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BOOK REVIEW

Norman McFarlane, *Across the Border: Surviving the Secret War in Angola,* Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2022. 358 pp. ISBN: 978-0-624-09304-6.

Norman McFarlane's recently published memoir of his experiences as a national serviceman and then as a Citizen Force "camper" brings a new perspective to the growing library of conscript accounts of service in the South Africa "Bush" or "Border War" in northern Namibia/Angola. To date, the majority of the published conscript accounts cover service during the second decade of the war from 1978 to 1988; but McFarlane's narrative brings a conscript's perspective of service in the earlier Operation Savannah in 1975/6. The first clandestine phase of the war, under the South African Defence Force (SADF) code name Operation Savannah, was cloaked in secrecy at the time. Thrown into a maelstrom of post-Vietnam Cold War politics by the collapse of the Portuguese colonial regime in Angola, the South African government attempted a cloak-and-dagger military intervention into that country in support of the two anti-colonial forces that espoused anti-communism: the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA) and the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) and that were struggling for control of the country against the Russian-armed and Cuban-supported forces of the Marxist-Leninist Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA). At the time of the seven-month-long operation, which took place during the Angolan rainy season of 1975-1976, the South African media were barred from reporting on the campaign; while the South African soldiers who participated were forced to sign secrecy agreements and to wear non-South African uniforms. Should they have been captured, they

were instructed to pretend that they were foreign mercenaries. The same legislation, the Official Secrets Act, was used to intimidate the members of the South African military who participated in the Operation from discussing their experiences with families, or anyone outside of their military unit. The lingering effects of this secrecy perhaps explains some of the silence that still cloaks the public memory of the Operation and that has prevented veterans like McFarlane from coming to terms with their memories of the war.

McFarlane also brings an artillery soldier's perspective to the experience of Operation Savannah. Called up for his 12 months of national service in 1975, McFarlane was sent for training as a gunner to the 4 Field Artillery Regiment based at Potchefstroom in what is now North West province. His experiences during "basic" and "field" training are well told and capture the rigours and absurdities of military discipline in the SADF from the perspective of an English-speaking conscript. Unknown to the young conscript and his fellows, they were heading into an engagement with larger, global issues to the north of the country as Angola disintegrated into civil war between the three rival anti-colonial groups, while the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), no longer constrained by the Portuguese military, mobilised on the Namibian border. His unit's first operational posting was to the 2 Sub-Area in eastern Caprivi, where they were deployed, not as gunners, but as a counter-insurgency light infantry against the SWAPO forces infiltrating into the area from Angola/Zambia. Although not actively involved in the action, McFarlane writes about the emotional impact on himself and his fellow soldiers of the casualties from their unit of the first cross-border engagement with SWAPO in the Luiana area just north of the Caprivi.

His unit was redeployed in late November into Angola as artillery, operating World War II era British 25-pounder guns, as part of X-Ray, the South African Battle Group sent to help maintain the UNITA control of the Benguela railway line in the centre of the country. As McFarlane recalls, he and his fellow artillerymen entered the country "with gusto", transported by air to Silva Porto with their guns and Bedford trucks. From Silva Porto, they drove to the rail point of General Machado, where they then loaded their guns, together with a squadron of Eland armoured cars, onto a train to Muhango, where the South Africans were greeted personally by the UNITA leader, Jonas Savimbi. It was just outside Muhango that his battery had their first artillery engagement, followed by a number of skirmishes en route to their participation in the Battle of Luso. Shortly after this engagement, his unit reached the end of its call-up period and was gradually moved in stages back to the Namibian border and then to the South African base of Grootfontein inside Namibia before returning to Potchefstroom to demobilise. Following his 12 months of national service, McFarlane was assigned to the Natal Field Artillery for

his Active Citizen Force duties. As a member of this unit, he participated in two training camps, of which he reports not much memory; before his unit was deployed in 1978, again to do three months of infantry service on the Namibian border in the Ovamboland region. Here he witnessed a large and unsuccessful follow-up operation inside Namibia against a group of SWAPO guerrillas in between recovering from a bout of malaria.

It should be noted that McFarlane's memoir was written more than 40 years after his experiences in the conflict in Namibia/Angola during the 1970s. As he himself notes, "distant memory can be, and often is, a lying bastard" (281). He did not keep a diary or make notes during his time during the war and has reconstructed his memories drawing on other people's writing, such as the "events diary" kept by an artillery officer in his unit, the diary of a fellow national serviceman, and the discussions amongst veterans groups on social media, mainly Facebook. Central to the memoir is his struggle, in the years after the conflict, with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He describes in his book how the writing followed from his belated turn to psychotherapy in 2010, after years of struggle with heavy drinking, aggressive outbursts, nightmares, and flashbacks to images of violent death. In this sense, the memoir is another addition to the growing library of trauma or PTSD narratives written by white servicemen after the South African "Bush" or "Border" war.[1]

The association between traumatic emotional reactions to combat has become so common in the South African Border War literature that it is surprising to find that this is not always the case amongst the veterans of other conflicts. Catherine Merridale's research[2] into the memories of the "Great War" amongst Soviet veterans suggests that these do not have to be inscribed through the concept of trauma: she writes, "in view of the near total acceptance of PTSD as a diagnostic reality, a universal human issue, the Soviet attitude to trauma, at least as the survivors and their carers communicated it to me, came as a surprise" (280). Closer to home, Luise White reports from her survey of writings by white veterans of the Rhodesian War[3], that "there is a conspicuous absence of trauma in the memoirs I cite in this book" (21).

