

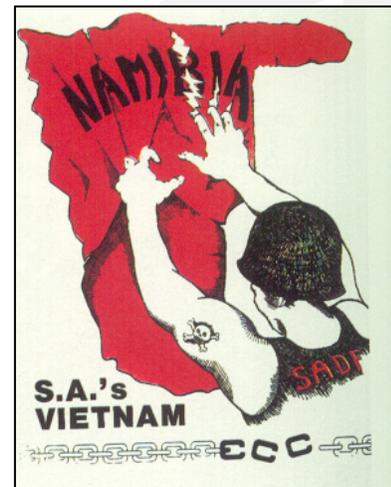
# “South Africa’s Vietnam?”

LITERARY HISTORY AND CULTURAL MEMORY OF THE BORDER WAR

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper derives its title from a poster produced for the End Conscription Campaign, an organization which opposed national service during the 1970s and 1980s. The ECC provided a support network for those (white) conscripts who objected to the call-up on conscientious or religious grounds and attempted to make the general public aware that the lives of the country’s young men were being sacrificed in support of the apartheid regime. The graphic image suggests that the South African Defence Force’s (SADF) illegal occupation of Namibia was analogous to the United States of America’s presence in Vietnam and that the outcome would be the same for South Africa as it had been for the United States. The analogy was invoked



not only by those who opposed the SADF’s illegal occupation of Namibia, but the soldiers involved in the conflict as well. Indeed, America’s war in Vietnam became a point of reference for South African soldiers who served on the so-called Border.

The Border had both spatial and metaphorical meanings. In South African military circles it became a metonym for the operational zone where the troops of the SADF and the guerrillas of the South West African Peoples’ Organization (SWAPO) known as the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) engaged in battle. These military engagements occurred mainly in “the north” of Namibia which comprised Owambo, Okavango, and the Caprivi Strip, as well as in Angola. The adoption of the nomenclature of the Border War by the South African media and (white) public implies the acceptance of the official rhetoric of the apartheid regime which justified waging war

in Namibia in order to keep it safe from infiltration by PLAN guerrillas and those of other liberation movements with whom SWAPO were aligned. By contrast, SWAPO described the conflict as the Namibian liberation struggle in order to reflect its rather diametrically opposed ideological and military objectives (Erichsen 2001, 158). Metaphorically, the border represented the extension of the conflict to the home country. The South African Police (SAP) with the back-up of the SADF sought to erect a cordon against its internal enemies so as to “defend the suburbs from the townships” (Jurgens 2000, 177). Although these struggles were interrelated and conscripts performed military duties in both theaters of conflict, this paper is concerned only with the war waged on the Namibian/Angolan border. And it is concerned primarily with the impressions of the South African soldiers or troops.

The troops incorporated many Americanisms into their jargon. For instance, those doing duty in the bush called South Africa or home “the States” and South West Africa (Namibia) “Nam.” Songs about the Vietnam War, even antiwar protest songs, were appropriated by South African soldiers. As a singer-guitarist who entertained his unit during a spell in Owambo in 1976, Rick Andrew’s repertoire included a recontextualized version of Country Joe McDonald’s anthemic *I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin-To-Die Rag*. The reworked first stanza went:

*Come on all you big strong men  
Uncle John needs your help again.  
Got himself in a bit of a jam  
Way down yonder in Ovamboland.*

And the sing-along chorus, also adapted slightly to suit the occasion, went:

*And it’s one two three  
What are we fighting for?  
Don’t ask me I don’t give a damn  
Next stop Ovamboland.  
There ain’t no use to wonder why  
Whoopie...we’re all bound to die.*

Although the song might have been sung in a light-hearted and off-handish manner after the consumption of many drinks, whether the troops identified with the sentiments expressed in the lyrics or not, Vietnam was still a reference point for them. Why was this the case?

In his analysis of the social reality shared by a generation of American males sent to war in Vietnam, Lloyd Lewis (1985) identifies the media as one of the agents of socialization by which the “symbolic universe” borrowed exclusively from the Second World War was transmitted from one generation to the next (the other agents were the family and the military). Thus John Wayne, the ultimate machismo warrior in a string of Hollywood war films, provided a role model for early American volunteers for Vietnam (*vide* Kovic 1977, 55; Caputo 1977, 6; Herr 1979, 169). The values of duty, honor, and sacrifice were reinforced in American homes where fathers and other male relatives were

veterans of the “Good War.” But in South Africa, especially in Afrikaner families, the government’s decision to go to war against Germany in 1939 had been divisive and was not necessarily remembered with affection. Instead, patriotism and conformity to the ideology of white supremacy was reinforced by a value system upheld by the family, the church, an educational system which included cadets for white male school goers, and military service itself. The media played less of a role in reinforcing a world view than in the construction of a frame of reference which enabled soldiers who served on the border to understand their experiences. It is my contention that South African soldiers related to American Vietnam war films and literature in order to make sense of significant episodes in their life stories. This was because, at the time, local productions of war adventure films with a border setting lacked credible story lines and heroes. The Border War film resembled poor versions of American World War II “propaganda-as-entertainment” films (Craig 2003). And the literature of the Border War did not amount to much, nor had it developed a meta-narrative.

