

Book Review

MOBILITY CONQUERS: THE STORY OF 61 MECHANISED BATTALION GROUP 1978–2005

Willem Steenkamp and
Helmoed-Römer Heitman

David Katz

*PhD Candidate in Military History, Stellenbosch
University*

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The authors have produced a handsome book of encyclopaedic dimensions matched with an equally large price tag. Its sheer weight presents a physical challenge when reading and it may have been wiser rather to present the work in two or three more manageable volumes. The narrative takes the form of a chronicle. Steenkamp and Heitman deftly build the text around the personal accounts of the officers and men who served in the South African Defence Force's (SADF) 61 Mechanised Battalion Group during the Border War and after that, with the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) for a decade into the new democratic South Africa. In constructing the narrative, they place more emphasis on personal accounts than on primary archival material, but the extent is difficult to gauge as the book lacks a comprehensive bibliography or referencing system.

Mobility conquers assumes the role of a semi-official/regimental history. Official histories play an important role in laying the foundation stone for the historiography of a military campaign. The absence of an official history creates a historiographical lacuna unless interested parties outside of government are prepared to fill the void. Fortunately, passionate interest groups have come to the fore on occasion to rescue our military history. Decades ago, General George Brink facilitated Neil Orpen in bringing out the semi-official *South African forces World War II*,¹ thereby rescuing the work of the Union War Histories Section (UWHS) when

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officialdom cancelled the excellent series in 1961.² In similar fashion, a strong combined team consisting of the Regimental Association of 61 Mechanised Battalion, together with former veterans of the unit, and two well-known authors, have stepped into the breach.

The book makes good use of a 'history from below' technique. The memory combination of leaders and ordinary soldiers makes for a convincing narrative, injecting the text with an immediacy of the events as they unfolded. Commanders and those they commanded sit side by side on the pages, giving their unique eyewitness accounts of the battlefield and adding greatly to the debate of determining what had happened. The script treats the reader to the first-hand experiences of the ordinary soldier who views his war through a keyhole, interspersed with those of the generals and commanders who had a superior overall view of the battle. The authors successfully manage the difficult task of weaving together the tapestry of personal accounts with their commentary of the events. The result is compelling writing which captures the danger, immediacy, and at times, the sheer terror and tragedy of the experiences. In doing so, Steenkamp and Heitman perform an invaluable service of recording first-hand accounts, which would have been lost to future generations. The book becomes a valuable primary source on which future historians will build their research.

In an exercise that transcends that of a mere chronicle, the book seeks out the historical roots of manoeuvre doctrine adopted by the SADF in general, and 61 Mechanised Battalion in particular. It also offers valuable insight into the technological development of a suitable armoured personnel carrier, the Ratel. Its introduction was the central component giving 61 Mechanised Battalion its mobility and protection for the infantry in the fire zone. The Ratel, which was a technological breakthrough for the South Africans, was a major driver behind the SADF's rediscovery of manoeuvre-type warfare. However, the book misses a trick when a deeper analysis would have revealed that the SADF owed much of its genetic material to the armies of the two Boer Republics and the Union Defence Force (UDF). It was the Boer abhorrence of wasting lives needlessly in futile frontal attacks and their preference to live to fight another day which gave birth to their predilection for manoeuvre warfare. Typically, the Boers sought to dislodge the enemy from his chosen battlefield and make him fight at a time and place of their choosing. Once the battlefield got too hot, the Boers would mount up on their horses, and by using superior mobility, escaped the numerically superior British, after inflicting a disproportionate amount of casualties. This style of warfare resonates strongly with that conducted during the Border War.

Overlooked too, is the debt owed to the UDF in developing South African manoeuvre doctrine in the First World War, the inter-war years and the Second World War. South Africa built a world-class armoured car industry during these periods. Emerging manoeuvre doctrine saw the rapid conquest of German South West Africa in 1915 and much of German East Africa in 1916. The South African doctrine often frustrated, if not infuriated, serving British generals and staff officers who preferred a more direct and bloody approach to war. Trends toward mobility and manoeuvre continued when the South Africans expelled the numerically superior Italians from East Africa in 1940–1941. They made use of their superb motorised infantry in a combined operations role with light tanks of the fledgling South African tank corps. It was in these battles that South Africa shaped manoeuvre doctrine around a long-existing abhorrence of unnecessary battlefield casualties.

At times, it seems that the authors would have us believe that the South African preference and practice of manoeuvre warfare began in the early 1970s. The book proffers the influence of two famous inter-war British intellectual military commentators, JFC Fuller and BH Liddell Hart. These two gentlemen were seen as the spark that ignited the SADF manoeuvrist flame. It is not difficult to see why their manoeuvrist doctrine, which promised battlefield success at a fraction of the human and material cost of World War One, was attractive to Roeland de Vries (one-time commander of 61 Mechanised Battalion) and other South Africans who harboured deep traditions of sensitivity to battlefield casualties. Mobility would allow manoeuvre, and by skilfully seeking the course of least resistance and using the indirect approach, one would be able to appear rapidly on the flanks and to the rear of the enemy and inflict a defeat by paralysing the will of the opponent.

