



## BOOK REVIEWS

### A Breed Apart

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This book details the experiences of Johan Raath, a former Special Forces operator. He offers an insider's view on the training he and other young soldiers received in the mid-1980s, which is quite rare. He describes the phases of selection and training by drawing on the reminiscences of his fellow Recces. He also offers valuable insights into what constitutes a successful operator. The training cycle courses have been designed to show the range and standard of Special Forces training, including handling weapons, bushcraft, survival mechanisms, parachuting, demolitions, urban warfare, and seaborne and riverine operations. Eventually, Raath and his colleagues experienced some level of development when their training culminated in an operation in southern Angola, where the young Recces saw action for the first time. Much of Raath's lived experiences forms part of present-day Special Forces training. In light of the brief background, this book demonstrates why these soldiers are a breed apart. It is important to note that the South African Special Forces was established in the early 1970s. It is currently considered a prestigious and vital South African National Defence Force unit. Selection and training doctrines were initially based on those of the British Special Air Service, with some influence from the French Special Forces, particularly on the combat and diving and seaborne operations side. Air capabilities were drawn from the highly esteemed 1 Parachute Battalion, based in Bloemfontein in the central highlands of South Africa. It was not long before Special Forces operators were referred to as 'Recces' - an abbreviation for Reconnaissance Commando.

The Recces operators got involved in the most challenging operations in Angola,

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Rhodesia (Present-day Zimbabwe), Mozambique, and other sub-equatorial African countries. Angola and Mozambique attained political independence from Portugal in 1975, and communist governments were installed in both countries. The National Party Government in South Africa perceived these communist African states as threatening white minority rule. The United States of America encouraged South Africa to reject communism outright, given its fight against the spread of communism throughout the world, which was at the height of the Cold War between the Soviet Union (Russia) and the United States of America. South West Africa faced insurgency challenges in South West Africa (present-day Namibia) by the South West Africa People's Organisation (Swapo). It is important to note that at the time, South West Africa was governed by South Africa as a protectorate. The National Party had to deal with the threat posed by Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed military wing of the African National Congress (ANC), and from the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA), the armed military wing of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

These groups were insurgents or terrorists/freedom fighters fighting the Apartheid regime first for South West Africa's independence and second for South Africa's democratization. The first South African Defence Force soldier to be killed in action in March 1974 in Angola was Lieutenant Fred Zeelie. He was a Recce operator from 1 Reconnaissance Commando. The Recce was very busy from 1975 onwards, immediately after Angola and Mozambique attained political autonomy with a backup from the Soviet Union and its satellites. Meanwhile, the white minority regime in Rhodesia faced an onslaught from the Liberation movements. When Rhodesia gained independence from the 1970s up until 1980. The Recces often worked with the elite Rhodesian SAS on operations in Rhodesia, Zambia, and Mozambique where the insurgents had training camps and from where they launched attacks against the Rhodesian security forces. Special Forces from South Africa and Rhodesia were militarily capacitated, hardened bush fighters with a wide variety of skills and specialised tactics derived from operations against numerically more significant enemy forces. In 1980, the old security forces of Rhodesia were discontinued, and a number of SAS, Selous Scouts, and Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI) operators joined the South African Reconnaissance Commandos. The amalgamation of the Recces with these Rhodesian special operations formations created one of the finest Special Forces organisations the world has ever seen. There were three South African Special Forces units by the late 1970s, namely: 1 Reconnaissance Regiment (Durban), 4 Reconnaissance Regiment (Langebaan), and 5 Reconnaissance Regiment (Phalaborwa). The Special Forces HQ was located in Pretoria. All the operators were schooled in bush warfare, parachute deployments, demolitions, basic seaborne operations, and urban warfare, and each unit

specialised in certain kinds of deployment. 1 Recce became experts in urban warfare, 4 Recce in seaborne operations, attack diving, and underwater demolitions, and 5 Recce were masters of larger-scale bush warfare operations, often expedited through fast strikes delivered by light armoured vehicles. Military or police conscription for all white males between 17 and 65 became compulsory from 1976. Initially this duty was performed over nine months. In the early 1990s, military conscription for white males was reduced to one year after Namibia attained independence and the ANC and other political organisations were unbanned. Compulsory military conscription in South Africa was finally abolished in August 1993.