So it is my argument that the Vietnam War provided a framework for imagining the Border War. I propose to make my case by examining themes which resonate in the literature of both these wars. The symbolically constructed world of the troop fighting in the bush (or *bundu*) was derived not from stories of previous South African conflicts but from accounts of the American experience of Vietnam. The narrative constructed of that experience has assumed mythic proportions, for it has taken on a shape, texture, and an identity which is separate from reality and exists apart from it. Likewise, “it would seem that [South African soldiers] were unconsciously mythicising their [border] war even as they fought it” (Batley). This paper will attempt to show that representations of the Border War as “South Africa’s Vietnam” have been reified in the literature of the war, especially in the writings of combatants. It is concerned with the narratives of the white conscript soldier rather than the freedom fighter.

## BORDER WAR LITERATURE

Before turning our attention to the recent works of soldier-authors, I wish to comment briefly on the extant literature of the Border War. This consists of a number of categories.

First, there is the conventional *military history* which chronicles and often extols the exploits of the SADF and its individual units (*vide* Steenkamp 1983, 1989; Stiff 1991, 1999). The premise is invariably that South Africa boasted the best-equipped and trained armed forces on the African continent. There is a preoccupation with the weapons of war, military strategies, and tactics, and the course of particular campaigns and battles. This body of writing makes little or no attempt to contextualize the Border War, to explain to the reader the circumstances of South Africa’s occupation of Namibia and its destabilization of the sub-continent. It is largely descriptive but its political bias masquerades as ideological neutrality or journalistic objectivity. In fact, much of this literature was sanctioned by the SADF.

Some of this literature seeks to draw analogies between the nature of South Africa's Border War and the United States' war in Vietnam. As in Vietnam where the United States supported a puppet regime with its own armed forces (ARVN), South Africa propped up a minority government with its own SADF-trained army known as the South West African Territorial Force (SWATF) and the counter-insurgency unit Koevoet. But the issue was complicated by regional and international politics as well as the symbiotic relationships of the liberation movements. Thus South Africa not only fought the Namibian liberation organisation SWAPO, but supported UNITA against SWAPO's allies in Angola, namely the MPLA and FAPLA. The cadres in the ranks of these organisations were, in turn, augmented by Russian instructors and Cuban troops. The presence in Angola of these troops armed with military hardware from the Communist bloc seemed to justify South Africa's claim that she was facing a "total onslaught." As the last line of defence against Communism in the African sub-continent, the country projected itself as the bastion of Western civilization. White South Africans were stepping into the breach to withstand Communist encroachment as the Americans had (unsuccessfully) done in Vietnam. These military histories tend to focus on whether the lessons learned from the Vietnam War were heeded by the SADF.

Second, there is a body of left-leaning *academic writing* which is critical of the apartheid regime. This includes accounts that focus on the military conflict (*vide* Herbstein and Evenson 1989), as well as sociological works concerned with militarization and the impact of war on South African society at large (*vide* Leonard 1983; Cawthra 1986; Cock and Nathan 1989; Frederikson 1986). The latter works treat the Border War as part of a broader conflict of the liberation struggle. They are concerned as much with the sites of struggle in the townships where troops were also involved, as with an ill-defined border or operational area. The works include studies which explore gender as a key component in the militarization of South African society (Cock 1991). If this literature refers to Vietnam, it does so in order to draw parallels with the impact of war on conscripts or resistance to the war by those such as the ECC involved in defying the military authorities.

Third, there is the corpus of fiction written almost exclusively by young white male Afrikaner intellectuals which has come to be known as *grensliteratuur* ("border literature"). The early works of the 1970s (eg., Haasbroek 1974; Steyn 1976) which drew inspiration from the country's own frontier history were usually fairly graphic descriptive accounts which explore personal encounters with violence and death. The later works of the 1980s were seldom written by those with first-hand experience of the war but "embody an attempt to come to terms with living in a state of constant friction and permanent tension." Koornhof (1989, 276) holds that "[t]he writing explores not so much the war, but the breaking up of the previously monolithic Afrikaner ethnic identity in the face of the current political, military and moral crises in the country." This identity, largely constructed around the symbolism generated by the South African War, was deconstructed and, to a lesser degree, reconstructed around another war: the Border War. Some of the writings are replete with an anguished and rather tentative notion of a new, all-embracing South African cultural identity. This abandonment of Afrikaner nationalism and its historical and cultural heritage is conveyed in metaphorical terms in Louis Kruger's novel *'n basis oorkant die grens* (1984) in which the body of the leader of a

failed mission is carried back across the border by his squad. The corpse serves as a metaphor for the ideological baggage of the past, which has to be lugged about at risk to life and limb, until it can be given an honourable burial. The border in this instance is not only a place of refuge from the pursuing enemy but a boundary that must be crossed in order for society to come to grips with a militarized existence as much as with a state of actual war. These dissident Afrikaner writers found military conflict to be the most apposite context in which to explore their perceptions of the dissolution of Afrikaner unity and hegemony (Koornhof 1989, 282). In other words, *grensliteratuur* reflected the construction of a new Afrikaner identity. Gordon (1991, 81) challenges this interpretation and holds that *grensliteratuur* served to sustain apartheid and the status quo. It seems to me that *grensliteratuur* is not undifferentiated but constitutes both complementary and competing narratives.