The line of thought adopted by the book provides an unwitting insight into some of the flaws present in South African manoeuvre doctrine as practiced during the Border War. In clearly favouring manoeuvre, the authors are not alone in misinterpreting Fuller and Liddell Hart. The antonym of ‘manoeuvre warfare’ is ‘static warfare’ and not ‘attrition warfare’. Manoeuvre produces opportunities to dislocate, unhinge or create circumstances favourable for attrition. It is South Africa’s loathing of attrition-type warfare that may provide some answers as to her relatively poor showing in static situations such as Sidi Rezegh, Tobruk and perhaps Cuito Cuanavale. Manoeuvre alone is not enough to overcome a determined, resolute and well-trained enemy. Waging war at the operational level becomes a blend of using manoeuvre and attrition in different proportions at different times. Too heavy reliance on the physiological effect of manoeuvre warfare has often resulted in failure against a resolute enemy who refuses to be

intimidated. Brigadier-General JJ Collyer, one-time South African chief of the general staff, made the observation back in 1936 about the Boer way of war. His reflections provide much insight into South Africa's less than stellar military performance in static situations.

A reluctance to push home an attack, of which there were several remarkable instances in the larger battles of the war, was emphatically not due to want of courage, for in this respect the burgher was the equal of any other soldier. It was chiefly a consequence of the view that, having repulsed the enemy and having inflicted heavy losses upon him, it was merely stupid to give him any chance of retaliating in kind. It follows that many tactical successes fell short of full result and that the opportunities against an enemy who had been driven off in confusion and with heavy losses were allowed to slip by.³

The 'hot topic' for many Border War buffs is Cuito Cuanavale. Unfortunately, *Mobility conquers* offers a conventional approach in assessing the SADF performance in that battle, and few new insights emerge. The authors dismiss South Africa's failure/reluctance to capture the town with claims that it was not the SADF's ultimate objective to seize this important communication junction. Here, and throughout the text, the book is unapologetic in representing an essentially SADF point of view, although it claims to include 'rare glimpses' of the Angolan/Soviet/Cuban viewpoint. However, on closer inspection, it seems that the authors have relied heavily on Vladimir Shubin and his *The hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa*.⁴ The paucity of easily available sources representing 'the other side of the hill' has resulted in an over-reliance on Shubin, leaving the narrative bereft of an Angolan and Cuban voice. One cannot help feeling that an opportunity has been missed to present a more comprehensive viewpoint of the Border War from the opposing side(s). Limited resources may have made it impossible to recreate the methodology of the UWHS where Agar-Hamilton injected great swathes of the German and Italian viewpoints into the battles of the Western Desert.

In conclusion, *Mobility conquers* goes beyond that of a mere regimental chronicle in its attempt to trace the evolution and development of South African mobile doctrine. It tells the story of the Border War through the lens of the members of 61 Mechanised Battalion admirably. It stands on less firm ground when endeavouring to present views from an 'enemy' perspective. The bold assertion that the book serves as a blueprint for success in fighting conventional war in Africa may be a little ambitious. The book's true value lies in the capture of first-hand accounts of the battles for posterity. In doing so, the authors have created an absorbing account of the Border War. A book of this magnitude is at risk of

becoming cumbersome. However, it emerges as one of the best books in this genre, and despite its intimidating size, one is compelled to read it from cover to cover.

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- ¹ J Brown. *Gathering of eagles: The campaigns of the South African Air Force*. Cape Town: Purnell, 1970; N Orpen. *War in the desert*. Cape Town: Purnell, 1971; J Brown. *Eagles strike: The campaigns of the South African Air Force*. Cape Town: Purnell, 1974; N Orpen. *Victory in Italy*. Cape Town: Purnell, 1975; H Martin & N Orpen. *Eagles victorious: Operations of the South African forces*. Cape Town: Purnell, 1977; H Martin & N Orpen. *South Africa at war*. Cape Town: Purnell, 1979; N Orpen & H Martin. *Salute the Sappers, Part 1*. Johannesburg: Sappers Association, 1981; N Orpen & HJ Martin. *Salute the Sappers, Part 2*. Johannesburg: Sappers Association, 1982.
- ² The UWHS is best known for the publication of a trilogy of books that deal meticulously with specific aspects of the war. The three works are: J Agar-Hamilton & L Turner. *Crisis in the desert, May–June 1942*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1957; J Agar-Hamilton & L Turner. *The Sidi Rezegh Battles, 1941*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1957 and L Turner, H Gordon-Cumming & J Betzler. *War in the southern oceans, 1939–1945*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1961.
- ³ JJ Collyer. *Campaign in German South West Africa 1914–1915*. London: Imperial War Museum and Battery Press, 1997.
- ⁴ V Shubin. *The hot 'Cold War': The USSR in southern Africa*. London: Pluto Press, 2008.