complete History of 32 Battalion*, 2 volumes (Zebra Press, Cape Town, 2012); the sometimes very personal reminiscences of ordinary soldiers, such as Steven Webb's *Ops Medic: A National Serviceman's Border War* (Galago, Alberton, 2008) and of generals, such as Magnus Malan's *My Life with the Defence Force* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2006). Not many of these books are of a scholarly nature.

In 2014–2015 the stream of Namibian liberation struggle – and related publications – continued, including the books written by Hans Beukes² and Richard Dale,³ and one that was edited by Jeremy Silvester.⁴ These three publications, together with those of Cleophas J. Tsokodayi⁵ and Piero Gleijeses,⁶ were analysed critically in an excellent review article written by Christopher Saunders.⁷ These books focus primarily on political and related issues. Three other important books that were published in 2014–2015, will now be reviewed in this article. These three books represent three categories of “War for Southern Africa” books. In the first place, there are books that are written by “amateur historians”, dealing with military operations

during the 1970/1980s”, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 34, 1 (February 2009), pp 16–17.

2. H. Beukes, *Long Road to Liberation: An Exiled Namibian Activist's Perspective* (Porcupine Press, Johannesburg, 2014).
3. R. Dale, *The Namibian War of Independence, 1966–1989: Diplomatic, Economic and Military Campaigns* (McFarland & Co., Jefferson: NC, 2014).
4. J. Silvester (ed.), *Re-viewing Resistance in Namibian History* (University of Namibia Press, Windhoek, 2015).
5. C.J. Tsokodayi, *Namibia's Independence Struggle: The Role of the United Nations* (Xlibris, Bloomington, 2011).
6. P. Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976–1991* (University of North Carolina Press and Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2013).
7. C. Saunders, “Namibia's Liberation Struggle and Resistance: A Critical View of Some Recent Perspectives”, *Historia*, 60, 2 (May 2015), pp 201–211.

and written for interested members of the general public, in this case, *Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa's Seaborne Raiders 1978–1988*, written by Daniel Steyn and Arnè Söderlund. Secondly, there are books that to some extent deal with the military course of events, but where geo-political, social and strategic and tactical issues are placed in a broader context by authors who have a more scholarly approach, in this case *A Far-away War: Angola, 1975-1989*, edited by Ian Liebenberg, Jorge Risquet and Vladimir Shubin. Thirdly, there are scholarly books that transcend the military events, written by academics for other scholars – i.e. mainly for academics and other researchers and postgraduate students. Here the book by Gary Baines, *South Africa's "Border War": Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories*, will be scrutinised.⁸

In this article the three books mentioned above will first of all be discussed separately in the three sections that follow, while in the concluding section the said three publications will be placed in a broader historiographical context, and where possible, compared.

The secret war of South Africa's seaborne raiders

One of the most fascinating, revealing, but also controversial publications of the recent past that deals with the War for Southern Africa, is the book by Daniel ("Douw") Steyn and Arnè Söderlund, namely *Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa's Seaborne Raiders 1978–1988*. It deals with the many clandestine raids launched by the then South African Defence Force (SADF)⁹ against targets in Angola, Mozambique and Tanzania.

The authors were both intimately involved with these operations. Douw Steyn joined the South African (SA) Army in 1974, saw action in Angola,¹⁰ and was awarded the Honorus Crux, then SADF's highest decoration for gallantry. Subsequently, Steyn qualified as an operator in the Special Forces (also known as the "Recces"), in which capacity he served for 15 years. As operational commander of the 4 Recce raiding group, he took part in several operations in Angola, earning two additional prominent military awards for his exploits. He retired from the SANDF as a Lieutenant-Colonel in

8. These three books have previously been reviewed by the author for three different journals. See his reviews in the *International Bibliography of Military History*, 35, 2 (2015), p 160 (Steyn/Söderlund); *Yesterday & Today* 15 (July 2016), pp 125–127 (Liebenberg/Risquet/Shubin); and *African Historical Review*, 48, 2 (2016), pp 92–94 (Baines).

9. The SADF became the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) at midnight on 26/27 April 1994, when the SADF, the defence forces of the four former so-called independent homelands, and the armed wings of two liberation movements amalgamated to form a new defence force.

10. For more on the SA Defence Force's invasion of Angola, 1975–1976, see, for example, F.J. du T. Spies, *Operasie Savannah: Angola 1975–1976* (Directorate Public Relations, SADF, Pretoria, 1989); L. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2013), pp 13–31.