The texts comprising the fourth category of border literature are primarily representative of the experiences of white English-speaking national servicemen. These include memoirs of soldier-authors (eg., Feinstein 1998, Jürgens 2000, Andrew 2001), as well as novels (eg., Behr 1996) which provide first-hand accounts of military life. While drawing upon their own personal and select memories, they also reflect a cultural memory shaped by the mass media and texts of other wars (Sturken 1997, 3). The memoirs have confessional narratives and amount to a growing corpus of *cathartic literature*. Such writings are both less than and more than confession; they are partly fiction. They address the issue of the guilt of (liberal) white males conscripted by the SADF who faced three options: answer the call-up and spend two years or more (if camps are included) of one's life defending a system that was morally indefensible, object on conscientious or religious grounds and face a stiff jail sentence, or flee the country. These reluctant soldiers express the misgiving that merely donning the SADF uniform made them complicit in supporting the apartheid regime, as well as acts of terror committed in its name. The stories are told with a blend of honesty and self-delusion, candour and skepticism, and self-deprecating humour. Above all, these literary memories conjure up a nauseous nostalgia for military life and the Border War. Nostalgia is not necessarily false or inauthentic. Indeed, it can be empowering and productive if critically tempered and historically informed (Bal 1999, xi). In many respects these personal narratives remind the reader of the universality of war experience, but in other respects they have undoubtedly been informed by American representations of the Vietnam War.

## UNIVERSAL WAR THEMES

Although I have drawn my illustrations from the Border and Vietnam Wars, the following themes which appear in the writings of the soldier-authors are common to the literature of all conflicts of the twentieth century:

### 1. *Right of Passage*

Fussell (1975) has suggested that most war stories have three phases: innocence, experience, and reflection. The loss of innocence and demonstration of manhood is

usually marked by the initiation into fighting which constitutes a rite of passage. Caputo (1977, xv) remarked that:

In the space of two months, [we] passed from boyhood through manhood to a premature middle age... We left Vietnam peculiar creatures, with young shoulders that bore rather old heads

Herr (1977, 16) describes the aging experienced by a young soldier in these terms:

He had one of those faces, I saw that face at least a thousand times at a hundred bases and camps, all the youth sucked out of the eyes, the color drawn from the skin, cold white lips... Life had made him old, he'd lived it out old.

Elsewhere, Herr speaks of soldiers being "twenty-seven pushing fifty." This rapid coming of age is also a feature of South African war stories. Feinstein's (1998) account of how a skirmish between a SAP detachment and SWAPO guerrillas separates "the men" from "the boys" is typical. The public also bought this line of reasoning. One of a group of white women visiting the boys on the border apparently stated that "[t]he Border is where our sons become men" (*Paratus*, from Herbstein and Evenson 1989, 99).

## 2. *Love-Hate Relationship with Combat*

Bourke (1999, 18-21) insists that soldiers derived considerable enjoyment and pleasure from killing. In his Vietnam memoir, Caputo (1977: xvi) recounts the contradictory attraction and repulsion of battle:

...I could not deny the grip that war had on me, nor the fact that it has been an experience as fascinating as it was repulsive, as exhilarating as it was sad, as tender as it was cruel.

This simultaneous thrill and fear of battle is also evident in Behr's account (1995, 12) of an engagement on the border. The excitement of combat was in stark contrast to the immobility induced by fear. Feinstein (1998, 57) describes the mixed emotions experienced after a skirmish:

The euphoria would not leave me. It was like that for all the men, relief and exhilaration feeding off us. We chatted animatedly, comparing experiences. One man candidly confessed he had to relieve himself during the battle in order to avoid the embarrassment of becoming incontinent. The elder of the two warrant officers had been overwhelmed by fear. He had sat immobile throughout the battle and had to be told when the fighting was over.

Hardened policemen are turned into gibbering wrecks in this baptism of fire. Any encounter with death is likely to cause an adrenaline rush but when the excitement wears off it can leave the soldier in an emotionally drained state. These ambivalent feelings towards conflict are evident in much war literature. Indeed, it is a myth that constant

exposure to battle situations necessarily turned rookies (or “scabs”) into hardened warriors (or “grunts”), for troops never really grow accustomed to combat.

### 3. *Dehumanization of the Enemy*

This encouraged the fiction that those killed were not really human (Bourke 1999, 220). In naming the enemy, soldiers tend to use monosyllabic terms which can be spat out with contempt. In Vietnam the Americans called the Vietcong “gooks,” “dinks,” or “Charlie,” while in Namibia SWAPO guerrillas were dubbed “terss” and a host of other more derogatory names. Feinstein (1998, 70) notes that:

The enemy was despised, nothing but a half-human, ill-educated kaffir whose remains could be obscenely displayed in our bar as trophies of battle. This dehumanising of the enemy was an essential first step that allowed the police and the army to hunt and kill insurgents with complete equanimity.

