

## Book review: South Africa's Border War 1966-1989 by Willem Steenkamp<sup>1,2</sup>

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Willem Steenkamp is a South African journalist, historian, military analyst and expert. He has published numerous works on military and historical topics mainly on South Africa. The author's commitment and expertise in military subjects can be attributed to his long military service and experiences he gained there. He served in the Active Citizen Force from 1961 to 1989, spending significant time on active duty and participating in different operations. His service was recognized with numerous decorations, many of which were earned for his operational activities.

His book, *The South African Border War 1966-89*, is considered one of the best on the subject, and has not been surpassed since. It quickly became a bestseller upon its publication, so it is strange that it was decided to republish it almost two decades later. In addition to the content of the book, I would like to highlight the richness of the illustration, the hundreds of colors and black-and-white photos, which vividly and authentically present the events, the environment, and the participants. They also contribute significantly to the success of the book. The photographs were taken and selected by Al J Venter, who is also a successful writer on various military subjects.

The South African Border War 1966-89 clearly encompasses a significant part of the South African military history. The author's aim seems to be to commemorate and acknowledge the South African Armed Forces (SADF), demonstrating their commitment, mindset and efforts in defending their country over this long period. Perhaps this is why the author adopted a one-sided approach and use of sources, relying solely on documents from the SADF. He did not use sources from other participants of the conflict (Angolan, Russian, Cuban, etc.). Imaginably these were not even available. Due to the one-sided use of sources, the book appears to be an expanded, well-illustrated "operational log." The author provides a chronological overview of the main foreign and domestic political processes, social events, and the circumstances necessary to understand the background and reasons for military operations. The main emphasis, however, is on the presentation of military activities. All this is done with a level of competence and thoroughness (equipment, technical details, number of casualties, etc.)

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<sup>2</sup> Willem Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War 1966-1989*, Helion & Company Limited, Unit 8 Amherst Business Centre, Budbrooke Road, Warwick CV34 5WE England, (paperback), Pages: 256, Images: 300+ color & b/w photos, ISBN: 9781915113009. Date of Publication: 15th February 2022, Edition: Reprint, Size: 297mm x 210mm, Helion Book Code: HEL1483, Price: £39.95 Including FREE UK delivery.

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that clearly demonstrates the author's expertise and the credibility of the sources used. In my opinion, there is no doubt that the content authentically reflects the thinking and actions of South Africans in relation to the 1966-89 Border War.

The author repeatedly emphasizes that the Border War was a low-intensity, protracted conflict that spanned generations of South Africans. Thus, we can sense the patriotism inherited from father to son and the ongoing commitment to the security of the homeland. However, the low intensity should not mislead the reader, as it resulted in thousands of casualties and significant material damage and destruction. The loss was probably significantly more than the book states, as the figures are based on SADF sources only. Most of the operations began against insurgent units operating across or near the border and then progressed to heavy conventional warfare across the border, deeply inside the enemy's (Angola) territory. This type of warfare involved the use of air power in addition to ground forces, and even the occasional involvement of the navy. Thus, complete combined arms operations were also part of the so-called border war. Over time, the South African side demonstrated considerable courage and resourcefulness in the use of special operations activities, raiding training camps and command posts in Angola and Zambia. The reader can clearly trace the force development progress of the South African Armed Forces during the long period of the Border War, including organizational, technical, doctrinal, training and planning areas. The author also introduces the decision-making military leaders, most of whom participated in the operations and gained real combat experience.

In addition to military events, he also addresses social issues affecting the military, such as racism, denying that the essence of the conflict was a white-black clash. One of the earlier principles of apartheid policy was that only whites could be called up for military service and provided with weapons. This policy changed radically during this period, for example, an independent Zulu unit was established and successfully deployed (p. 234). We do not know to what extent this was due to military necessity or to the democratization process repeatedly emphasized by the author.

Part 2 presents the operations and the units that played a decisive role in the war. This can be considered more of an appendix, given the relatively short, descriptive text paragraphs and the large number of photos. In any case, it helps the reader to understand Part 1 better.

There is no doubt that the border war presented a continuing challenge to the South African Armed Forces, but it also offered an opportunity for its development. It is important to note that by the end of the war they had gained capabilities in border defense and anti-guerrilla operations that were probably unique in the world at that time. A particularly important achievement was the establishment and development of an independent military industry based on war experiences. The role and the mentality of the South African political and military leadership are also highlighted in the book, as they seized the opportunity and built the most effective and experienced military force of the era in the region.

