



IT'S the war no one talks about any more, the one fought on the sandy flats and in the bush of then South West Africa and Angola. Almost as if there never had been a Boetie sent straight from school to the defence force to fight "on the border" whether he wanted to or not.

While Americans are still making movies about the Vietnam War there has been an almost audible silence in the new South Africa about the time when compulsory military service for all white men was a reality.

Now the silence has been broken by a new book, *An Unpopular War**, in which more than 40 former servicemen relate their experiences in the defence force. Their real first names and ages at the time are given. It's heartbreaking to read how young some of them were – such as the 17-year-old telling how he had to unload one body after another from a chopper one hot afternoon.

Thousands of young white men served 'on the border' – in a new book many recall the horror of death and maiming

"Even though most national servicemen called up for military service did not experience combat their time in the military had a profound and lasting impact on them," says the author, Johannesburg freelance journalist JH Thompson, wife of popular Highveld FM radio personality Jeremy Mansfield. Conversations at braais with former soldiers in which they reminisced about their experiences made her realise this part of our history needed to be documented.

The book reveals events kept secret at the time due to strict media censorship. As Greg (25) writes, "There was a s**tload of stuff going on and most South Africans didn't know. The guy driving his Mercedes around Sandton had no idea that men were dying or being maimed, losing limbs. Not just ours, but Angolan men, women and children too."

The tragedy of the war would remain with Greg and his comrades for years. Here they talk about it in their own words . . .

WE had to catch the (troop) train to Cape Town from the station near Milpark (in Johannesburg). I told my mom she couldn't come if she was going to cry like all those mothers on TV.

The guys were very friendly and told us to make sure we left alcohol, drugs, knives or guns with our parents! I wasn't sure if they were joking or not. I remember thinking, this isn't so bad.

But the minute you stepped through the gate – what a rude awakening! They screamed and shouted and called us all sorts of names.

Some of the things that stood out for me that day were: the stale sandwiches – which you had to eat – *vrot* bananas and coffee so sweet you could die from insulin overload, having to close the windows at Joburg station so the enemy could not see in to count the number of troops, and that my mom didn't cry. – Dave (19)

The word *vasbyt* originated with 1 Parachute Battalion. New recruits arrived at the battalion and had to undergo this form of physical initiation by tensing their stomach muscles as a big guy hit them in the gut as hard as he could. The word is now used all over the place, on the rugby field, the rest of the SADF, but that's where it came from – 1 Parachute Battalion. – John (18)

While we were still candidate officers we were sent up to the border. We had to go around trying to get information. We had black transla-

Our war that didn't happen



sors who were also trackers with us. When we entered a village they would ask for information. The people were always too scared to talk. If they didn't get co-operation, they would set fire to a hut or two. This usually worked. I also saw them hitting villagers with rifle butts. When we moved on, the translators used to take a woman or two with them and some goats. The women had to slaughter and cook the goats for them, and I know they raped the women at night because I could hear those sounds. The moaning and crying.

In the mornings we checked around the TB (temporary base) for tracks. There were always tracks, which I'm sure were from the husbands or men looking for their girlfriends. As we moved on, the black translators would let the women go and then do the same at the next village.

I only talked about this with my buddy. We came from an academic background and had never seen this sort of behaviour. But it is funny what you soon accept as normal. - Werner (21)

My clearest memories are of the first few contacts we had inside South West. We were based not far north of Oshivelo, and that evening we were given the opportunity to travel to Tsumeb for a Geraldine concert. She was a corny country and western singer who was a big hit with the troops. I think one of her songs was "Baby Makes Her Blue Jeans Talk".

Anyway, about 150 of us are sitting in the dark, watching the show, when the lights go on and we're told there's been an insurgency and everyone must get back to their vehicles immediately. We leave Geraldine and her blue jeans behind and head off for one of the *kaplyne*. These were long sandy "roads" stretching for miles, which were impossible to cross without leaving a sign. The army used a Buffel to drag a tree so that the *kaplyne* were swept clear daily and we could check for fresh spoor.

We are to form a stopper group on a fence line just off to the south of one of the *kaplyne*. We form a long line of guys, about 5-10 m apart. There are also these large

observation towers and the guys in them have night-vision equipment. It's pitch dark and completely silent. Nothing happens. We see no one.

The next morning we are back in Ratels, about 12 of them. We check out an area further west down the *kaplyne* from where we had been the night before. The trackers pick up where terrs had crossed. They all wore Russian boots with very distinctive spoor: a couple of V-shaped notches facing the front of the boot.

I'm sitting on the front of the Ratel, and E, a guy from the Eastern Cape, is walking around looking at where the guys had come through the fence and crossed the line. He shouldn't have been there, on the ground, walking around. There was this boom! and smoke and dust as he stepped on a Black Widow. I was sprayed with sand and he collapsed with one leg blown off. We couldn't find any part of his leg, only a corner from the back of his boot.

The wound wasn't bleeding much. The edges were ragged and partly sealed from the heat of the blast. He was lying there, conscious but completely quiet. No screaming or shouting. The medic treated him while we waited for a chopper to casevac him out.

I was lucky because that type of mine is a small concentrated charge designed not to kill a person but to maim, and this one was buried in soft sand, which absorbed some of the charge.

One minute we were in a hall in Tsumeb being entertained by the sexy singer Geraldine belting out country-and-western hits, and now this.

- Anonymous

The most awe-inspiring thing that happened to me was at a temporary base in western Zambia. Around 3 am I was wakened and I noticed it was pitch dark. The guy who'd woken me put his face right next to mine

and he said, "We're surrounded." And I thought, oh my God, and he told me to look. There was a herd of elephants around us. About 50 jumbo. But the scary part was that they were all looking in one direction, away from us.