South Africans substituted “kaffir” for “gook” in the aphorism that “the only good gook is a dead gook” which was widely employed in Vietnam. Racial prejudice and the othering of the enemy served to fuel gratuitous violence. The denigration of human life led inexorably to the committing of atrocities.

### 4. *Terror and Gratuitous Violence*

Rules of engagement counted for nothing in Vietnam and Namibia. These people lived in a state of perpetual fear as the armies of occupation employed tactics such as “search-and-destroy missions” to eliminate the enemy. In the process, they used arbitrary, indiscriminate brutality and gratuitous violence against innocent civilians. The character Senator in Webb’s *Fields of Fire* (1978, 336) explains war’s brutalisation of combatants in these terms:

You drop someone in hell and give him a gun and tell him to kill for some amorphous reason he can’t even articulate. Then suddenly he feels an emotion that makes utter sense and he has a gun in his hand and he’s seen dead people for months and the reasons are irrelevant anyway, so *pow*. And it’s utterly logical, because the emotion was right...It isn’t even atrocious. It’s just a sad fact of life.

Caputo (1977, 308-10) recounts how he instructed a patrol to capture Vietcong suspects but that the men under his command interpreted this to mean that they should take whatever course of action they chose. Not surprisingly, civilians were killed for the hell of it. The subsequent court martial provided an opportunity for Caputo and his colleagues to recognize the wrongfulness of their actions, but the eventual “whitewash” amounted to an official condonation of such acts. My Lai and other atrocities committed by American soldiers were not aberrations but rather relatively commonplace occurrences. Acts of torture and the execution of POWs were committed by both sides. When committed by American or South African soldiers, such acts are usually attributed to the frustrations of the war, the wish for troops to avenge the loss of buddies, and their brutish state. Whilst perpetrators of atrocities are often riddled with guilt and express

remorse, most war narratives evince a collapse of moral certainties. Even the dead were dishonoured and sometimes mutilated. Gordon's (1991) examination of the construction of terror in *grensliteratuur* suggests that this was handled with more forthrightness than the current confessional works of soldier-authors. Indeed, the committing of atrocities by the SADF has merely been hinted. But SADF soldiers were undoubtedly guilty of committing rapes and other atrocities (Herbstein and Evenson 1989, 105). Photographs of the bodies of dead SWAPO guerrillas slung over military vehicles called *casspirs* published by the independent press (Erichsen 2001, 181) served to confirm that the SADF and its agencies—particularly the notorious Koevoet—were little different from other parties involved in civil/national liberation/revolutionary wars.

### 5. Fatalism/Superstition

The randomness of death is a striking feature of war stories. South African troops rather naively did not expect to have to encounter death and life-threatening injuries. Narrators express astonishment when a buddy is killed in front of their eyes or is flown home in a body bag, or they themselves have a close call with death. Recognition of vulnerability and mortality meant that fatalism invariably set in. Andrew (1998, 48) relates the words echoed by many on active duty that “if the thing's [rocket, in this instance] has your name on it then it's your time.” Narratives of Vietnam are also replete with instances of fatalism. The journalist Herr (1979, 52) speaks of the “charmed grunt,” and comments that:

no one expects much from a man when he is down to one or two weeks. he becomes a luck freak, an evil-omen collector, a diviner of every bad sign

Herr tells of the many superstitious practices of American infantrymen which were believed to increase their chances of coming out alive. For instance, when on patrol they remained as close as possible to a soldier who appeared to live a charmed existence in combat.

### 6. Combat Madness

Descriptions of soldiers cracking under the strain of combat are to be found in all war literature. In Del Vecchio's *The 13<sup>th</sup> Valley* (1982, 571) the character Cherry regresses the deepest into savagery. A member of the same squad exclaims: “That Cherry. he gone nuts. He crazy, L-T. You can see it in his eyes, L-T. Cherry becoming a animal.” Symptoms associated with crossing the thin red line between sanity and insanity are said to include irrational, impulsive behavior and life-risking/foolhardy bravery in the face of enemy fire. In the Border War, any strange behaviour was immediately regarded as a sign that the person concerned was “*bosbevok*” or “*bossies*,” or suffering a mental breakdown. Both wars had their fair share of aberrant behaviour. In Van Heerden's *My Cuban* the protagonist captures and leads an imaginery captive/POW around like a dog on a leash. Alexander Strachan's work, *'n Wereld Sonder Grense* (1984) tells of a leader of a special unit who goes off the rails and refuses to return to base after the invasion of a SWAPO camp. In a scene reminiscent of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), his friend and comrade is sent to

persuade this renegade soldier to return. When he declines to do so, this disillusioned and war-weary figure has his throat slit by his erstwhile friend.

### 7. *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*

Whether they called it “shell shock” during World War I or “battle fatigue” during World War II, the checklist of symptoms identified in the discourse of medical health as arising from war is fairly consistent. The list includes repression, rage, apathy, guilt, intense anxiety, and paranoia (Lewis 1985, 161). These symptoms, as well as the abuse of alcohol and drugs, are frequently associated with Vietnam veterans whose portrayal as victims and outcasts has more to do with Hollywood representations than reality. But there can be no denying that PTSD was ubiquitous among Vietnam veterans. Feinstein (1998, 80-81) recounts his own “Red Nightmare” and other symptoms of PTSD evident in the behavior of other members of his unit following a battle with SWAPO. He also tells of companions who sought numbness in substance abuse, while Andrew relates a second-hand account of a soldier being admitted to One Military Hospital for psychiatric evaluation. Such behaviour may arguably be regarded as coping mechanisms or survival strategies.

