

African solutions to African problems

The Most Recent Chapter in the War Diary of Eben Barlow.¹²

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The failure to contain the growing instability in the Sahel and the persistence of numerous conflicts both in the Mediterranean and the Sub-Saharan regions of Africa necessitate the re-evaluation of the conventional and largely dogmatic understanding of the continent's security environment. In this new approach, a revised conceptualisation of the contemporary privatisation of force is an inevitable requirement warranted by not only the appearance of new and influential private actors such as the Russian Wagner Group but also by the recognition of previous erroneous characterisations of private military and security companies (PMSCs).

While foreign entities like the aforementioned Russian company and, albeit to a lesser extent, its American, British and Chinese counterparts are often discussed in academic publications and media reports, African private military companies (PMCs) are largely neglected. Similarly, the PMSC industry is almost exclusively portrayed as a means of foreign interference in Africa, ignoring the local demand and rationale for the employment of such actors. This general disregard for local agency is one of the historically entrenched oversights analysts and commentators continue to make. To address this shortcoming, academics, journalists and policymakers must pay particular attention to indigenous, African PMCs and local, African security requirements. In other words, the new approach to understanding the continent's security environment must account for *African solutions to African problems*.

Few people played a greater role in shaping the modern African private military industry as Eben Barlow. A veteran of both conventional and covert units of the South African Defence Force (SADF), Barlow founded and chaired what was the most influential and controversial private military company of the 1990s, Executive Outcomes (EO). Between 1989 and 1996 EO was engaged in a number of African conflicts. Most notably, in 1993 the company was contracted by the government of Angola to provide *train, advise and assist* (TAA) services to the Angolan Armed Forces fighting UNITA⁴ rebels. Three years later, in Sierra Leone, EO gained international fame - or infamy - when the PMC engaged in counterinsurgency operations against the Revolutionary

¹ Doi: <https://doi.org/10.12700/jceeas.2024.4.3-4.323>

² Eben Barlow, *The War for Africa, Conflict, Crime, Corruption & Foreign Interests*, 2nd ed. (2020; repr., 30° South Publisher, 2024).

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⁴ National Union for the Total Independence of Angola or in Portuguese *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*.



United Front (RUF) on behalf of the Freetown government. These deployments and by association Executive Outcomes and its chairman were subjected to harsh criticism by Western governments and media outlets. Eben Barlow addressed these accusations in his first book titled *Executive Outcome: Against All Odds*.⁵ Drawing on his extensive experience as a SADF officer and a pioneer of the African PMSC industry he developed his own approach to strategy and operational design specifically adjusted for the African environment. This work has been published under the title *Composite Warfare: The Conduct of Successful Ground Force Operations in Africa*.⁶

The subject of this paper is Eben Barlow's third book, *The War for Africa, Conflict, Crime, Corruption & Foreign Interest*.⁷ First published in 2020 and a revised edition by 30° South Publisher in 2024, this book should be regarded as the most recent chapter in the war diary of Eben Barlow. Its coverage begins shortly after the author's departure from Executive Outcomes and the company's closure in 1996. The revised edition concludes with thoughts on events as recent as the 2023 coup in Niger and the subsequent expansion of Russian influence in the country. The book is predominantly focused on the deployments of Special Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection (STTEP), a South African PMC chaired by Barlow between 2009 and 2020. However, it also contains the author's personal thoughts on the contemporary state of Africa and its troubling role in the ongoing global power struggle. While the book is divided into no less than 33 chapters, four major sections can be identified: (1) Barlow's failed attempt at retirement and the birth of STTEP, (2) the overview of the company's first major contract, Operation *Viper* in Uganda, (3) a short-lived deployment to Nigeria, Operation *Anvil* and (4) an assortment of unrealised opportunities, the accounts of which are dispersed throughout the book.

The first section of *The War for Africa* begins with a concise introduction of the events that led the author to direct yet another private military company. These initial chapters outline Barlow's personal and professional background, his endeavours following the departure from EO and his interpretation as to how Africa fell victim to foreign interests post-Cold War. Furthermore, it is in these chapters that the reader is presented with the genesis of STTEP. Albeit chaired by Eben Barlow for over a decade, the company was not founded by the author. In fact, the idea of the PMC was conceived by three SADF veterans while briefly incarcerated in Chikurubi Prison in Harare, Zimbabwe. Harry Carlse, Simon Witherspoon and Louwrens 'Loki' Horn founded STTEP in 2006 guided by their belief that foreign business and state interests only fuel conflicts on the continent often taking the form of peacekeeping efforts mounted by the United Nations (UN) or former colonial powers such as France. As the author recalls: "African solutions to African problems was at the forefront of their thinking"⁸. When the aforementioned

⁵ Eben Barlow, *Executive Outcomes* (Galago Publishing, 2010).

⁶ Eben Barlow, *Composite Warfare: The Conduct of Successful Ground Force Operations in Africa* (Pinetown, South Africa: 30° South Publishers, 2016).

⁷ Eben Barlow, *The War for Africa, Conflict, Crime, Corruption & Foreign Interest*, 2nd ed. (2020; repr., 30° South Publisher, 2024).

⁸ *Ibid.* p.102

three founders - two of whom were previously employees of Executive Outcomes - approached Barlow in January 2009 and invited him to chair their company, it was primarily this shared perspective that compelled him to do so.

