

THE CITIZEN SOLDIER IN THE BORDER WAR

Willem Steenkamp*

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of the citizen soldier - meaning any man (and latterly woman) who takes up arms, not out of choice but through necessity, and then returns to his or her civilian life once that necessity is resolved - in the long bush conflict, popularly known as the "border war" has never been clearly understood or even fully appreciated.

Yet it is a fact that the course of that war would have been very different from what it was if the South African Defence Force (SADF) had not been able to muster an adequate force of citizen soldiers - and to a lesser extent, airmen and sailors - at the most crucial times and for services which were otherwise not readily available.

The so-called "border war" of the 1970s and 1980s was not actually a war at all by classic standards. At the same time it eludes exact definitions. The core of it was a protracted insurgency in South West Africa, later South-West Africa/Namibia and still later Namibia. At the same time it was characterised by the periodical involvement of the SADF in the long civil war taking place in neighbouring Angola, because the two conflicts could not be separated from one another.

A detailed discussion about this broader struggle, all of which was ultimately fuelled by the Cold War struggle between the Free World and the Warsaw Pact bloc of countries for control of the Indian Ocean and the Cape sea-route, is another subject for another day.

What is of direct relevance however, is what it meant to the tens of thousands of men - most of them citizen soldiers of one kind or another - who fought in it, and what effect it had on the concept of the worker-warrior which for centuries had been traditional to people of all races and groups in Southern Africa.

* Military analyst and Reserve Force soldier. E-mail address: steenkampw@mweb.co.za.

2. ORIGINS

The part-time soldier has been around for a very long time; he is a protean figure who stands out amid the smoke and dust of South Africa's battlefields over the past 500 years. Virtually all of South Africa's innumerable wars, insurgencies and other disturbances, large and small - starting before there *was* a South Africa, in fact - have been fought mainly by citizen soldiers, either conscripts or volunteers.

Till very recently the concept of a professional full-time combat element has been noticeably conspicuous by its absence in South Africa. This strange phenomenon could be ascribed to a number of reasons. One thinker stated that historically the South African - regardless of race or creed - has tended to be warlike but not militaristic, and has not trusted the idea of a full-time standing army. It is also true that none of the South African nations and nation-groups of earlier times could afford the luxury of maintaining a large, dedicated warrior caste. It might also be that a professional soldier caste never arose in South Africa, except on a very small scale, because there has never been a clear-cut distinction between worker and warrior.

The Khoina warriors in South Africa's first recorded clash - a short, sharp action in 1510 which resulted in the decisive defeat of a larger Portuguese force - were citizen soldiers, and so were most of their successors of all races, including the BaSotho, the Boer commando soldiers, the Griqua, the Oorlams Nama clans of what is now Namibia, the Xhosa of the numerous Frontier Wars and even the fearsome soldiers of Shaka Zulu's all-conquering impis.

By the time all these odd bed-fellows had been thrown together into the Union of South Africa, the concept of a large citizens' militia and a small regular element was so well-established that it is hardly to be wondered at that when the Union Defence Force (UDF) was established in 1913 its composition was a very familiar one to South African eyes.

At its base were four principles, some of them of long standing. Firstly, it relied very heavily on the citizen warrior of one kind or another. Secondly, it incorporated the principle of conscription, which had been around for more than 250 years, although this provision would not be applied for four decades. Thirdly, it was designed to be a specific component of what was known as the "Imperial umbrella" (South Africa was officially a dominion in 1913, and would not gain full independence till the 1930s). Fourthly, it was structured to be as affordable as possible.

Thus, for practical purposes, there was hardly any standing force, barring a few regiments of the gendarmerie-style South African Mounted Riflemen, a tiny army

air component called the South African Aviation Corps and a small number of professionals of the Permanent Force, whose main roles were to carry out the day-to-day running of the UDF, to provide an upper crust of leadership in time of war and in the meantime to train the citizen soldiers and sailors (there were a few South African detachments of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve) to the requisite standard.

The citizen soldiers who made up virtually the entire combat component consisted of a number of Active Citizen Force (ACF) regiments which were organised for what would now be called conventional warfare; the usual combat-support and support units; and the so-called "Defence Rifle Associations" (DRA), which were nothing else than a revival of the old commando system which had officially ceased to exist after the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

The DRAs concentrated mainly on rifle-shooting, while service in the Active Citizen Force consisted of a short initial training period, followed by a few annual or bi-annual training camps and some weekly or monthly parades. Its purpose was quite clear: to build up a suitable reservoir of more or less trained citizen soldiers, and then to keep topping it up to replace the time-expired men going on to the inactive reserve.

The basic philosophy, as far as can be ascertained, was to maintain a force which was fit for immediate low-intensity operational service or, after an additional month or three of training, for high-intensity work. This was a perfectly workable system in the pre-blitzkrieg era, when there tended to be a gap between a declaration of war and the first actual clash of arms.

The ACF's co-existence with the Permanent Force was not always an easy one. Some regulars were not comfortable with the part-time soldier and his tendency to grumble loudly, short-circuit the tortuous procedures which are an army's life-blood and respect rank only as far as was required to keep him out of the clutches of the Military Discipline Code. This was nothing new, however, and the more flexible professionals knew that once one understood what made a citizen soldier tick, he could be turned into a superb fighting instrument.