I told the guys we had to move. We moved about 2 km and the elephants moved off too. At first light our previous position was mortared. To this day I believe those elephants warned us. - Ric (18)

We were part of an assault group assigned to destroy a strategic enemy position in southern Angola.

The operation was afforded the name Operation Protea.

We initiated contact with the enemy at a town called Xangongo, a small town positioned alongside the Kunene River. We met with very little resistance and took it quickly.

From there we moved on through Mongua and on towards Ongiva. After about

(Turn over)

'It is funny what you soon accept as normal'



SA soldiers' bodies were treated with reverence but



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75 km, we took up temporary base outside Ongiva for the night.

It was a small town, but it had banks, roads and shops.

Obviously, those with some form of rank had looted the town. It was common knowledge money had been removed from the bank and appliances from various trading stores.

We laid our hands on small transistor radios. Those were the spoils for those in the military with lesser rank.

As we passed through the town, we simply jumped off the vehicles, quickly ran into the ransacked shops, and grabbed the radios.

That night in the temporary base we were in our sleeping bags in the trenches with our ground-sheets over us to form a shelter. And the irony of the story is that we turned on the stolen radio and unbelievably we caught a broadcast from the RSA and heard PW Botha categorically denying to the world that there were any South African forces in Angola.
- Dudley (21)

My trip to the Skeleton Coast was the most awesome trip of my life. We were to go ahead and set up camp for all the OCs (Officers Commanding) from every base in Sector 20. I wasn't sure why they were all there, but it sure looked like just fishing to me.

I remember the one night the signaller came to tell them that this well-known terrorist, Platpote, had been shot dead. He was brilliant. They'd been after him for ages, and they eventually found out he used to run along fences. Right on the top of barbed wire fences – bare-foot. The Bushmen trackers figured it out; they were brilliant too.

So that night when we heard he'd been shot, there was a big chug-chug. They were, "Hey, they got the oke!" But yet there was respect. Even though we had killed him, there was still admiration for him.
- Anthony (18)

One afternoon during a large operation a radio call came through saying there had been a big contact. None of our guys had been hurt but the choppers were bringing out enemy dead and wounded. I was ordered down to the helipad to assist in unloading the choppers.

Loss of the enemy were dropped like bags of potatoes

While I was waiting for the helicopters to come in, I met the base doctor, newly arrived and freshly qualified. After half an hour the choppers came in, and soon the helipad smelt of hot exhaust gases, and the rotor blades were going whoosh, whoosh, rotating above our heads. There was dust everywhere and it was noisy and very hot.

The choppers had to be unloaded fast 'cause they were returning, so they didn't even shut down. One helicopter had bodies and the other was carrying wounded terrorists. I was assigned to unload corpses, while the doctor and a medic unloaded the wounded from the other. The flight sergeant had quickly busied himself on something near the engine, leaving me by myself.

There was blood and bits of bodies everywhere. I could barely drag each bloody body out of the helicopter. At first I tried to keep the various shot-off body pieces together, but soon the corpses just became things, like bags of potatoes. Just grab a body, pull it out and let it fall to the ground – a drop of about a metre. I remember the sound of the skulls hitting the tarmac. Thud. Thud.

On the other hand, dead South African soldiers were treated with absolute reverence. Our dead were carefully lifted out of a chopper and placed gently on a stretcher before being taken to the morgue at Ondangwa.

For the bodies of the enemy there was absolutely no respect. The intelligence guys would go through their clothing, looking for intel, and then the bodies would be put on display outside the base. There were civilians in the area, and displaying the bodies was a message to them. The bodies were also used in posters and photos for propaganda purposes.

The more covered in blood I became, the more the bodies became like bags of potatoes, just to be thrown on a pile. As I pulled the last corpse out, the helicopter flew off, leaving me covered in bloody dust, crouched over this pile of bodies.

Meantime the doctor had finished with the wounded. Wounded terrorists were treated but I think it

was only to make them fit enough for interrogation. He came over and saw that one of the corpses I had pulled out was alive. I will never forget him looking at me with complete shock and revulsion.

As he frantically began to look for other signs of life, I wondered how many others I might have killed because of the rushed and rough offloading. I wanted a shower to try and cleanse myself of the afternoon, but during the week the showers were off due to water rationing, so I tried to wash from a bucket.

That evening I walked out to the perimeter walls and tried to watch the sunset, wondering if I really had become the monster I saw in the doctor's eyes. It was a sad sunset. – Chris (17)

I hated township patrols. We were called in this one night to help locate a consignment of R4s that had been stolen from a base near Soweto. We were on roofs, in helicopters, zooming around in police bakkies.

We ganged up at a door and ran through a house. It was not nice:

people were in their dressing gowns tending little fires. We ran right through their homes, invading their privacy. For me, it was far worse doing township duty than border duty. – Brett (18)

'There was a stload of stuff going on and most South Africans didn't know'**

I was only 50 m away when a toy-toying crowd of a few hundred people passed me. I never realised they were murdering someone. When they moved off down Khumalo Street I saw this little boy playing right next to the body.

The wire around the wrists had cut into the flesh and there was a pool of blood. The boy didn't seem at all bothered.

He looked at me and held up a stick for me to play with. I didn't take it. I stepped over the body and walked to the nearest house, where a woman stood in the garden.

She frantically waved me away, and I realised that if I spoke to her she could be the next victim.

I was hijacked in February 2000, and when the guy stuck a 9 mm pistol in my temple, he had the same look in his eye as the little boy. – John (27)

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