The first contract the book covers took STTEP personnel to Uganda to train and assist the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) in their struggle to combat the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). A notable strength of Barlow's style of writing is his thorough efforts to provide a concise historical background to each conflict referenced. In this particular case, readers are familiarised with the LRA, its leader Joseph Kony and the militia's practice of abducting children as young as eight years old to serve as child soldiers. Only after introducing the context does the author begin to discuss how STTEP became involved in the conflict. In an unorthodox fashion, the South African PMC was approached by a US-based non-profit organisation (NPO), the Bridgeway Foundation, to devise an operation to rescue LRA child soldiers in Uganda. Barlow's detailed account of how negotiations with the NPO and the UPDF unfolded provides a rare insight into the corporate background of the operations of PMCs. The numerous meetings, lengthy proposals, setbacks and breakthroughs that precede a private military company's deployment are seldom discussed in publications concerned with the PMSC industry. This novelty borrows the book a unique corporate note. As all aspects of the deployment's context are sufficiently introduced the author proceeds to give a dynamic and engaging account of Operation *Viper*, STTEP's efforts to establish, train and deploy with a UPDF unit subsequently christened Special Operations Group (SOG). While these chapters provide mounting evidence of the inadequate training UPDF troops have previously received, Barlow's account of STTEP's training testify to the determination of Ugandan soldiers and tells a tale of a growingly amicable relationship between the contractors and the SOG personnel. As the offensive stages of Operation *Viper* unfolded and the newly established unit began its pursuit of the LRA and Kony, difficulties emerged. SOG operations were repeatedly compromised by the failure of the UPDF's private contractor to provide crucial airlift. The American company explained this deficiency as inability due to various external factors while Barlow viewed it as unwillingness resulting from political constraints dictated by Washington. Despite these difficulties, SOG achieved notable accomplishments against the LRA in the initial stages of Operation *Viper*. The premature end of STTEP's engagement in Uganda and the termination of its contract with the Bridgeway Foundation was due to a visit of the American Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to the NPO's US offices and what the author describes as "US [...] pressure on the UPDF for our [STTEP's] departure"⁹.

The second STTEP deployment the book covers is Operation *Anvil*, which saw contractors establishing and training the 72 Mobile Strike Force (MSF) of the Nigerian Army. As previously stated, the author places great emphasis on outlining the context of each conflict. In the case of Operation *Anvil*, this entails a chapter on Boko Haram and the kidnapping of 276 mostly Christian girls from their secondary school in Chibok,

⁹ Ibid p.261



north-east Nigeria on the 15th of April, 2014. In Nigeria, STTEP acted as a subcontractor to Conella Services, a Nigerian private entity whose managing director was Cobus Claassen, a former Executive Outcomes employee. Initially, the PMC was tasked with training and assisting a hostage rescue team of the Nigerian Army to rescue the Chibok Girls. However, an imminent Boko Haram offensive forced the Nigerian authorities to shift priorities and reassign STTEP and the freshly - albeit very poorly - equipped MSF to reinforce Nigerian forces in the vicinity of Maiduguri. A testimony to the transparency of Barlow's account is the description of the events that unfolded when the MSF attempted to link up with the Nigerian main force. The inadequate *identification friend or foe* (IFF) training of the Nigerian Army and the absence of shared standard operating procedures between the main force and the STTEP-trained Strike Force resulted in a *blue-on-blue incident*. After the Nigerian main force at Maiduguri misidentified the MSF as hostile combatants, it proceeded to ambush the Strike Force column. A Nigerian T-72 tank engaging a Conella-supplied Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle killed two contractors and wounded a number of MSF members. Although STTEP continued to provide support to the Nigerian Army following the incident, the private military company's contract was terminated soon after the 2015 Nigerian national elections, which were won by Maj. Gen. Muhammadu Buhari. Buhari, known for his pro-American stance, favoured U.S. military assistance over the outsourcing of training to private actors.

While the previously outlined two deployments are the primary subject of *The War for Africa*, a number of fascinating endeavours are also featured, such as the author's "short lived quasi-diplomatic career"¹⁰ as the unaccredited honorary consul of São Tomé and Príncipe to South Africa, as well as his friendship with Taba Amin, son of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. Furthermore, in the book Barlow periodically describes unrealised business opportunities that would have taken place in Madagascar, Sudan, Libya and both the Democratic Republic of Congo as well as the Republic of Congo. It is in the margin of one of these accounts that the author briefly and in a very reserved manner alludes to the reason for his departure from STTEP. Upon learning that two directors of the company have joined a competitor, Dyck Advisory Group in Mozambique while Barlow negotiated for an STTEP contract in the country, the author felt that "I [Eben Barlow] no longer had a role to play in the company."¹¹

Overall, the book is best understood as the most recent chapter of Eben Barlow's war diary. As such it gives a personal, often witty yet indisputably forthright account of both *boots-on-the-ground* realities of PMC operations in Africa and the author's interpretation of the political headwinds he and the company were forced to fight. The book is accessible to a wide audience due to its language and Barlow's careful efforts to contextualise the events and actors. However, academics and those who wish to gain an in-depth understanding of the African PMSC industry ought to read this book as a companion to analytical publications. For them, *The War for Africa* gives a unique

¹⁰ Ibid p.481

¹¹ Ibid p.504

opportunity to familiarise themselves with the ideas and observations of a seasoned practitioner. On that note, it is important to offer a word of caution. Readers must recognise that Eben Barlow is not without prejudice. He is a staunch advocate of the African PMSC industry and an individual with a past many find controversial. Therefore, it is the responsibility of readers, and an explicit duty of academics, to exercise rigorous scrutiny when engaging with the text.

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