It might have looked slightly shipwrecked, but the system was a very economical one which allowed for rapid expansion in time of need, and it soon proved its worth when World War I broke out, followed by the 1914 Rebellion, the South West African campaign and the fighting in East Africa, France, Flanders, Libya and (in the case of one regiment) Palestine.

After World War I the system became even more shipwrecked to look at. A post-war economic depression left South Africa in such a parlous state that the efficient regiments of mounted riflemen were disbanded, all except one small segment which can now lay claim to being the oldest existing unit of any kind in the SADF, and angry questions were asked in Parliament about the appointment of a new second-lieutenant in the Permanent Force. The Minister of Defence stood firm on the matter, however, which was just as well, since the new one-pipper was a scrawny little fellow called Dan Pienaar.

A decade later the Great Depression wrought such additional destruction that for a period ACF units had to carry out unpaid training camps.

There were some bright points in the two decades of stagnation and depression, however. The Aviation Corps, which had been absorbed into the Royal Flying Corps during World War I, was resuscitated as a regular-manned separate service called the South African Air Force (SAAF), a few more ACF regiments were established, the DRAs were reorganised and updated, and a strange new job-creation unit, of which much was to be heard later, was created and named the Special Service Battalion.

But the damage done could not be repaired in time for World War II, and South Africa went into the greatest conflict in history "half-equipped and somewhat less than a quarter-trained", in the acid words of one historian.

3. WORLD WAR II

Entry into the war changed everything. The half-starved part-time units were brought up to strength and re-equipped with what could be made locally or wangled out of hard-pressed Britain, the Special Service Battalion spawned several "field force battalions" and finally was turned into an armoured unit; the Air Force made do very efficiently with what it had or could scrounge and a navy consisting mainly of commandeered whale-catchers and the like arose and acquitted itself well of its tasks.

With these hastily improvised armed forces South Africa rendered yeoman service in East Africa, Abyssinia, the Western Desert and Italy. By the end of hostilities more than a quarter-million male and female volunteers of all races had seen service, and the UDF was larger than it had ever been.

Then came a savage down-scaling. Defence spending plummeted, ACF units shrank to a fraction of their authorised strength and for several years the UDF

stagnated. The acquisition of new weaponry and equipment was the exception rather than the rule, and the UDF lived off the fat of its World War II-vintage stocks while it clung on and waited for better times.

This is not to say that the UDF - soon to become the South African Defence Force - stood still altogether. Some fundamental, if largely invisible, changes did take place. The South African Armoured Corps and South African Infantry Corps were formally established, three new training battalions were created to replace the old training depots and some armoured vehicles were bought, principally Saracen armoured personnel carriers and Centurion battle tanks.

In December 1948 the Defence Rifle Associations became "rifle commandos", nominally of battalion size each, and launched into a programme of expansion and training. Then in 1951 the compulsory training clause was applied for the first time, although funds were so scanty that in some years only one in three candidates was called up for full-time ACF basic training, and the three-month basic training period, which itself was reduced to two months at one time.

In 1957, too, a milestone came and went with the passing of a new Defence Act - Act 44 of 1957 - which superseded the old South Africa Defence Act of 1913. The new Act incorporated various changes which had become necessary, but also retained many features of its predecessor, including one which was to come back and haunt the military planners, a clause which stipulated that South African troops could only be deployed in defence of the homeland.

This had been circumvented in World War I by forming nominally non-South African "imperial service units" from existing regiments, and in World War II by requiring the signing of the so-called "Red Oath", volunteering for service anywhere in Africa. After that it seems to have been forgotten, and so found its way into the new Defence Act.

Then came the watershed 1960s. South Africa was expelled from the Commonwealth and emerged from the "Imperial Umbrella" under which it had sheltered since 1806. The umbrella itself was in tatters as Britain began to divest itself of its various possessions, colonies and protectorates at a rate which left some home-grown African and other leaders positively embarrassed because they had not had an opportunity to suffer the detention which was such an important political asset. The Cold War had set in with a vengeance by now, and a new type of warfare had arrived: insurgency.

The 1960s style of insurgency was not the same thing as the traditional *franc-tireur* resistance offered by inhabitants of a territory which had been occupied in war-time. It was more of an undeclared low-level civil war which was manpower-intensive for the government forces involved and could drag on for many years, till one side or the other caved in or the conflict escalated to a conventional or semiconventional conflict which ended with a decisive defeat. In a nutshell, it was not the sort of conflict for which the basically 1913-style Active Citizen Force was geared.

The ACF was designed to take part in a conventional war in defence of the sovereignty, as a component of a larger allied force engaged in a broader conflict, an eventuality which might never happen again but could not be dismissed out of hand as impossible. The existing system of quick in-and-out basic training, backed up by short courses and refresher training camps, on the assumption that any outbreak of war would leave time for bringing the fighting elements to top standard, was clearly outmoded.