1996.¹¹ Steyn's co-author, Arnè Söderlund, served for 40 years in the SA Navy, inter alia as commanding officer of the diving support and torpedo recovery ship SAS¹² *Fleur* and as the first commanding officer of the strike craft SAS *Oswald Pirow* (later renamed *René Sethren*). After serving in the Navy in many capacities, inter alia as Naval and Military Attaché in London and head of Fleet Force Preparation in the post-apartheid SA Navy, he retired as a Rear Admiral (Junior Grade) in 2006. He has edited several publications, has co-authored a book on the history of the SA Navy,¹³ and plays an important role in preserving South Africa's naval heritage in and around Simon's Town.¹⁴

Not many books have been written on the history of South Africa's naval forces.¹⁵ The stream of books that have thus far been published on the SADF's role in the so-called "Border War", also deal primarily with the SA Army's involvement, with only a few books that focus on the role of the SA Air Force (SAAF).¹⁶ In light of the fact that the SADF mainly deployed ground troops during this conflict, with SAAF aircraft and helicopters in a supporting role, this state of affairs is understandable. The SA Navy is usually not associated with the "Border War", but it nevertheless played an important, albeit understandably limited role.¹⁷

Thus far, most "Border War" books have only cursory references to the SA Navy's role during Operation Savannah,¹⁸ while it took many years before there were references to the Navy's role in providing support to the Special Forces.¹⁹ This void has, to a large extent, been filled with Steyn and Söderlund's book *Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa's Seaborne Raiders 1978–1988*. In this book 22 operations planned or carried out by the SADF's Reconnaissance Commandos since 1981, known as Special Forces Reconnaissance Regiments, in Angola, and 21 operations in

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11. D. Steyn and A. Söderlund, *Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa's Seaborne Raiders, 1978-1988* (Helion & Co., Solihull and GG Books, Rugby, 2014), unnumbered last page in book.
 12. South African Ship/Suid-Afrikaanse Skip.
 13. C.H. Bennett and A.G. Söderlund, *South Africa's Navy: A Navy of the People and for the People* (SA Navy, Simon's Town, 2008).
 14. Steyn and Söderlund, *Iron Fist from the Sea*, unnumbered last page in book.
 15. See, for example, J.C. Goosen (compiler), *South Africa's Navy: The First Fifty Years* (W. J. Flesch & Partners, Johannesburg, 1973); L.C.F. Turner et al., *War in the Southern Oceans, 1939–1945* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1961); and footnote 13 above.
 16. For books on the SAAF's Border War role, see, for example, D. Lord, *From Fledgling to Eagle: The South African Air Force during the Border War* (30 Degrees South Publishers, Johannesburg, 2008).
 17. See, for example, A. Wessels, "The South African Navy during the Years of Conflict in Southern Africa, 1966–1989", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3 (December 2006), pp 283–303.
 18. See, for example, Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, pp 141–142.
 19. See, for example, P. Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations, 1969–1994* (Galago, Alberton, 1999), pp 347–349, 357–358, 392–393, 457–469; J. Greeff, *A Greater Share of Honour* (Ntomeni Publishers, Ellisras, 2001), pp 118–159.

Mozambique are described. The authors received access to hitherto classified official records kept by the South African Department of Defence's Documentation Centre in Pretoria. However, many documents had been destroyed *circa* 1994. In an effort to bridge the many gaps, the authors consequently conducted interviews with several of those who took part in the operations. Assistance was also provided by Soviet Union veterans who served in Angola. The authors also analysed in detail the surviving logbooks. The consulted sources are listed on pp 428–430 of the book, but unfortunately there are no footnote or endnote references. The book includes many photographs, most of them not previously published.

The authors decided to follow a chronological approach to describe the Recces' seaborne operations and the support that was provided by the SA Navy. They briefly discuss the origins and development of South Africa's Special Forces.²⁰ The first seaborne operation they consider is Operation Starlight at Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, as early as 1972.²¹ Interestingly enough, the first number of seaborne operations from 1978 onwards were launched against targets in Mozambique. In all these operations, the SADF Special Forces were dependent on the SA Navy's ships and/or submarines to take them to and from the target area. The action then moves to the "Western (i.e. Angolan) Front" (see Chapter 6). Support operations on the "Eastern Front" (Mozambique) follows (see Chapter 7). In Angola, there followed Operation Kerslig (November 1981), when an oil refinery in Luanda was damaged (Chapter 8). Further operations along the Mozambican coast (Chapter 9) included attacks against targets in Beira. These, as well as all the other Recce operations that are described in the book, were approved by the National Party government in South Africa.

In the course of the 1980s, the war in Angola escalated and as a consequence Recce operations also increased (Chapter 10).²² Although most of the seaborne raids were successful, some did go wrong for example, when during Operation Argon (May 1985) in the Angolan enclave of Cabinda, two operators were killed and Captain Wynand du Toit was captured.²³ There are many startling revelations in the book, including the plan to blow up the entire national executive of South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) at a bush lodge in Tanzania in 1987. This attack had to be aborted when poor visibility forced the aircraft carrying the Recces to divert to

20. Steyn and Söderlund, *Iron Fist from the Sea*, pp 39–63. For more details with regard to South Africa's Recces, see also, for example, P. Matthysen, M. Kalkwarf and M. Huxtable, *"Recce": A Collector's Guide to the South African Special Forces* (Johannesburg, 30 Degrees South Publishers, 2010); P. Els, *We Fear Naught but God: The Story of the South African Special Forces "The Recces"* (PelsA Books, [SA], 2015).