### 8. *Sense of Betrayal*

The defeated soldiers in all twentieth century conflicts have regarded themselves as victims of political machinations, devoid of responsibility for fighting and losing the war. It was no different with American soldiers in Vietnam and South African troops in Namibia. The myth of the “stab in the back,” of the war lost at home was revived in both instances. The politicians insisted that the military fight a limited war. Speaking as a veteran, Erhart (1995, 15) opines: “Like they put our asses out there, and then tied one hand behind our backs and blindfolded us.” The generals, in turn, did not understand the nature of unconventional warfare and employed the wrong strategies. The SADF also rejected claims that it was ill-prepared for counter-insurgency. Instead, it blamed the politicians who hamstrung military operations by having the SADF fight a limited, strategic war subject to pressures from allied governments (especially the Reagan administration). However, unlike the Americans in the case of Vietnam, they could hardly blame the media for the defeat because there was an almost total news “black out” pertaining to the war: neither the newly-established SABC television channel nor the print media carried much coverage of the Border War. But the outcome was rather different: whereas the Americans simply withdrew from Vietnam, South Africa negotiated a settlement which brought SWAPO to power in Namibia. South Africa was forced to accept that the enemy whom they had been fighting had wrested control of the state and that erstwhile “terrorists” were to be integrated into the newly constituted defence force. Many whites—in both Namibia and South Africa—were of the opinion that the government had betrayed its armed forces by negotiating a settlement with the enemy. It was easier to find scapegoats for the defeat of the SADF than to question its conduct of the war. In being forced to come to terms with defeat, soldier-authors appropriated much of this discourse.

### 9. Emasculation

As with the trench soldiers in the First World War, this sense of betrayal extended to the folks back home, and especially to the women. In Vietnam narratives, the soldiers are constantly worried about girlfriends' or wives' infidelity. The legendary figure who steals the wife or girlfriend while the soldier is away and is known as "Jody" makes appearances in this literature (Lembcke 1998, 118). Erhart (1995, 19) remarks on the unfaithfulness of women:

Calloway had gotten a Dear John letter from his wife—worse, actually a divorce request from her lawyer—and had blown his brains out with a forty-five automatic.

Partly by way of compensation for this (real or imaginary) emasculation, American soldiers in Vietnam partook of consensual sex with local women, the service of prostitutes, and engaged in acts of sexual violence as in Lang's *Casualties of War* (1969). Despite the fact that fraternization and all contact with women of the indigenous populace was strictly forbidden by SADF standing orders, Andrew (2001, 76) suggests that liaisons with Owambo women were not unknown. In the official discourse of the Border War, women were regarded as supportive of their men in uniform, upright, moral, and faithful. But the literature suggests otherwise. The character who receives a "Dear John" letter in Andrew (2001, 68-71) is betrayed by his best friend, and yet the girlfriend is regarded as being wholly to blame. While women are usually treated with suspicion in war stories, camaraderie and male bonding is regarded as tantamount to making the war worth while.

### 10. The Futility of War

This is a well-worn theme in the literature of twentieth-century warfare. The Vietnam and South African Border Wars are no exception. Some South African soldiers came to the realization that their victories did not add up to a defeat of the enemy; that the sacrifice of life for an un-winnable war was futile. Similarly, "[t]he brutal recognition that one could 'die for nothing' is echoed throughout the Vietnam narratives" (Lewis 1985, 85).

## THEMES IN THE VIETNAM AND BORDER WARS LITERATURE

Herzog (1992, 46-59) has identified a number of features of Vietnam narratives which suggest that conflict was different or distinctive. A number of these features occur in narratives of the Border War. At least ten motifs/themes/tropes are common to the literature of both wars, and include the following:

### 1. *An Invisible Enemy Indistinguishable from Civilians*

The elements of stealth and surprise counted more heavily than conventional indices of military (fire) power in guerrilla warfare. The invisible enemy remained

undetected until the counter-insurgency forces were engaged. Lines from W. D. Ehrhart's poem "Guerrilla War" express the difficulty of fighting a faceless enemy in Vietnam: "It's practically impossible/to tell civilians/from the Vietcong...Even their women fight;/and young boys,/and girls..." (from Herzog 1992, 52). Similarly, Feinstein (1998, 113) relates how, as a medic, he accompanied SAP and SADF patrols in Owamboland in 1983 which were "unable to discern friend from foe." Like their counterparts in Vietnam, the South African armed forces had to fight against an enemy who did not necessarily wear uniforms, was unpredictable, armed women and children, used booby traps and other devices to kill and maim, and so on. Given that these are obviously characteristics of guerrilla warfare, this might seem unremarkable. But even soldiers who were trained and prepared for unconventional warfare found it difficult to deal with a phantom-like enemy.