What was needed was a new system which would retain the benefits of the existing one but make provision for a readily available standing force which was well-trained and substantial in size, but economical to maintain.

The outcome of all this was a drastic modification of the existing system, together with an acquisition programme which got off to a modest start but would eventually lead to a large home-grown arms industry, a number of whose products were to become world leaders.

4. NATIONAL SERVICE

A national service system was introduced, in terms of which all white males of a certain age were subject to universal full-time conscription for nine months (which soon became 12 months). When this term had been finished, they were posted out to the Citizen Force (CF) and commando units, where they were required to participate in a small number of annual refresher camps as well as a certain amount of non-continuous training in between; after that they could opt for transfer to the inactive reserve or volunteer to serve on.

The existing 30-odd CF infantry battalions and the handful of artillery and armoured units were augmented by new ones to cater for the increased inflow of trained men, while the commando system, up to now the poor relation of the SADF, received considerable attention to upgrade it.

The extent of this change was not fully appreciated at the time. For the individual, being a citizen soldier became a more serious affair altogether. For the country, it meant that the first time since the disbandment of the South African Mounted Riflemen there was some form of standing combat force, because after completing their long and intensive basic training the conscript servicemen spent a considerable time on regimental service before being posted out to the part-time forces.

This meant, in turn, that for the first time since the 1920s the SADF disposed of a substantial supply of fully-trained manpower which could be deployed at a moment's notice on high-intensity tasks without requiring a preparatory working-up period.

This applied particularly to the leader group. The SADF now had the means and the time to select junior officer and non-commissioned officer candidates on the basis of their performance during basic training and then turn them into leaders of near-professional quality. Many good leaders had emerged under the old system, but this dispensation, although it had some faults, was obviously considerably more systematic and thorough than its predecessor.

Yet another very significant feature of the national service force was that to a large extent it neutralised the greatest disadvantage of a part-time combat component: the adverse effect on the economy that could result from a substantial long-term mobilisation of economically active workers. The national service system softened this impact because most of its members went straight from school into the Army. This meant that the economy did not suffer any direct harm except in the sense that the entry of some new workers was delayed.

It is interesting to speculate, aided by the razor-sharp vision of hindsight, whether national service was actually a small but significant early crack to appear in the system of "grand apartheid", which even then was beginning to run into some internal self-contradictions, in the sense that the delayed entry of white youths into the market-place automatically provided more opportunities for their non-white counterparts.

This is not as far-fetched as it might sound; the commissioning of six officers of colour into the Permanent Force a few years later was definitely an unintended but significant step towards the eventual collapse of the system because of the events it had set in motion.

Be that as it may, there was another outgrowth of the national service system during the 1960s. This was the re-activation of the Cape Corps, the latest re-

incarnation of a famous unit traditionally recruited from the coloured population. In its latest form the Cape Corps was essentially a volunteer national service unit. Its soldiers signed up for the same term of service as their white counterparts, after which they could choose between returning to civilian life or applying to join the Permanent Force. It was an attractive choice, and there was no shortage of good-quality volunteers.

By 1974 the South African Army's teeth arms had developed far beyond what any soldier of the 1950s could have envisioned. There were now eight full-time infantry battalions which were not only training depots but deployable units; a combat-ready parachute battalion fed by its own training centre; and the State President's Guard, which was a combined combat and ceremonial unit. One of the infantry units, 2 SA Infantry, was actually a battalion group with a unique (for the SADF) structure, since it comprised not only a full-scale infantry battalion but an organic armoured-car squadron and a 25-pounder field artillery battery. The artillery, armour and other corps were similarly organised.

New part-time units had been established to accommodate the flow of time-expired national servicemen, so that there were now 42 CF infantry battalions, including one parachute unit, and more than 200 commandos, each headquartered in a magisterial district. National servicemen and CF members manned 16 armoured regiments and 19 artillery regiments of one kind or another.

A vital but not very visible asset was the leader group trained by the national service system, a large number of which were now serving in the CF units, supplementing those from the pre-national service era who had been honed by repeated courses and training camps in which universal standards were mercilessly applied.

Yet another significant ingredient was about to be added. It was not generally known then, but plans were afoot to start raising black units as well, based on the successful Cape Corps design.

Backing up this moderately fearsome array was a relatively small number of Permanent Force leaders and instructors at various levels of the training battalions and corps or service training schools, as well as a very exclusive regular unit, 1 Reconnaissance Commando, the forerunner of today's special forces units.

It was the passing of an era in another sense as well. Literally for centuries the part-time regiments had been first-line units, with nothing between them and the enemy. Now their position had shifted, almost imperceptibly but without any doubt, to the second line of defence, or at least to the rearmost rank of the first line. They

remained the backbone of the Army in particular, and the repository of its main conventional warfare capability; but they would no longer be the first into battle. The only constant was that both the front and rear ranks of the first line were still manned by citizen soldiers of one kind or another.

As an aside, there seems to have been some doctrinal confusion during this era, so for some years in the 1970s the Army tried to train its part-time regiments for both conventional and counter-insurgency warfare. But the part-timers – who still made up the bulk of the ground combat force - simply did not have the time to absorb both. The result was that the doctrine of the Citizen Force (CF) began to resemble the mythical Swoose - half swan, half goose.