21. Steyn and Söderlund, *Iron Fist from the Sea*, pp 21–28.

22. For Recce operations in general, see again the sources referred to in footnotes 19 and 20 above.

23. See, for example, Steyn and Söderlund, *Iron Fist from the Sea*, pp 304–329; W. du Toit, *Judasbok: Verraad ter Wille van Oorlewing* (Author, s.l., 2015); A. Soule, G. Dixon and R. Richards, *The Wynand du Toit Story* (Hans Strydom, Johannesburg, 1987).

Malawi. The book also tells the story of how two Recces eavesdropped on Thabo Mbeki at a hotel on Christmas Eve 1987 in Dar es Salaam.²⁴

These clandestine operations “behind enemy lines” would not have been possible without the assistance provided by the SA Navy. All nine Navy strike craft, all three of its submarines, as well as one of its frigates (SAS *President Pretorius*), its combat support ship SAS *Tafelberg* and the hydrographic survey ship SAS *Protea* were each involved in two or more of the operations.²⁵ The SADF risked a great deal when launching seaborne Special Forces operations, but these operations added another important chapter to the military history of South Africa’s armed forces.

Putting political, ideological and ethical considerations aside, the exploits of the Recces and SA Navy were, militarily speaking, remarkable achievements, so much more if one considers that no more than 45 operators (both black and white) were involved in the operations – most of them not yet 25 years old. But the actions of the Recces were controversial, and *Iron Fist from the Sea* is eye-opening and disturbing in many ways (depending on how one views military matters), shedding light on events that are not well known, or completely unknown. Everything considered, it is a seminal work that documents the SADF’s seaborne Recce operations as well as the invaluable assistance provided by the SA Navy in this regard. It reveals the versatility and breath-taking effectiveness of South Africa’s Reconnaissance Regiments and is a worthy addition to the growing historiography of the War for Southern Africa. Many readers will find the content upsetting; but the truth must be told. The facts of military history must be faced and although there will always be those who will glorify military exploits, others have the desire to understand the past in all its nuances. Of course, both the authors of *Iron Fist from the Sea* were personally involved in some of the events that they describe and consequently they are providing *their* interpretation of the past. If there is a major flaw in the book it is, as Alex Mouton has pointed out, the fact that the Recce operations are not placed in a broader historical context.²⁶ Political and other developments in southern Africa are not explained in detail, and there is no thorough concluding evaluation.

The well-known independent defence analyst, Helmoed-Römer Heitman, once wrote that by the mid-1980s the SA Navy “was on the way to becoming the most experienced in the world at inserting special forces teams, and the latter were themselves among the best anywhere”.²⁷ Steyn and Söderlund’s *Iron Fist from the Sea* is testimony to this. Everything considered, it is an extraordinary book, giving the reader insight into the incredible raids successfully undertaken by the SADF’s Special

24. Steyn and Söderlund, *Iron Fist from the Sea*, pp 406–411.

25. For more on the history of these ships, see, for example, A. du Toit, *South Africa’s Fighting Ships Past and Present* (Ashanti, Rivonia, 1992), pp 220–245, 263–277, 297–309.

26. F.A. Mouton, Book review of D. Steyn and A. Söderlund, *Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa’s Seaborne Raiders, 1978–1988* (Helion & Co., Solihull, 2015), in *African Historical Review*, 48, 1 (2016), pp 158–160.

27. *The Mercury*, 12 June 2014, p 8.

Forces with the indispensable assistance of the SA Navy.²⁸ For many years, only the Recce inner circle knew about these exploits and to their credit they kept it secret, although since 1999 an inkling of what happened “behind enemy lines” entered the public domain. Thanks to Douw Steyn and Arnè Söderlund's research and efforts, the record has now been revealed for all to read. The book is an invaluable addition to the South African military historiography, is highly instructive and informative and should be studied by all students of the science of war and of military history. After all, this is not merely an adventure story, but also deals with topics such as the development of maritime doctrine, the planning of joint operations, and the concomitant design and development of specialist raiding craft and amphibious assault platforms.

A far-away war that impacted on more than one home front

Forty years after South African forces invaded Angola in 1975, Sun Press published *A Far-away War: Angola, 1975–1989*, edited by Ian Liebenberg (from the South African Military Academy), (the late) Jorge Risquet (inter alia a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba) and Vladimir Shubin (the former Deputy Director of the Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences). Co-editors were Gert van der Westhuizen (journalist), Hedelberto Lopez Blanch (Cuban journalist and historian) and (the late) Gennady Shubin (Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Southern African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences). Other contributors are Phil Eidelberg (historian), Klaus Storkmann (German officer), Ulrich van der Heyden (German academic) and (the late) Tienie du Plessis (publisher).²⁹

In the elaborate bibliography on the so-called Border War at the end of this book (more about this important bibliography later), Steyn and Söderlund's *Iron Fist from the Sea* is included (p 176), but otherwise there are no references to the SADF's seaborne raiders. The purpose of *A Far-away War* is, of course, not to focus on any minor aspect of the War for Southern Africa, but on the Angolan war zone as a whole – where, towards the end of the Cold War, the superpowers one more time confronted one another, mainly through proxy forces. And when the elephants fight, it is (as always) the grass that suffers most.