## 2. *War Was Waged Against the Elements and the Land*

Many soldiers' accounts of the Vietnam War remark upon the oppressive clamminess of the jungle, the dampness of the marshy paddy fields, the incessant rain, and so on. Indeed, nature appeared to be an adversary. When Caputo (1977, 82) remarks, "It was the land that resisted, the land, the jungle, and the sun," he suggests that nature was not neutral nor innocent. Herr (1979, 59) speaks of the "malignant environment," of trees that could kill, and of "homicidal elephant grass." As Lewis (1985, 80) commented, "It often seemed as if all forces of man and nature had conspired to take the life of the GI in the bush." In Namibia, soldiers too are pitted against nature/climate and the landscape. Batley (1992) identifies the scorching heat of the sun and blinding white sand/dust of Namibia as contributing to the austerity of the terrain. But the terrain can be both friend and enemy. In *'n basis oorkant die grens* (1984, 36-40) the narrator is aware of the uneven terrain over which he passes and the bushes and branches which catch him in the face as he tries to find a path through the undergrowth. But he is equally aware that the terrain affords him shelter and protection against the enemy, especially when his camouflage allows him to blend in with the environment.

## 3. *The Enemy Ruled the Night*

No matter what objectives American and South Vietnamese forces achieved by daylight, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese were able to retake them once darkness set in. This day/night dichotomy figures in many Vietnam narratives. The poet W. D. Erhart (1995, 244) calls nighttime "Charlie's time." Frederick Downs (1993, 111) held that "[a]nything that moved outside our perimeters at night was fair game because the night belonged to the enemy and both sides knew it." Steve Earle's short story "The Reunion" (2002, 160-61) relates how the Viet Cong deployed from the underground tunnels:

...the guerrillas waited out the sun while above them the Americans and their South Vietnamese counterparts went about the business of an army of occupation. Occasionally individual guerrillas or small teams would venture out into the light on one mission or another. But the night belonged to the National Liberation Front...They issued from their underground strongholds under cover of darkness, safe from the prying eyes of helicopter and O-2 pilots. Cu Chi was the one part of the South that the Americans could never "pacify."

A similar imagery is evident in the Border War. Feinstein (1998, 121) recounts how the SAP retreated to its base by nightfall and did not venture out under cover of darkness. He notes:

We frequently did not know who the enemy was, let alone where he was hiding. If anything, the night belonged more to him and we, with our mighty military machine, were forced to take refuge in base. This night-time show of force was akin to a savage dog, tethered to a post and forced to bay in frustration and helplessness at his enemies.

#### 4. *Faith in Superior Technology/Weaponry*

The helicopter (or “chopper”) became a potent visual and literary image in Vietnam. In fact, it has become part of the iconography of that war. The Americans believed that control of the skies afforded them the means to bomb the Viet Cong (and North Vietnamese) into submission or, failing that, to provide ample cover for their ground troops to win the war. Their superior firepower gave them an advantage over the relatively ill-equipped enemy. A passage in Feinstein (1998, 150) suggests a similar mindset amongst SADF brass:

Major van der Merwe [ordered] us into the courtyard to see something that would show the kaffirs who was *baas*. So we gathered under the clear blue skies and waited and waited and waited, in true military fashion, when suddenly there was an explosion of sound just above us and two impala jets flashed by, skimming the roof tops. They had come to put on a show. We spent the next few minutes gasping as the jets dived and climbed and spiralled in a display that was meant to impress and in truth succeeded. Having appeared out of nowhere to blast our senses the jets were just as suddenly gone. For a moment we stood stunned, looking up into empty skies, before the men broke into spontaneous, excited applause. SWAPO never stood a chance.

The impressionable SADF troops were in for a rude awakening once they crossed the border into Angola and encountered a far more formidable enemy armed with sophisticated modern weaponry such as AK47s, armoured vehicles, the Stalin organ and Mig fighters piloted by Russians and Cubans.

#### 5. *The Ineptitude/Menace of the Enemy*

Some of the Vietnam literature repeats the myth that the fighting capacity of the Vietcong was limited and that it was only the support of the North Vietnam Army and the supplies from the Peoples’ Republic of China that enabled them to wage war effectively. Yet other works acknowledge the fighting spirit of the Vietcong and the North Vietnam Army with a hint of admiration for their willingness to soldier on when seemingly outgunned. This was especially so of the soldiers who recognized the enemy as their equals. Erhart (1995, 17) remarks that the Vietcong fought like hell despite being poorly armed. The SADF denigrated the capabilities of the SWAPO forces. Roberts

(1977) mentions “terrorists” fighting with Russian weapons which they are too stupid to use (Haarhoff 1991, 208). Accounts of the Border War often speak of enemy confusion, deficiency in the use of their weapons, and a general lack of savvy/intelligence. The conventional military wisdom was that the “terrs” would only engage with the SADF when the odds were stacked in their favor as when they had the element of surprise or outnumbered their opponents. Whilst PLAN guerrillas were considered second rate soldiers because they were black, many SADF troops encountered blacks as equals for the first time when they had weapons. Indeed, the SADF more than met its match when the Angolan (FAPLA) forces were supported by Cuban brigades. Van Heerden’s short story *My Cuban* (1995) exemplifies how the Cubans and Russians represented an unknown quantity that aroused the curiosity and dread of the SADF soldier.