The Army then decided quite correctly that the two tasks had to be separated. Some regiments remained as they were - the artillery, for instance, is conventional by its very nature - but the infantry in particular began to specialise. By the end of the decade the South African Infantry Corps was well on the way to its ultimate shape, in which it had three components: conventional mechanised and motorised infantry; light infantry, specialising in counter-insurgency warfare; and the commandos to handle rear-area protection (this was not the same as home-area protection, since the definition of "rear area" is everything that lies behind the battle line).

By now national servicemen and Citizen Force members were beginning to serve almost everywhere in the SADF, many of the former being professional graduates who had been given deferment to complete their studies and were then called up to serve in the military equivalents of their fields.

5. THE BORDER WAR

At this stage the SADF finally became embroiled in what was later to be called the border war. The roots of this conflict can be traced back to 1966, when the South-West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) first embarked on its insurgency against the administration of the vast, ill-populated territory known then as South-West Africa.

For the first eight years or so the military did not become deeply involved, apart from providing some air and other support to the South African Police (SAP). But in 1973 the government concluded that the SWAPO activity, although it was still fairly low-level as insurgencies go, was a task beyond the capacity of the police. The SAP had never been a particularly large force, and it had simply become too thinly stretched; in addition to performing its basic domestic law-and-order duties it also maintained a sizeable contingent in Rhodesia, and it simply could not cope

with the added strain of the slowly but steadily escalating insurgency in South-West Africa.

The government's solution was to transfer responsibility for counter-insurgency operations in the sprawling border operational area to the SADF, leaving the police to focus mainly on their normal duties, although they maintained an organic counter-insurgency element, later to grow into the much-feared "Koevoet" ("Crowbar") unit.

Personnel and equipment began filtering into the operational area under conditions of high secrecy in the latter half of 1973 in preparation for the official take-over on 1 April 1974. Inevitably snippets of news about the deployment began to filter out, but no official announcements were made till the Army was in place. Then it was made known with great fanfare. The public reaction was a mixture of acclamation and indignation, depending on who was doing the reacting. None of it mattered. The Army was committed, and the border war was a fait accompli, although a long time was to pass before that name came into use.

The first troops to be deployed were national servicemen from the training battalions, led at senior level by members of the Permanent Force, and a few Active Citizen Force members who had volunteered for full-time service. No ACF or commando units were called up for border service at this stage, not only because there was no immediate need for them, but because any such mobilisation had deeper economic and political implications.

The initial main focus of their attention was the eastern end of the Caprivi Strip, because at that stage Angola was still under Portuguese control and SWAPO insurgents were forced to infiltrate to their main power-base, the Ovambo-inhabited tribal area of South-West Africa, from Zambian territory.

It was not, at that stage, an arduous deployment, because the Caprivian population was not particularly enthusiastic about supporting SWAPO, although a local insurgent group called the Caprivian African National Union had allied itself to SWAPO. This was just as well, because the SADF was still recovering from the long post-World War II period of neglect. The efficient little Eland armoured cars - locally manufactured versions of the French AML-90 and AML-60 vehicles - were already in service, but the mine-protected vehicles which became *de rigueur* in later years had still to appear, as had a plethora of other items of weaponry and equipment.

6. OPERATION SAVANNAH

Within a year of the first deployment along the South-West African borders, however, events further afield brought about a dramatic change in the general situation. The spiritual and financial exhaustion resulting from years of simultaneous counter-insurgency operations in three different African territories led to a coup in Portugal, and the new far-left government withdrew precipitately from Angola after cobbling together a patently unworkable future dispensation which favoured the Marxist-led Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).

It was a recipe for disaster, since the MPLA and the two other Angolan insurgent groups, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and the National Union for the Liberation of Angola (UNITA), had long been fighting one another at least as enthusiastically as they had fought the Portuguese. Inevitably the result was immediate civil war.

Just as inevitably, South Africa was dragged into this dispute because the outcome of events in Angola obviously would have a strong influence on what was happening south of the border; an MPLA victory in Angola would enable SWAPO to infiltrate directly into Ovamboland, instead of trekking westwards via Caprivi, with all that that implied.

Some clandestine help was given to the FNLA (and later UNITA), but for a considerable time the South African Cabinet was bitterly divided between those who favoured pre-emptive action in Angola and others who preferred the option of merely defending South-West Africa against infiltration.

But in August the South African hand was forced when the Angolan town of Calueque, 25km up the Cunene River from the giant hydro-electric scheme at Ruacana, came under threat. At Calueque was a vitally important barrage which ensured a steady flow of water to the turbines of the giant Ruacana hydro-electric scheme, but part of the town was occupied by UNITA troops and another part by an FNLA faction, while an MPLA force was reportedly on the way to throw both of them out.

The crunch came when the last three barrage technicians fled in fear of their lives. Faced with the possibility that the barrage would be closed, a platoon of national service infantry and two armoured cars chased the occupiers out after a brief exchange of fire and held it till they were reinforced by a company-sized combat team from 2 SAI Battalion Group. The first shots had been fired - by citizen soldiers - in South Africa's involvement in the three-sided Angolan civil war.