With so many books that are written for an uncritical public by “amateur historians”, it is always a delight to have a new book on the shelves written by academics or people with tertiary academic training in History or related disciplines. This holds true for *A Far-away War: Angola, 1975–1989*, a book based on solid research. But the title is somewhat misleading because the book deals with more than just the war in Angola. From the names of the editors, co-editors and other

28. For views that are very similar, see, for example, A. Esterhuyse, Book review of D. Steyn and A. Söderlund, *Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa's Seaborne Raiders, 1978–1988* (Helion & Co., Solihull, 2015), in *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 44, 1 (2016), pp 256–259.

29. See the list of “Contributors” in I. Liebenberg, J. Risquet and V. Shubin (eds), *A Far-away War: Angola, 1975-1989* (Sun Press, Stellenbosch, 2015), p viii.

contributors (mentioned above) it is also already clear that this publication is neither written from a South African point of view, like Leopold Scholtz's *The SADF in the Border War* (already referred to in footnote 10 above), nor from a Cuban point of view, like P. Gleijeses's *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976–1991* (already referred to in footnote 6 above), but that the war is here seen from different points of view, including those of South Africa, the Republic of Cuba, the former Soviet Union (split up into Russia, and 14 other states in 1991), and the former Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic; i.e. East Germany, since 1990 part of a re-united Germany).

As Will Gordon has correctly pointed out, this publication in contrast with most other “Border War” books is to a large extent written from a “pro-East” and sometimes even “anti-West” perspective.³⁰ Many readers who thoroughly enjoyed reading *Iron Fist from the Sea*, will find much in *A Far-away War* hard to swallow because it is to a large extent, written from a liberal and socialist point of view. The book confronts many well-established ideas in South Africa with regard to the war “up north” and “on the border”. After setting the scene in the “Introduction” (Liebenberg, pp 11–15), the chapter “On our Borders: Namibia seeks its own Destiny” (Liebenberg, pp 17–34) provides a review of the history of SWA/Namibia from 1885 to 1990. Then follows the thought-provoking “Tempest in a Teacup? The Angolan War as Cold War Template, 1975–1989” (Eidelberg, pp 35–39), placing the conflict in the broader international context. “The Militarisation of the South African Society 1972–1988” (Liebenberg, pp 41–55) has, of course, been dealt with in much more detail by authors such as Annette Seegers.³¹ The chapter “The Cubans in Angola, 1976–1990” (Blanch, pp 57–68) provides a chronological review of foreign involvement in Angola.

In the intriguing “Beware, the Reds are upon us: Another View on the Relations between South Africans and Russians” (Liebenberg, pp 69–81) the author takes the reader back to the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902 when Russian volunteers fought on the side of the Boers in their (Afrikaner) independence struggle against Great Britain; but then, in the course of the twentieth century, and especially after the National Party came to power in 1948 and implemented its policy of apartheid, relations between South Africans and Russians soured. This then brings us to “The Soviet Involvement” (Shubin and Shubin, pp 83–100), followed by “Secret Solidarity: The Military Support provided for the Liberation Movement in Angola by East Germany” (Storkmann and Van der Heyden, pp 101–109). In an effort to defend their country against the SADF and the União Nacional para a Independência Total de

30. W. Gordon, Book review of I. Liebenberg, J. Risquet and V. Shubin (eds), *A Far-away War: Angola, 1975-1989* (Sun Media, Stellenbosch, 2015), in *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 44, 1 (2016), p 254. For another excellent review of the book, see M. Alexander, Book review of I. Liebenberg, J. Risquet and V. Shubin (eds), *A Far-away War: Angola, 1975-1989* (Sun Media, Stellenbosch, 2015), in *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 44, 2 (2016), pp 163–172.

31. A. Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (IB Taurus, London, 1996).

Angola (UNITA), the Angolans invited foreign troops and advisors from many countries to take part in (what was for these foreigners) a far-away war; in much the same way as many young SADF soldiers, mostly national servicemen, became engaged in a war “on the border”, far away from the “States” (i.e. South Africa). Finally, in chapter 9, “National Service and Resistance to Conscription in South Africa, 1968–1989” (Van der Westhuizen, Liebenberg and Du Plessis, pp 111–134), this controversial issue is discussed in a well-balanced way.³² This chapter includes references to the role of the military chaplain service³³ and of churches in general.³⁴ Each chapter is well-documented, with endnotes at the end of every chapter.

Each of the themes mentioned above lend themselves to an independent study, and – as has been indicated – have indeed in certain instances been researched in more depth and the research findings published in book form. But here we now have a single volume in which other voices are heard, at least filling, to some extent, the gap in

English-language texts on the war in Angola that have thus far mainly been dominated by manuscripts produced by former SADF members – as has been the case with *Iron Fist from the Sea*. Ideally, *A Far-away War* should also have included chapters on the Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola (FAPLA), the South West African Peoples’ Organisation (SWAPO), and even the ANC.