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1 Examples of South African "conscript" or "trauma" memoirs are: A Feinstein, *Battle-scarred: hidden costs of the Border War (*Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2011); G Korff, *Nineteen with a bullet: A South African paratrooper in Angola* (Johannesburg: 30 Degrees South, 2009); T Ramsden, *Border-line insanity: A national serviceman's story* (Alberton: Galago, 2009); P Tucker and M van Niekerk, *Behind the lines of the mind: Healing the mental scars of war: Based on the personal story of a South African Parabat* (Stockholm: Tucker/van Niekerk, 2011); S Webb, *Ops Medic: A national serviceman's Border War* (Alberton: Galago, 2008).

2 C Merridale, "Soviet memories: Patriotism and trauma", *Memory: histories, theories, and debates* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 376-89.

3 L White, *Fighting and writing: The Rhodesian army at war and postwar* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2021).

The first conscript memoir specifically to link Post Traumatic Stress Disorder with the experience of the South African Bush War was Clive Holt's *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter,* which was published in 2005.[4] Holt's stated goals for his memoir were two-fold: on the one hand, he sought to produce a narrative providing an accurate account of his experiences; but on the other hand, the narrative was to be a record of his overcoming the traumatic effect of those experiences through the process of writing. Holt wrote about his experiences as a crew member in a Ratel armoured troop carrier during the ferocious conventional land battles in Angola that characterised the last phase of the war in 1988. In common with many of the memoirs, Holt explicitly positioned his account as a therapeutic journey that began with his self-diagnosis as suffering from PTSD. In the Preface to his memoir, Holt wrote,

> I hope that this book can be not only a story of war, but also a story of triumph in overcoming the effects of these traumatic experiences[. . .]. Who knows, it may even help other veterans [. . .] to deal with these experiences in a positive manner and move forward with pride. (18)

In some ways, Holt's narrative is as much about his suffering after the events of the Angolan conflict as it is about the actual experience of the War. The subtitle of McFarlane's book, "Surviving the secret war in Angola", suggests a similar trajectory in which he ascribes his suffering not only to the initial traumatic events of the conflict, in his case, witnessing the bodies of MPLA soldiers mutilated by the South African artillery fire, but also to the lack of treatment and support in the SADF at the time of his military service. Like Holt, McFarlane describes the years following his discharge from the army as a time crippled by his struggle with painful memories and explosive and unpredictable emotional reactions, often sparked by films or events in the outside world, such as the television broadcasts of testimony given by perpetrators to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In Holt's case, release only came when he was able to identify his condition as PTSD, which he does, making use of a manual published by the Australian Centre for War-Related Stress. "Once you are able to identify or understand the process, it becomes a lot easier to start dealing with the cause"(185), he declares, encouraging his readers and fellow veterans to follow his example. McFarlane, however, seems to have been aware that he was suffering from PTSD for many decades prior to seeking treatment, but, as he recalls, "What healthy, red-blooded South African male admits that he needs help, hey?"(287). The catalyst for his final breakdown was a sequence of events beginning with his mother's death. He reports that a few months later that

4 C Holt, *At thy call we did not falter* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2005).

he “made the mistake” of watching *Egoli*, the South African feature film about a SADF conscript’s struggle with PTSD. The final straw, however, was his encounter with another representation of the Border War, the Afrikaans singer Bok van Blerk’s music video “Die Kaplyn”. McFarlane describes himself watching the music video repeatedly, “with tears streaming down my face as the lyrics scythed into my subconscious, dredging up long-buried memories” (333). As a testimony to the effect of van Blerk’s song, McFarlane transcribes the lyrics in full, both in the original Afrikaans and in English translation. The encounter leads him, with his wife’s urging, to finally enter therapy and begin writing about his experiences. Significantly, he chooses to entitle his initial attempt at writing, in an essay written for a community newspaper, “The first casualty of war is innocence”, after the tagline from another war movie, Oliver Stone’s Vietnam War epic, *Platoon.*

The value of McFarlane’s account is the almost forensic detail with which he traces the poisonous thread of PTSD through his entire post-war life. Unlike the earlier ex-conscript accounts of PTSD, McFarlane does not present his experiences as a therapeutic model for other sufferers to follow; but rather as an expiation of his symptoms and a testimony to his regret at not seeking treatment earlier. His account of his therapy with a female psychologist is particularly valuable because she identifies his PTSD as a way of denying the reality of his post-war existence. “Why can’t I get past this”? He demands to know from his therapist through “a flood of tears” (345). Her answer is straight forward and direct and begins the last phase of what McFarlane describes as his healing,

> Because although it is painful to revisit those memories, it is a pain you understand and know, so you keep on going back there. Moving on, getting on with your life is far more painful and frightening, ‘because you will be forced to face the unknown’, she said. (345)

In his Epilogue to the memoir, telling entitled with the interrogative “Redemption?”, McFarlane concludes that the writing has been “cathartic” but “singularly unredemptive” (354). Through the process of therapy and writing, he seems to have reached peace with the dissonance between his liberal ideological self-positioning and his role in the South African “Border War”. “My time in the military is what it is. I am forever altered by its effects. It’s what I do with this knowledge that is important” (355).