The involvement, which inherited the code-name "Operation Savannah" from an earlier arms-supply project to the FNLA, was not to end till late March of the following year, by which time the revised citizen soldier system had received a thorough testing which provided much food for thought.

Ironically, Calueque was not the scene of significant further fighting, but in the next four months national servicemen and their senior Permanent Force leader group penetrated deep into Angola and saw much action, some of which was quite intensive.

They were not the only participants on the South African side. The official attitude was that the SADF's main role was to provide training, heavy weapons and logistical and other support to the FNLA and UNITA, in other words, more or less what the substantial and ever-growing contingent of the Cuban military were doing for the MPLA.

But events on the ground soon made nonsense of this, because the FNLA and UNITA - just like the MPLA on the other side - had not had the opportunity of transitioning from loosely organised guerrilla organisations into forces with the structures and mindset needed for the semi-conventional warfare which was soon to take place.

The result was that a small but busy contingent of South Africans, ranging from special-forces operators to conventional Permanent Force and national service soldiers, found themselves involved in a variety of activities. They trained and frequently led the FNLA and UNITA members who made up the bulk of the anti-MPLA/Cuban forces and provided specialists like mortarmen, medics, engineers, artillerymen, armoured vehicles and crews, medium machine-gunners and logistics personnel and equipment.

It is a matter of record that in the last four months of 1975 the South African forces in Angola performed very well, winning almost every substantial action and incurring remarkably few losses. Even a cursory analysis of why this was so indicates that there were three decisive factors: sound leadership, superior training and strong motivation at all levels.

It might be asked why the national servicemen involved exhibited generally sound motivation (a number were decorated for gallantry), considering that they were, after all, pressed men. There is no simple answer to that question, because a fighting spirit can derive from many factors.

Unit spirit and a sense of adventure obviously played a role. Ideology, too, was a factor. In general, South African whites - and a good slice of the other ethnic groups - had been raised to be anti-communists, and it must be remembered that Operation Savannah took place at the height of the Cold War, when there were only two sides to choose from and finer nuances were not given much consideration.

Towards the end of 1975 the South Africans suddenly ran into two obstacles which had nothing to do with the progress of the war. Firstly, the national servicemen's time in uniform was up. Secondly (although this was almost unnoticed at the time) most or all of them, together with their full-time colleagues, were in Angola in contravention of the Defence Act, thanks to that troublesome home-defence clause.

The South African government's reaction to the first problem was to extend the national servicemen's term by a month and simultaneously to mobilise a number of Citizen Force units with maximum speed. By the beginning of 1976 the national servicemen were withdrawing and their places were being taken by CF soldiers. The second problem was addressed by resurrecting the "Red Oath" for the CF units as an interim measure before tabling legislation in Parliament to abolish the offending clause. The reaction to the "Red Oath" requirement was spotty. In some units there was a near-total positive response, while in others there was considerably less enthusiasm.

It is difficult to specify one cause for the fall-out in the latter case. Politics and ideology were undoubtedly one cause. A considerable number of right-wing South African whites, for example, believed that the SADF had no business fighting in a far-away country like Angola, while some liberals and left-wingers were also against intervention, although obviously for a different reason. In the case of one unit, however, the lack of positive response stemmed from bad administration and a failure of leadership, and various others refused to sign out of general disgruntlement at the abrupt disruption of their civilian lives.

On the whole, however, most of the mobilised CF men signed the "Red Oath" and were posted to various parts of southern Angola; the non-signers ended up spending their time on such unpleasant pursuits as loading trains at the Grootfontein military base or planting a sisal fence along the border which was supposed to inhibit SWAPO infiltration (which, of course, it did not).

The CF units saw very little action; greater events had set in motion a general South African withdrawal from Angola, and their main role was to provide a screen through which this southward movement could take place in an orderly fashion. Implicit in all this, of course, was the possibility that the units would have to fight a

rearguard action against considerable - and considerably better-armed - MPLA/Cuban forces if the need arose.

It did not, since their opponents did not follow up with any alacrity, and on 27 March 1976 a Johannesburg CF unit formally locked up Operation Savannah and turned out its lights, so to speak, with a small parade at the border which was attended by no less a personage than the Minister of Defence, PW Botha. In human terms Operation Savannah cost the SADF 29 men killed in action and another 20 from non-operational causes - a light toll, considering the scope of the seven month-long operation.

7. OVAMBOLAND

With Operation Savannah over, the emphasis was now on the insurgency inside what had become known as South-West Africa/Namibia. National servicemen were deployed in a large variety of roles along the entire length of the border, with the heaviest concentration being in Ovamboland, SWAPO's primary target from beginning to end.

The SADF's policy of allowing deferment for tertiary and technical study now paid off very satisfactorily. In addition to foot and mounted infantrymen, paratroops and other "teeth arms" personnel, it could deploy numbers of doctors, technicians, teachers and other specialists as part of its intensive "hearts and minds" programme (unordained theological graduates, for example, were often used as "chappie's appies", or assistant unit chaplains). Other national servicemen were not deployed at the "sharp end" but were posted to a variety of rear-area staff and support tasks at Windhoek, Grootfontein and elsewhere.