Without in any way distracting from the value of all these chapters,³⁵ perhaps the most important contribution of *A Far-away War* is the “Bibliography on the Border War” (pp 165–200) which is the most comprehensive list to date of sources that deal with this war. There is reference to a report; several internet sources and websites are listed; as well as films, records, novels and plays. But from an academic/research point of view, the more than 500 book titles and more than 500 references to articles, are invaluable. The bibliography has references to sources published in countries such as South Africa, Namibia, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Germany, Russia and Cuba. This is indeed a treasure trove for anyone interested in the war in Angola/Namibia and will for many years to come be of great assistance to postgraduate students and other researchers, as well as anyone else who would like to know more about this fascinating, albeit tragic conflict.

32. See also M.W. Phillips, “The End Conscription Campaign, 1983–1988: A Study of White Extra-Parliamentary Opposition to Apartheid”, MA dissertation, University of South Africa, 2002.

33. For the SADF’s Chaplain Service in general, see also, for example, A. Wessels and I. Bredenkamp, “Military Chaplaincy in the South African Defence Force during the Namibian War of Independence, 1966–1989”, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 34, 1 (February 2009), pp 318–338.

34. See, for example, C. Villa-Vicencia, *Trapped in Apartheid: A Socio-theoretical History of the English-speaking Churches* (Orbis Books, New York, 1988).

35. For other critical comments see, for example, Evert Kleynhans’s review of *A Far-away War*, in *Historia*, 61, 2 (November 2016), pp 133–135.

Although the focus of the book is on the events that unfolded in Angola, the text of necessity has to include events in SWA/Namibia and in other countries. One will seldom in the same volume find that a conflict such as the Border War is looked at from more than one particular perspective. In *A Far-away War*, voice is given to some of the participants on all sides of the struggle, but it is rather a pity that the Angolans and Namibians are to a large extent left out. From a South African research perspective, it is good to be able to read (in English) about the role of the Cubans and Russians. An additional bonus is the inclusion of 24 black-and-white photographs and other illustrations in the first eight chapters, followed by 50 black-and-white photographs in the photo chapter “Cuban Archives. Images of the Angolan War” (pp 135–146) – many probably never published before. Then follow five maps (pp 147–150). In the photo chapter “Dust, War, Far-away Theatres, Home Fronts and Peace” (pp 151–164) there are 18 colour photographs and four other (colour) illustrations – once again, most have not been published previously. These striking depictions of war as seen through the lenses of, inter alia, Cuban and Russian cameras, add even more value to this publication.

The editors achieved what they set out to do, namely to “contribute to a wider understanding of a war in which many partook and a conflict that has some lasting consequences which are still felt today in South and southern Africa”. This publication certainly “contributes to the ongoing socio-historical dialogue and its outcomes for all those involved” and the book will indeed “leave the future generations of our country and in the region with a broader understanding of a conflict that should never have been” (p 15). A central theme in the book is that the National Party politicians in the mid-1970s became embroiled in a war in which they were, notwithstanding success on a tactical level, unable to maintain the strategic advantage.

Without any doubt, this publication provides (in chapters 2 to 9) much thought-provoking background information regarding this relatively recent and most devastating conflict in southern Africa, enabling those who were involved in the military operations, those who suffered from the concomitant collateral damage, as well as those who watched from the sidelines, to either once again or for the first time, take stock of the events of 1975 to 1989. To a large extent, it provides an alternative view to events that have thus far, at least in South Africa, been described from an SADF perspective. The comprehensive bibliography adds further value and contributes towards making *A Far-away War* a very important scholarly publication and a worthwhile contribution towards the ever-expanding historiography of the war in Angola and adjacent areas.

When memories can no longer be trusted, and stories fail to convince

The war on the battlefields of Angola, as narrated in *A Far-away War*, is over, but the war in SWA/Namibia, Angola and Mozambique continues in the memories of many of those who took part in the conflict. These include SADF soldiers (and airmen, and seaborne raiders), SWAPO guerrillas, members of FAPLA and their Cuban and Eastern Bloc allies, and civilians. And then there are also those people who were far away

from the war zones but nevertheless were in some way affected by the War for Southern Africa of 1966 to 1989, for example when news was received that a son or husband or boyfriend had been killed in action, or was wounded, or had gone missing. Thus, the war indeed rages on in the hearts and minds of many people – the winners and the vanquished, whoever they might be; all of them victims of a drawn-out conflict.