The author provides incisive accounts on his early life which informed his interest in the title of the book. He was born in 1968 in the city of Bloemfontein, in the Free State province. He comes from a modest middle-class family. His father was a teacher and his mother was an administrative secretary at the local municipality. Both his parents grew up on farms in the Free State. His entire family comes from a community of farmers. Raath showed interest in military matters from a young age, including toy guns and real firearms. One of his uncles afforded him an opportunity to experience farm life in the mountainous eastern Free State during school holidays. The uncle taught him how to use a rifle and hunt small animals such as rabbits, dassies (rock rabbits), meerkats, and various birds. Raath made significant progress for example; from a 22 long rifle to a shotgun and later to a larger calibre, which were used to hunt various species of buck (Antelope). He eventually excelled at shooting. Raath's father taught him fishing which he enjoyed very much. He learned horse riding and loved outdoor life in the veld. The author soon realised that all the skills he was taught were actually in his DNA, as they were meant for the Boers who trekked from the Cape into the hinterlands during the 19th century.

Raath's father taught history at high school and was particularly interested in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, as well as its battle sites around the country, which exerted a profound influence on Raath to pursue his military interests to a large extent. Furthermore, he enjoyed narratives on military service, border battles between South West Africa and Angola. Here the South African Defence Force was also engaged in battles against Swapo guerrillas and the People's Armed Forces of Liberation of Angola (Fapla), the armed forces of Angola's communist government. Tales and rumours about secretive Recces and outstanding group of combat soldiers they were. The author developed an interest in becoming a Recce and took part in the cadet camps that young men were encouraged to experience during the winter holiday break. At the age of 16, Raath was ready to actualise his dream of becoming a soldier. He also desired to become a Special Force operator. He

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was not interested in school. Rugby, cricket, parties, girls and a regular bar fight, were the subjects Raath excelled in. The latter caused him serious injuries that compelled him to undergo facial reconstruction surgery. The consequences thereof imposed some limitations on his academic and social life. He missed school for a couple of months and could no longer play rugby. When the call-up papers arrived, they clearly stipulated the criteria to be met by recruits who wished to join Special Forces. Raath could not meet some of the criteria. Communicating in English was a major challenge given his background as a Dutchman coming from the Free State. Eventually, he was sent off to perform military duties at the age of 17.

The author has been able to detail his lived experiences and perspectives on South African Special Forces coherently through fourteen chapters, which speak to the book's title. In the first chapter, he highlights the most crucial aspects of his journey of discovery that he willingly undertook, hence the crux as a sub-title. The second chapter details the basics of the Special Force and its experiences. Chapter three deals with the orientation of the Special Forces, including induction programmes designed to educate them on the ideals of military engagements. In the fourth chapter, the author explains the selection criteria and standard procedures in-depth. The primary aim was to ensure that recruits are were for purpose. Chapter five covers the role of individuals within the Special Forces Units. In chapter six, the focus is on Seaborne and Water Orientation. The aim was to equip Special Forces with the requisite skills, including diving.

Chapter seven discusses the military strategies that help identify the enemy. In chapter eight, the author delves deeper into the components of the Parachute Course and the extent to which it meets expectations. In chapter nine, Raath provides a detailed explanation on how Aof Operations were conducted. Chapter ten deals with Demolitions and Mine Warfare. In chapter eleven, the author highlights Bushcraft, Tracking, and survival as part of the narrative on the country's Special Forces. In chapter twelve, the Forces are taught minor tactics, guerrilla and unconventional Warfare. Chapter thirteen deals specifically with Urban Warfare. In the book's last chapter (Chapter fourteen), Raath explores the avenues of life beyond the Recce cycle.

In conclusion, Raath's book is a carefully thought out piece of academic writing. It captures the essence of the title so well. Chapters have been chronologically organised, which makes it a lot easier for the reader to grasp the gist of the entire book. The language used has been simplified well for the benefit of the reading audience. The literary style is good. The use of photographs as a visual representation of episodes covered in the book is commendable. Overall, the book is quite an exciting read.