The author presents the political and social events only in a nutshell to put military

activities into context, but at the same time he still provides a comprehensive picture of the defining political directions of the era and their mutual effects. It is very interesting to follow how a trade union featured movement developed into a regionally significant armed liberation force. Furthermore, how a national organization became a determining factor at the regional and then international level. The Ovambo People's Organization (OPO) was not an ideologically based organization, but a "*labour organisation against the migrant-labour system by which thousands of workers were hired to work in other parts of South West Africa without taking care of their rights and welfare*" (pp.18). The nature of the organization fundamentally changed after a serious police decision to shoot at the protesting crowd, this meant the focal point of the transformation into a liberation and independence organization, which fought for its goals not only with political means, but also with military force. The author describes how this transformed organization gained regional importance through relations with the liberation forces of neighboring countries (Angola, Zambia, Mozambique), establishing training camps and forward commands in their territory. The withdrawal of the Portuguese from the former Portuguese colonies strengthened the positions of the liberation organizations in the region, and thus the regional support and activities of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) also strengthened.

With the changing nature of the OPO and its connections with the liberation organizations of the region, the OPO grew beyond its regional role and became part of the global confrontation. Following the principle of: "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", during the Cold War, it was not necessary to have a strong ideological commitment for the Soviet Union to support an organization fighting against a Western-type state. Then, of course, in addition to military support, they also received strong ideological training.

Therefore, the Soviet Union, Cuba and the Eastern Bloc strongly supported the liberation movements, while the USA and the Western Bloc supported the South African and Angolan UNITA forces on a smaller scale, according to the author. Thus, the border war can also be considered part of the global confrontation, a proxy war on the African continent, one of the stages of the East-West struggle.

I consider this work to be a historic memoir of SADF's border war activities. The author commemorates the generational struggle for the security of the country and the development of the armed forces, and the SADF's rise to become a dominant force on the continent.

However, the book has become particularly relevant today and has gone beyond the "historic memoir" category. It carries a strong critical message regarding the current state of the South African Armed Forces. Already in 2014, "*A series of cuts to its capital and operating budgets compromised several capabilities and the South African National Defence Forces (SANDF)*<sup>4</sup> was "*in a critical state of decline*". (Department of Defence's

<sup>4</sup> in 1994 the South African Defence Forces was reorganized and renamed for South African National Defence Forces

2014 Defence Review)<sup>5</sup> The situation has not improved much to this day, although the “2024 presidential directive that ordered the defence budget to be moved from 0.7 to 1.5% of GDP to redress chronic underfunding”<sup>6</sup>. It is doubtful that this will happen, until then it will remain the lack of maintenance for prime mission equipment (PME) including most of the SA Air Force (SAAF) and Navy assets. The decline was reported by the military website Global Firepower, which published its 2025 military force rankings. “South Africa is ranked as having the 40th greatest military strength globally – dropping seven spots from 2024. The country also dropped in the ranking of strongest military force in Africa, sliding by one spot from third in 2024 to fourth in 2025”<sup>7</sup>.

Overall, this is an excellent history book with an important message for our time. The message is the importance of maintaining and developing the achievements accomplished through the sacrifice and hard work of generations. This is particularly important in today's complex and challenging circumstances not only for moral reasons, but also for fundamental security interests.

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<sup>5</sup> DÖRRIE, Peter, South Africa's Military Is Falling Apart, Medium.com, War Is Boring, 2014. 04.13. <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/south-africas-military-is-falling-apart-a63c5d28220f>

<sup>6</sup> Staff Writer, Dod Management Taken To Task For Failing To Reverse SANDF Decline, Defence Web, 2025.04.25 <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/sa-defence/sa-defence/sa-defence/dod-management-taken-to-task-for-failing-to-reverse-sandf-decline/>

<sup>7</sup> LIBERA, Malcolm, South Africa's military strength vs the world in 2025, BusinessTech.co.za, 2025.01.16. <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/806980/south-africas-military-strength-vs-the-world-in-2025/#:~:text=South%20Africa%20is%20ranked%20as,2024%20to%20fourth%20in%202025.>