Authors have different views of the War for Southern Africa, as is clearly illustrated by *Iron Fist from the Sea* and *A Far-away War* – which have been discussed in the previous two sections of this article. The narrative that unfolds in the latter publication, differs substantially from the one penned by Steyn and Söderlund. And this then brings us to *South Africa's "Border War": Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories*, a tour de force by Gary Baines, a professor of History at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. The book is based on many years of thorough research, and links up (or overlaps) with some of Baines's earlier publications.³⁶ He makes it clear that he approaches the Border War as “a historian of war rather than a military historian” (p 7). His goal is, inter alia, to examine “how SADF veterans, and former conscripts in particular, have struggled to make sense of their part in the ‘Border War’” (p 6); and thus, the main focus of his study is “on cultural history and cultural production that shapes the experiences, representations and memory of a war” (p 7). Christo Doherty correctly points out that the book's title could just as well have been “Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories”, with “South Africa's Border War” as its subtitle.³⁷

In the first chapter (“Writing on the Wrong Side of History? SADF Soldier-Authors Reclaim the Border War”), Baines provides a review of books that have been written on the conflict, indicating how several authors “who were there” try to set the record straight, but he challenges the authority of soldiers' witness. This leads to “The Cultural Construction of Combat: Narrative Templates of the Border War” (Chapter 2), where he, inter alia, addresses the issues of cultural codes and the transcribed tradition of war writing, discusses universal war themes, as well as common themes in Vietnam and Border War literature. In Chapter 3, the “Codes of Conduct in Captivity: Narratives of South African POWs [prisoners of war] in Angola, 1975–1978” are discussed, including conditions of captivity, POW politicking on the

36. See, for example, G. Baines, “Blame, Shame or Reaffirmation? White Conscripts Reassess the Meaning of ‘Border War’ in Post-apartheid South Africa”, in *Interculture*, 5, 3 (October 2008), pp 214–227; G. Baines, “Conflicting Memories, Competing Narratives and Complicating Histories: Revisiting the Cassinga Controversy”, in *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 6 (2009), pp 7–26; G. Baines, “Site of Struggle? The Freedom Park Fracas and the Divisive Legacy of South Africa's Border War/Liberation Struggle”, in *Social Dynamics*, 35, 2 (September 2009), pp 330–344; G. Baines, “The Saga of South African POWs in Angola, 1975–1982”, in *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 40, 2 (2012), pp 102–141; G. Baines, “SADF Soldiers' Silences: Institutional, Consensual and Strategic”, in *Acta Academica*, 47, 1 (2015), pp 78–97.

37. C. Doherty, Review article of G. Baines, *South Africa's "Border War" ...* in *Journal for Contemporary History*, 41, 2 (December 2016), pp 273–274.

home front, the release and homecoming of POWs, and how they had to readjust to civilian life. The captivity narratives that form the basis of this chapter are those of SADF soldiers captured in Angola during Operation Savannah, 1975–1976. Since then, of course, the most publicised capture of an SADF soldier was that of Captain Wynand du Toit.³⁸

"Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Victimhood: A South African Veteran's Story" (Chapter 4) focuses on Clive Holt's experiences as published in his book, *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter*³⁹ and in turn, based on the diary that he kept while serving in Angola as a member of 61 Mechanised Battalion.⁴⁰ Sub-themes addressed by Baines in this chapter include memoir writing as narrative therapy, post-traumatic stress disorder as an alibi among SADF veterans, and SADF veterans as victims. One reviewer has argued that there is a possibility that some of the veterans claimed victimhood in the hope of securing access to the benefits offered by South Africa's Department of Military Veterans.⁴¹ The reader will do well to consult other related sources, such as Anthony Feinstein's *Battle Scarred: Hidden Costs of the Border War* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2011).

The battles of Cassinga (4 May 1978) and Cuito Cuanavale (August 1987–March 1988) will forever represent the most controversial dimensions of the war in Angola. In Chapter 5 ("The Battle for Cassinga: Competing Narratives and Complicating Histories") Baines relates both the SADF and the SWAPO sides of the story and shows how and why the controversy continues. Several versions of the story have also been published, including those by Willem Steenkamp,⁴² Leo Barnard,⁴³ Leopold Scholtz⁴⁴ and, most recently, by Christian Williams.⁴⁵ The battle for the truth about the series of battles that took place along the Lomba River, including in the vicinity of Cuito Cuanavale also continues, as Baines correctly points

38. See, for example, Du Toit's book *Judasbok*, and other sources, already referred to in footnote 23 above.

39. C. Holt, *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter: A Frontline Account of the 1988 Angola War, as Seen Through the Eyes of a Conscripted Soldier* (Zebra Press, Cape Town, 2005).

40. For more on this battalion, see W. Steenkamp and H-R. Heitman, *Mobility Conquers: The Story of 61 Mechanised Battalion Group, 1978–2005* (Helion & Co., Solihull, 2016).

41. E. Kleynhans, Book review of G. Baines, *South Africa's "Border War" ...* in *South African Historical Journal*, 69, 1 (2017), p 1, published online 4 January 2017.

42. W. Steenkamp, *Borderstrike! South Africa into Angola* (Just Done Publications, Durban, 2006), pp 15–141. (Originally published by Butterworth, Durban, 1983.)