#### 6. *Winning Hearts and Minds (WHAM)*

The unconventional nature of guerrilla warfare required not only a military but a political strategy as well. WHAM was supposed to build goodwill among the civilian population by distributing food and medical treatment and collecting intelligence so as to root out guerrillas and cadres. O’Brien (1973, 131) tells us that this policy was counter-productive in Vietnam:

It is not a war fought for territory, nor for pieces of land that will be won and held. It is not a war fought to win the hearts of the Vietnamese nationals, not in the wake of contempt drawn on our faces and on theirs, not in the wake of a burning village, a trampled rice paddy, a battered detainee. If land is not won and if hearts and minds are at best left indifferent, the only obvious criterion of military success is the body count.

As with the American armed forces in Vietnam, the SADF made futile attempts to win the hearts and minds of the “local population,” dubbed LPs or PBs (*plaaslike bevolking*). The SADF introduced a Civic Action Programme in Namibia in 1974 as it insisted that the war was only twenty percent military and eighty percent political. Andrew (2001, 80) describes the rhetoric of a visiting officer to the Durban Light Infantry base at Oshikango who exhorted the troops along these lines:

...you need to understand that you are here as diplomats, as ambassadors of South Africa—of civilisation. This war is not a full-scale conventional engagement. It’s a war of terror and persuasion. Insurgency and counter-insurgency. It’s a war of psychology. You have to win the hearts and minds of the people. This war will not be won by military action on the ground, but through influencing people towards non-communist ideas and Christian values.

Faced with a “forced choice” of resistance or collaboration, most of the local population opted for the path of least resistance or lesser of two evils (Gordon 1991, 85-86). This passivity is captured in a poem cited by Batley (1992, 17) written by a troopie which acknowledges that the SADF were made to feel unwelcome by the locals:

*This foreign land,  
where a white boy  
on white sand  
listens –  
to the clicking tongue  
of a foreign people  
saying –  
Bwana, go home...*

And Andrew (2001, 71) describes a proprietor of a *cuca* shop “who hated the white intruders” which was evident from his sullen disposition and silent contempt. Feinstein (1998, 70) reckons that South African propaganda services, “while hopelessly inept at influencing the opinion of the local Owambo population, had done a good job with the average South African policeman.”

#### 7. *Battlefield Success was Measured in Terms of Body Counts and Kill Ratios*

Bourke (1999, 22) takes issue with the assumption that the emphasis on body counts is regarded as a phenomenon of the Vietnam War. She remarks that tallying victims (and collecting souvenirs and trophies such as body parts) was a real goal for many combatants during the two world wars as well. But this misses the crucial distinction that this was a private pursuit rather than a matter of military policy. Because “victory was a high body count, defeat a low kill-ratio, war was a matter of arithmetic” (Caputo 1977, xix). As a regimental casualty-reporting officer, Caputo (1977, 160) kept score of various units’ kill ratios:

...the measures of a unit’s performance in Vietnam were not the distances it had advanced or the number of victories it had won, but the number of enemy soldiers it had killed (the body count) and the proportion between that number and the number of its own dead (the kill ratio).

In Blatchford’s short story in *Forces Favourites* (1987, 156), he relates the pride of the officer who claimed, “Over the last five years, as bodycounts show, the SADF in South-West Africa and Angola has maintained a kill ratio of eight to one—almost the highest in the world!” Feinstein (1998, 55) describes an engagement between SADF troops and SWAPO after which there was a stock-taking or “doing the all-important body count. That was how success was measured in the Namibian war. By the SWAPO body count.” Irrespective of whether this toll included those caught in the crossfire such as women and children, these figures had to be seen to exceed the casualties incurred by the SADF. This was little different from Vietnam where it was reckoned that the body count also included innocent civilians.

#### 8. *Survival Mentality*

Because of the lack of clear-cut policy in the Vietnam and Border Wars, American soldiers and their South African counterparts returned home before their military objectives were achieved. Whereas the average American conscript did a single

tour of duty, his South African counterpart could be called up for a number of three-month border camps. Whether there was rotation of individuals in Vietnam or units in the Border War, survival became of paramount concern for all soldiers. Caputo (1977, xiv) recounts:

What had begun as an adventurous expedition had turned into an exhausting, indecisive war of attrition in which we fought for no cause other than our own survival.