There was soon a constant flow of CF units, commandos and unattached or detached personnel into SWA/Namibia on three-month mobilisations, a number volunteering to stay on when their call-up expired. The CF units provided an even greater source of specialist skills, since the average part-time regiment's rank and file usually included men of an astounding range of civilian skills; a medical unit, for example, often brought in surgical skills that the Army would not have been able to afford in normal circumstances.

8. ANGOLA REVISITED

This was to be the pattern for the next five years as the border war gradually escalated and then, inevitably, spilled back into Angola again. The seriousness of

the situation was really brought home in 1977, when the national service period was extended to two years and the part-time obligation increased by a large margin.

The increases aroused much indignation, especially among national servicemen who had already made plans for their post-service activities and CF members nearing the end of their part-time obligation. From a strictly military point of view, though, the new measures made sense. The 12-month system resulted in a high turnover, with national servicemen being discharged just when they were reaching their operational peak, which in turn represented a continual drain on the sort of know-how which could not be taught on courses. The only other remedy, extending the three-month stints of the CF units and commandos, was not an option.

South African policy at this time focussed on pre-empting SWAPO infiltration southwards over the border, and this had two main prongs: rendering some assistance to UNITA, to make sure that the border region was not completely dominated by the MPLA, and launching periodical "external operations" to damage SWAPO's combat and infiltration capability as much as possible.

The external operations were not ad hoc forays like the "hot pursuit" of insurgent groups across the border following a contact on SWA/Namibian soil. An external operation was a carefully planned semiconventional action in pursuit of an identified goal, usually in some force and liable to result in fierce but short-lived combat.

The first of the genre was, of course, Operation Reindeer in early May 1978. Reindeer consisted of three separate actions. The most visible one was the SADF's first large-scale airborne attack on the town of Cassinga. The jump was commanded by the renowned Colonel Jan Breytenbach, but his troops were almost all members of the two CF airborne units which now existed, 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions.

The attack illustrated both the strength and the weakness of the system in force. 1 Parachute Battalion, a full-time unit manned by national servicemen, could contribute only a mortar and a rifle platoon because of immutable operational and training commitments, but the SADF could fall back on its airborne force's depth element of part-timers. However, an earlier attack jump on Cassinga had had to be called off at the last minute because it was feared that there had been a security breach resulting from the sudden disappearance of hundreds of young men, many of them students.

Reindeer's second component was an overland attack on a SWAPO base at Chetequera by national service mechanised infantrymen and armoured troops of 2 SAI

Battalion Group under the unit commander, Commandant Frank Bestbier; this was the first time that the new Ratel infantry fighting vehicle would be used in action. The third component was a sweep through a number of actual and suspected small SWAPO bases east of Chetequera by the ex-FNLA soldiers of 32 Battalion, the existence of which was still a secret.

All three attacks were successful, with low casualties for the SADF in spite of heavy fighting at Cassinga and considerable initial resistance at Chetequera. Three months later SWAPO avenged Cassinga by firing some rockets at the Caprivian capital of Katima Mulilo. Only one rocket hit its target, but it killed 10 national servicemen, more than the combined death-toll of Cassinga and Chetequera. The SADF had had some advance warning and responded with a short incursion into Zambian territory which led to the deaths of 16 insurgents.

In 1979 two small external operations named Rekstok and Saffraan were launched into Angola and Zambia respectively, the latter involving a combined force of 32 Battalion troops, a company of CF soldiers and a contingent of national servicemen. Neither force saw much action, although considerable damage was inflicted on several SWAPO bases.

The next large-scale external operation, however, did not take place till June of 1980, more than two years after Cassinga. Three battalion groups successfully attacked a large SWAPO base complex at Chifufua, about 120km inside Angola, and then swept westwards. National servicemen - mechanised and motorised infantrymen, armoured troops, paratroops and combat-support personnel - played a major role in this operation, code-named Sceptic, and 17 of them were killed in action, the largest death-toll of any external operation up to this point.

9. A NEW FORCE

The heavy reliance on South Africa's citizen soldiers was about to start easing off, however. Two months after Operation Sceptic a home-grown military force was established, called the South-West Africa Territory Force (SWATF); henceforth the border war would be conducted in close co-operation between it and the SADF, the latter providing the specialist stuff. In some ways the SWATF structure closely resembled its "parent", the SADF, and in other ways it differed considerably.

While the SWATF was growing, national servicemen or CF troops or both were involved, at least to some extent, in most of the external operations of the next few years, among them Carnation, Protea and Daisy in 1981, Vasbyt 5 and Super in 1982 and Operation Askari in 1983/4. By 1984, though, the SWATF had grown to

the point where it was carrying a major share of the burden, so that the General Officer Commanding South-West Africa Command, Lieutenant-General George Meiring, could state that 70 percent of the "bayonets" (combat troops) deployed in the operational area were members of the new force.