43. L. Barnard, "Die Gebeure by Cassinga, 4 Mei 1978 – 'n Gevallestudie van die Probleme van 'n Militêre Historikus", *Historia*, 41, 1 (May 1996), pp 88–99; L. Barnard, "The Battle of Cassinga, 4 May 1978: A Historical Reassessment, Part 1: The Course of the Battle and Ensuing Controversy", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3 (December 2006), pp 131–146; L. Barnard, "The Battle of Cassinga, 4 May 1978: A Historical Reassessment, Part 2: Interviews with Two SADF Soldiers", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3 (December 2006), pp 147–160.

44. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, pp 66–87.

45. C.A. Williams, *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa: A Historical Ethnology of SWAPO's Exile Camps* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2015).

out in the thought-provoking Chapter 6 of his book: “The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale: Successful Stalemate and Vicarious Victory”. He correctly states that as with many other conflicts this was also to a large extent a war without victors or vanquished; that one can also win a war and yet lose the memory battle, and vice versa. And who writes the history – the victors, and/or the vanquished? In this regard, the battle lines are still drawn – see for example, the views of Greg Mills and David Williams,⁴⁶ Helmoed-Römer Heitman,⁴⁷ Leopold Scholtz,⁴⁸ and Jannie Geldenhuys.⁴⁹ See also Doherty’s criticism of some of Baines’ views and conclusions as expressed in Chapters 5 and 6 of *South Africa’s “Border War”*.⁵⁰

Just as the war for the liberation of Namibia was almost over, SWAPO and its military wing, the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) crossed into the territory on 1 April 1989 in violation of the ceasefire, resulting in nine days of some of the heaviest fighting experienced during the conflict as a whole.⁵¹ Baines deals with this controversial issue in Chapter 7: “Digging up the Past: Revisiting the 1989 Namibian Ceasefire Violation” – indicating, inter alia, how much “unfinished business” (p 135) there still is. This is of course also true of many, if not most, other conflicts including the Vietnam War, which brings us to Chapter 8: “The Spectre of Vietnam: Lessons and Legacies of the Border War”. Was SWA/Namibia South Africa’s Vietnam, as an End Conscription Campaign poster suggested? Baines discusses analogies and metaphors, the lessons of Vietnam, and the aftermath of lost wars. He correctly points out that “Whereas Vietnam has arguably left a scar that binds US society, the legacy of South Africa’s Border War is still inflamed” (p 153).

In the penultimate chapter, “The Freedom Park Fracas: Commemorating and Memorializing the ‘Border War’”, Baines looks at the SADF memorial at Fort Klapperkop on the outskirts of Pretoria, the Freedom Park wall of names (not far from Klapperkop), the SADF memorial wall in the Voortrekker Monument precinct (opposite Freedom Park), discursive struggles and the politics of memory. Perhaps one could have added a discussion on the so-called “just war principle”.⁵² In the tenth and final chapter, “Fictive Kinship: The National Service Generation and Veteran Networks”, Baines discusses sub-themes such as veterans and the politics of victimhood, and the SADF veterans as a virtual community. In the “Conclusion” he

46. G. Mills and D. Williams, *7 Battles that Shaped South Africa* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2006), pp 167-188.

47. H-R. Heitman, *War in Angola: The Final South African Phase* (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1990), pp 53-73, 109-309.

48. Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, pp 247–360; L. Scholtz, *The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale: Cold War Angolan Finale, 1987–1988* (Helion & Co., Solihull, 2016).

49. J. Geldenhuys, *Dié wat Gewen het: Feite en Fabels van die Bosoerlog* (Litera, Pretoria, 2007), pp 165–182.

50. Doherty, Review article, pp 276–278.

51. See, for example, P. Stiff, *Nine Days of War* (Lemur Books, Alberton, 1991).

52. See, for example, I. Bredenkamp and A. Wessels, “Die Suid-Afrikaanse Kapelaansdiens en die Beginsel van ’n Regverdige Oorlog: Die Namibiese Vryheidsoorlog, 1966–1989”, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 35, 1 (June 2010), pp 39–61.

argues the coming to terms with the past. “There can never be one truth about the apartheid past nor the place of the ‘Border War’ in that history. It will remain a point of contestation and it is likely that this book will further conflictual dialogue rather than consensus. If so, it will have achieved its aim” (p 193). Notwithstanding certain methodological limitations,⁵³ that is indeed the case with this exceptional publication – an incisive and seminal text on war and memory; a standard work and an exemplary piece of scholarship in the field of History.