Caputo (1977, 320) reflects on the expediency of survival: “None of us was a hero... We had done nothing more than endure. We had survived, and that was our only victory.” American troops aimed to stay alive long enough to leave Vietnam physically intact (or, failing that, incur a minor injury so as to get sent back home prematurely). They wanted to avoid being “wasted” (killed) or “hit” (seriously wounded) at all costs. Some refused to participate in patrols or obey orders that exposed them to risk. There are accounts of fragging where superior officers who exposed troops to unnecessary risk were disabled usually by means of a grenade. These were not unknown on the Border either. Feinstein (1998, 73) confesses that his “priority in Owamboland had become a selfish one; to survive the tour of duty and get home to safety, family and friends.” The countdown of the remaining days of national service or a border camp was as commonplace as during the tour of duty in Vietnam. In the case of South African troops, the survival mentality was captured in the term *vasbyt* (literally “grind one’s teeth and bare it”). Soldiers were exhorted to endure by “biting the bullet” or *vasbyting*. Those with few days (*min dae*) were known as *ou manne* (old timers). This obsession with survival meant that the *ou manne* enjoyed a status over and above their rank (or lack thereof). This “short-timers syndrome” (Herr 1979, 78) existed in Vietnam too. Short-timers were exempt from having to perform especially dangerous duties. Because they remained unconvinced by the legitimacy of the cause for which they were fighting, the soldiers’ loyalty remained to his fellows. They fought for one another rather than the government or country.

### 9. *A Lost Cause*

Americans were perplexed by their having to sacrifice their lives for a cause that seemed inadequately shared by the very people they were supposedly trying to help. The lack of will and incompetence on the part of America’s South Vietnam ally, the ARVN, occasioned comments such as those of Erhart, “Most of the ARVN weren’t worth a flying fuck. Armed to the teeth, and still couldn’t - or wouldn’t - fight their way out of a paper sack” (1995). This gave rise to the unbridled resentment expressed by Downs (1993, 201):

This [training] camp represented what we were always bitching about. These dinks had been in that camp for many months supplied with American arms, clothes and food but they were never went out on any patrols. They never fought. we patrolled all the time, se ambushes, got into firefights. All the while those bastards sat upon their smug asses... We didn’t understand it.

Negative attitudes toward those the Americans were supposedly helping were based, according to several Vietnam portraits, on misunderstanding due to cultural difference. David Halberstam's *One Very Hot Day* (1967) is a key novel in this regard, juxtaposing the perceptions of American and South Vietnamese officers (Jason 2000, 124). The SADF troops harboured contradictory attitudes towards their allies. Whereas the San ("bushmen") who served as trackers were held in awe on account of their ability to follow spoor (Gordon 1991), the SADF generally expressed contempt for the training and effectiveness of the SAP who were "playing at soldiers." Such disdain was also reserved for the SWATF and SWAPOL. All in all, a mood of demoralization and disillusionment is apparent in the Border War narratives.

#### 10. Closure and Rehabilitation of Veterans

Vietnam veterans were met with a mixture of ignorance, indifference, and sometimes outright hostility. Many are the stories portrayed them as psychotic or traumatized. The media, and particularly Hollywood films, represented the veteran as an outcast incapable of being reintegrated into American society (Katzmann 1993). But more recently the veteran has been rehabilitated, a development apparent in the erection of Maya Lin's wall of remembrance in Washington, D.C. In the case of South Africa, returning soldiers were unable to share their experiences with civilians, including friends and family. In the short story "A Return" by Peter Rule in *Forces' Favourites* (1987) the protagonist returns home from a stint on the border but finds he is unable to communicate his fears and inner turmoil even to his girlfriend or family. Veterans often relive their war experiences by seeking out the company of other troops with whom they can exchange war stories. But this act does not necessarily provide cathartic healing, for it more often than not constitutes a form of combat nostalgia. The traumatization of South African troops has not received the same attention that Vietnam veterans in the United States have (belatedly) received. Official memorialization of the Border War was relatively low-key during the time it was being waged and has obviously been virtually non-existent since 1994. There is no monument erected specifically to honor the dead in the Border War. However, there is a memorial wall which lists the names of all those in the service of the SADF killed in "combat-related deaths" between 1961 and 1990 at Fort Klapperkop, south of Pretoria. Upon closer scrutiny, it becomes clear that the names inscribed on the granite tablets are not only those killed in action on the border but includes those who died in training exercises, accidents, and so on. Despite the evidence of a wreath when I visited the Fort Klapperkop site last year, the memorial has not become a shrine like the American Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Fort Klapperkop does not represent a site where veterans and the loved ones of those killed or missing in action are able to find a sense of closure. Of course, under the new dispensation it is not deemed politically correct to honor those who gave their lives for the apartheid state.

## CONCLUSION

The appropriation of these tropes from the texts of the Vietnam War by South African soldier-authors who have provided personal accounts of the Border War serves to connect it with American cultural/literary memory. It constitutes a form of literary inheritance and cultural memory different from that of *grensliteratuur*, which tends to draw its inspiration from the country's own frontier history (Haarhoff 1991). But borrowings from the American experience of Vietnam need to be problematized because of the soldier-authors' partial and selective memories. For as Sturken (1997, 7) reminds us, memory is a narrative rather than a replica of an experience that can be retrieved and relived. We remember through the representations of our experiences, by way of material artifacts, symbols, and literary tropes that stand for events. While the events themselves are frozen in time, their representations are not. Thus the power to control cultural memory is bound up with the power to control representations of history, including literary history. Right now the memory of the Border War is being refashioned by personal narratives which construct memories with reference to representations of the American experience as much as to South African history. Thus there is every possibility that the Border War might be remade in the image of America and remembered as "South Africa's Vietnam."

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