In its final form the SWATF numbered about 30 000 of all ranks, structured into three main components, two of which made heavy use of national service, CF and commando members. The "Reaction Force" consisted of a brigade of three motorised infantry battalions, one a multiracial national service unit and the other two CF-manned, and six full-time light infantry battalions recruited from specific tribal groups. The "Area Force" was made up of 26 commando units, manned by volunteers and reservists of various races, and the third component consisted of an assortment of specialist and support units which included a squadron of private light aircraft flown by their owners.

The emergence of the SWATF eased pressure of another kind. Although media controls on the press existed, they were of a peculiarly South African kind. A range of laws gave the government the right to withhold or prohibit publication of certain news items, but such prohibitions did not extend to items originating overseas or in Parliament, and no attempt was made to force newspapers to echo the government line.

10. INTERNAL DEPLOYMENTS

This meant that if a national serviceman or CF member died on service there was nothing to prohibit his family from publishing a death notice, and although - or perhaps because - SADF casualties had been consistently light throughout the border war so far, most deaths received media coverage, sometimes quite heavy. The motive behind the coverage varied. In some cases the motive was to emphasise the war's losses, while in other cases it was simply the sort of maudlin sensationalism which has always sold newspapers. In either case the publicity was an embarrassment to the government.

The SWATF's shouldering of a large part of the burden automatically reduced the number of South African deaths and therefore the amount of publicity given to each. By the mid-1980s, however, a new media threat was arising, and potentially a much more serious one. This resulted largely from the government's decision in 1984 to use troops in support of the civil power, namely the police, to keep order in the black townships.

The use of troops in support of the civil power to control unrest was not unusual in itself, since this is a traditional secondary role of the military in most countries. In the South African context, however, it was extremely ill-advised. Such support is usually for short periods only, till order is restored, but in South Africa's case the internal deployment soon became semi-institutionalised. For many citizen soldiers it was also a demotivating business, entirely different from fighting in the field.

At least some members of the top military structure were acutely aware of the long-term dangers of the internal deployment, among them the Chief of the SADF, General Constand Viljoen, who went personally out of his way to make it clear to all armed forces members that malpractices and excessive force would not be tolerated. With some exceptions this was obeyed, but it was all in vain.

Till that time the SADF and its participation in the border war had somehow remained relatively unpoliticised in the circumstances, but now everything changed. Organisations like the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) made significant headway for the first time, greatly helped by the government's hard line on conscientious objection. This boiled down to an insistence that objection would only be allowed on religious grounds, with the alternative service offered being so unnecessarily arduous and lengthy that it amounted to penalisation instead of accommodation.

The resistance offered by the ECC and other organisations garnered huge amounts of publicity but did not materially affect the citizen soldier components' fighting capability, firstly because most whites were still in anti-communist mode and secondly because only a small percentage of the annual recruits' crop of 35 000 or so actually saw active service, and this was even smaller now than it had been because of the emergence of the SWATF.

Another factor which was to have a certain effect in later years was that barring a few special-forces raids, the SADF never actually clashed with the armed wings of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) except while supporting the police in the black townships. Elements of the ANC's Umkhonto we Sizwe were, in fact, deployed in Angola, but against UNITA rather than their fellow countrymen.

National servicemen and the part-time forces continued to take part in the border war for the rest of the decade, but more and more their role was that of supplying the specialist support elements which the SWATF did not have, including mechanised infantry, armoured elements and field or medium artillery.

Infantry remained the main requirement for the day-to-day grind of patrols inside SWA/Namibia, and some unusual stratagems were employed to keep the reservoir topped up. One of these was to temporarily convert soldiers of other corps into a "foot" role. National service anti-aircraft artillerymen, for example, spent an extended operational deployment as infantry after their basic training, then returned for their special-to-corps training, and in one celebrated case a CF field artillery regiment found itself converted, to its disgust, to infantry for a three-month border deployment.

11. DISLODGING FROM THE BORDER

Operation Askari, which inter alia involved four mechanised battle groups, mostly manned by national servicemen and CF members, ended in January 1984 with a decisive South African victory, after which a serious attempt was made to end the border war by setting up a bipartisan Joint Monitoring Commission.

The stated aim was to facilitate the withdrawal of the entire SADF/SWATF presence from southern Angola, with FAPLA (the Angolan armed forces) undertaking to allow no SWAPO or Cuban presence in the area in question; personnel assigned to the JMC for various duties included national service and CF troops and a contingent from 32 Battalion.

The JMC existed well into the following year, but failed to achieve its stated purpose. SWAPO did not desist from using the Angolan border as a sanctuary and jumping-off point, UNITA did not cease fighting its own war against FAPLA, units like 32 Battalion did not cease their operations in the "shallow area of southern Angola", and south of the border the insurgency carried on as before. For three years, however, there were no major external operations.

Then in 1987 the latest of a series of FAPLA/Cuban attempts to take out UNITA's stronghold in the far south-east escalated into a paroxysm of violence which went on into 1988, with fierce conventional ground and air combat in the course of three separate but interlinked operations - Modulêr, Packer and Hooper - involving both the SADF and SWATF, with a strong commitment of national service and CF units and personnel.