Concluding perspectives

The liberation struggle of the people of Namibia meant that many young, white South Africans were sent “up north to the border”, from where – in due course – many of them were sent across the border to fight a far-away war in Angola. Simultaneously, many young Cubans were also sent even further away from their fatherland to Angola, where they, together with Eastern Bloc military advisors, had to assist FAPLA against the Front National de la Libération de l'Angola (FNLA), but especially against the SADF and UNITA. In due course the SADF's initial counter-insurgency operations (COIN) within Namibia developed into a fully-fledged conventional involvement in the Angolan Civil War. These aspects of the War for Southern Africa are dealt with succinctly by Ian Liebenberg, Jorge Risquet and Vladimir Shubin in their excellent book, *A Far-away War: Angola, 1975-1989*. In an effort to assist the SADF's COIN and (semi-) conventional actions, the SADF established Special Forces, colloquially known as the “Recces”, to infiltrate behind (the SADF's) enemy lines, to disrupt the Angolan infrastructure and consequently also to destroy vital FAPLA/Cuban and allied communication lines and logistical bases. As has been pointed out, Douw Steyn and Arnè Söderlund have put on record the role played by the Recces in conjunction with the SA Navy, in their comprehensive and pioneering *Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa's Seaborne Raiders 1978–1988*.

Thus far, the SADF's role in the north of SWA/Namibia and in Angola has always been associated primarily with the SA Army's hot pursuit and later also (semi-) conventional operations, ably supported by the SAAF. In Allan du Toit's book on the SA Navy's ships, there are only a few references to the Navy's operational role in the years 1975 to 1989,⁵⁴ and even in the book of Chris Bennett and Arnè Söderlund on the history of the SA Navy, there are just three cursory references to the SA Navy's involvement in providing support to Special Forces.⁵⁵ Of course, as has been indicated, the SA Navy/Recces operations were not confined to the “Western Front” (i.e. the coast of Angola),⁵⁶ but also included top secret operations along the coast and in adjacent coastal cities and areas of Mozambique – in aid of the white minority

53. Doherty, Review article, pp 279–280. In general, see also E. Kleynhans, Book review of G. Baines, *South Africa's “Border War”: Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories* (Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2014), in *South African Historical Journal*, published online, 4 January 2017.

54. Du Toit, *South Africa's Fighting Ships Past and Present*, pp 230–232, 242, 274, 291.

55. Bennett and Söderlund, *South Africa's Navy*, pp 35, 107, 123.

56. See again Steyn and Söderlund, *Iron Fist from the Sea*, Chapters 5, 6, 8, 10 and 11.

Rhodesian government until 1980, and later in support of the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO).⁵⁷

In the Recce operations mentioned above, many members of the opponent forces died but sometimes civilians also perished; and in the clashes that took place in the north of SWA/Namibia and especially in Angola, tens of thousands of people died, particularly during the conventional battles.⁵⁸ After the cessation of hostilities the combatants returned – went back to their homes in Angola, to new homes in Namibia, to Cuba, to Eastern Bloc countries, and back to the “States” (South Africa). Many of the veterans bore the scars of war; in some cases, with physical wounds but mostly of a psychological nature. Many, many books on the war have been written, but few are as thought-provoking as Gary Baines’s excellent book, *South Africa’s “Border War”: Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories*. In this superb, scholarly work he indicates eloquently just how contested South Africa’s past, with special reference to the Border War, indeed is. In the numerous publications on this controversial conflict, the battles of 1966 to 1989 are, in a sense, refought as published “memory wars”, where antagonists “construct histories that validate their actions and discredit those of their erstwhile enemies”.⁵⁹

Each of the three books evaluated in this article can be regarded as representative of three different categories of “War for Southern Africa” publications: *Iron Fist* being a military history book written unashamedly from South African veterans’ point of view; *A Far-away War* endeavouring to place the military and other events in a broader context and giving voice to many of the opposing military role-players; and *South Africa’s “Border War”*, a work of scholarship par excellence which sheds light on what happened after the guns and rifles fell silent. When read and evaluated together, these books link up with one another, providing information and insights on aspects of the War for Southern Africa not dealt with in earlier publications (or at least, not as comprehensively), also providing pointers for further scholarly investigation. Many of those who enjoyed reading *Iron Fist from the Sea* will not like what is said in, *A Far-away War*, and vice versa; while *South Africa’s “Border War”* will speak only to a much narrower academic readership. This said, all three books invite much-needed further discourse on a protracted conflict.

The three books that have been discussed in this article span a wide spectrum of books that deal with the so-called “Border War”. *Iron Fist from the Sea* may have been written by “amateur historians”, but they did thorough research. The book will be regarded by some as a gung-ho adventure story told with patriotic fervour by two men “who were there”, but it does add to our knowledge and insight into a very controversial aspect of the War for Southern Africa. It is not merely an adventure story, but contains a wealth of new information. The scholars who collaborated in

57. See again Steyn and Söderlund, *Iron Fist from the Sea*, Chapters 5, 7, 9, 10 and 11.

58. Very few sources provide statistics regarding the battle casualties; correct total numbers will probably never be established. See, for example, Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p 185; Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p 444.

59. Baines, *South Africa’s “Border War”*, back cover.

producing *A Far-away War* have paved the way for new research to be undertaken on a variety of topics concerning the war in Angola, for example, the involvement of the forces from Cuba and Eastern Europe. Together with Gary Baines's excellent *South Africa's "Border War"*, all these books contribute to a fuller picture and a better understanding of the brutal conflict that raged in southern Africa for so many years; of the consequences it had on those who took an active part, as well as those on the various home fronts.

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