Appropriately, the final military gambit of the border war was played out by citizen soldiers. A large Cuban contingent arrived in southern Angola towards the end of the fighting, presumably to provide extra pressure on the South Africans - it did not become involved in any fighting - and in September of 1988 a substantial part of

this force suddenly headed for the SWA/Namibian border in a way which seemed to indicate that it intended to cross over.

Whether the Cubans planned actually to cross the border or were merely engaged in a feint to test the South Africans' resolve was not known, but the latter reacted by sending a large, totally CF battle group under Commandant Tony Marriner of the Cape Town Highlanders on a helter-skelter 200km cross-country dash northwards. The battle group arrived at the border in good order and ready to fight, but found that the Cubans had withdrawn.

That effectively marked the end of the border war, barring one inexplicable but fiercely fought incursion by SWAPO in March-April 1989 which nearly derailed the far-advanced peace talks.

12. CONCLUSION

It lasted 23 years, if one traced it back to its earliest beginnings, and 15 years from the first military take-over. Between 1974 and 1988, the known dead were 715 military personnel (an average of about 47 a year), 1 087 SWA/Namibian civilians and 11 291 SWAPO fighters; this figure does not include any SWAPO members who might have died of wounds at a later stage.

The CF and commando men resumed their civilian occupations and, for those who remained in service, the routine of peace-time training. The national servicemen returned to their barracks, unaware that in the not-too-distant future full-time service would first be cut in half and then abolished altogether.

Their task was not quite finished, however. In the oftentimes turbulent years of the CODESA negotiations in which the "new South Africa" was hammered into place, citizen soldiers of all kinds were still used for maintaining law and order in support of the police, and in 1994 the border veterans of the CF units and commandos rendered their final and greatest service.

A mere 10 days before the historic general election of that year, it became apparent that the police were entirely incapable of providing the necessary security at the thousands of polling stations which had been set up. A hastily implemented call-up brought thousands of seasoned volunteers to the colours, and their vital role in ensuring that the election was not only peaceful but internationally credible, is a matter of historical record.

Looking back, one can discern several ways in which the participation of citizen soldiers affected the border war, and how it affected them.

- In the early years particularly, the post-1960 system proved effective, although far from perfect. In almost any country the non-regular component is an emergency force which is deployed only when there is an urgent need. The combination of full-time national service battalions and part-time CF units and commandos provided great flexibility, because it allowed both an instant and a graduated response on quite a large scale by African standards. This bought the time needed to adjust to a war situation in an orderly fashion – for example by the creation of the SWATF.
- The combined national service and CF/commando component, making up more than 90 percent of the SADF's bayonets, enabled the country to simultaneously fight a large-scale counter-insurgency-cum-conventional campaign in SWA/Namibia and Angola, conduct an internal security operation on the home front and build up a large arms industry without damaging the economy to any appreciable extent. If memory serves, defence expenditure never topped 5,5 percent of the GDP at any stage and was considerably lower most of the time – a very acceptable figure by world standards. It was reported at one stage that the border war cost R2 million a day, an inconsiderable sum even then in the context of the defence budget, when the rand was worth much more in real terms than it is today.
- Generally speaking, South African citizen soldiers did not suffer the same sort of cultural dislocation than, for example, afflicted American soldiers in Vietnam. They were not strangers in a strange land like the Americans. They were Africans, fighting in Africa and relatively close to home, and could usually make themselves understood to the local inhabitants, since the lingua franca in the then SWA/Namibia was Afrikaans.
- Although most of them were pressed men, in the sense that they had been involuntarily mobilised, they generally performed well, thanks to an array of circumstances which have already been discussed.
- Time and time again, their successes in the field highlighted the vital importance of good discipline and thorough training, particularly that of the leader group. South African officers serving with the 1984 JMC, for example, often compared notes with their FAPLA equivalents and were shocked to hear of how little advanced training the Angolan officers received as they progressed upwards in rank.

All this leads inevitably to the question of what sort of citizen warrior force we need for the future. From the above it would seem that the best dispensation would be one that, like the post-1960s system, combines instant and graduated responses; one do-able option would be a series of voluntary national service units whose members serve no more than 18 months or two years, and whose contract involves a firm commitment to return to civilian life and render another three or four years, say, of part-time service.

Currently no such system is in place. Existing CF (now Reserve Force) units are not nearly up to operational strength and the commandos are being disbanded while the Military Skills Development (MSD) training scheme reportedly provides little through-put to the part-time component because there is no obligation to undertake such service, or even a standard service contract which embodies such an obligation. It is true that there are a number of full-time units, but these are no substitute. Their members belong to the Regular Force and serve without term limitation, so that the average age of a rifleman is now in the low 30s, 10 years higher than the ideal.

Ironically, the confused situation can be blamed partly on the post-1960s system, which worked so well in spite of its defects that to the military planners of the early 1990s it seemed as if there was no life beyond conscription.

As a result sight seems to have been lost of the fact that conscription is not necessarily the equivalent of full-time national service, and that apart from providing a rapidly deployable combat force, the function of a national service system is to feed the second rank of the front line, the part-time Reserve Force, with well-trained officers and other ranks. Till that penny drops, there will not be any bright light at the end of the tunnel.