

DIE BUFFEL STRUIKEL: 'N STORIE VAN 32 BATALJON EN SY MENSE

L.J. Bothma

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Maps (6) and Photos

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“Die Buffel Struikel: 'n Storie van 32 Bataljon en Sy Mense” (The Buffalo Stumbles: A Story of 32 Battalion and Its People) was written originally in Afrikaans. The author is an Afrikaans-speaking white South African who, as a member of the well-known South African 32 “foreign legion” Battalion, participated in the Namibian Border War in the 1970s and 1980s. The war was fought by an army whose operational language for the major part was Afrikaans. However, two reasons call for a review of this book in English. Firstly, with the Western powers facing a serious insurgency threat in Iraq and elsewhere, the world has an urgent need for a new understanding, thinking and perspectives about counter-insurgency. Secondly, the book can be seen as a watershed contribution to the so-called Border War literature that, until now, has been dominated by contributions of journalists and writers with questionable motives.

The author contends that the book was not written to project the South Africans as heroes and “the enemy” as crooks or vice versa. The book was, furthermore, not written with a military or academic audience in mind. The author describes it as a book for those people who never participated or understood South African participation in the Border War in far-off Namibia; and specifically for the parents, spouses and children of those who had to fight the war. It is, above all, a book written to show how “politicians can waste the lives of people in a war”, an assertion that may even sound familiar today in a far-off superpower involvement in a counter-insurgency struggle in the Middle East. Within this context, it is understandable why the author dedicates the book to everybody – friend, foe and innocent bystander – who was bereaved by a loss of life in the Namibian Border War.

The reader of this book will gain some insight into the struggle of individuals, generals and colonels, captains and corporals to make sense of a war and a history that has not always turned out to be positive to most of these participants. From this perspective, the book could be regarded as a history-from-below; a small contribution by an individual soldier who wrote about his own role in a war that neither the generals nor the politicians necessarily understood at the time. This contributes to one of the outstanding features of the book – the ability of the author to balance his individual experience of the war with the higher-order tactical, operational and political-strategic context of the war. By accounting his own experiences, the author further succeeds in maintaining a strong unfolding storyline in the book.

The author also keeps a fine methodological balance. As an academic, the author provides a very well researched and referenced account of the war in general and the role of 32 Battalion in particular. This is obvious from the list of sources and the references that are provided throughout. Of particular importance and interest is the information obtained from the key actors in the 32 Battalion-drama. The name of the legendary Colonel Eddie Viljoen with the *nom de guerre* of Big Daddy and Echo Victor, who was involved with the Battalion almost since its inception until the end of the war, features prominently in this regard. The author also went to great lengths to gain access to documentary sources being kept at the Documentation Centre of the South African National Defence Force in Pretoria. Working through the military bureaucracy to obtain access to classified material, as the author indicates in the foreword, alone was a challenging two-year endeavour. As an individual soldier who had a small role in the war in general and in 32 Battalion in particular, the author, nevertheless, succeeds in bringing the historical sources to life. This is done through an account of his personal experiences and those of other soldiers who participated in the war at different levels within the military hierarchy. These accounts are very cleverly interwoven into the story as a whole. Humour, in particular, is also used very successfully in this regard.

The skilful use of humour is also a reflection of the writing style of the author. His style is light without getting flippant and he succeeds in drawing the reader into the book. In a number of cases the author describes a particular incident in such a way that the reader cannot decide whether to laugh or cry. The description (p. 159) of the “adoption” of a black baby, Buffalina, by the white junior leader group of the Battalion is a good example. The description (p. 292) of how Big Daddy slapped a white lieutenant in front of his troops because he made a derogatory remark about the graveyard at Buffalo is another example. It is at times quite painful to write about war and a Battalion in which people have died. It is also

not easy to write about a war in which tactical and operational successes were not always reflected in the strategic and political outcomes of the war. Factors such as these lead to questions by family members and soldiers who are disillusioned about the need to fight for an unclear cause and die. However, the author writes with an understanding of the spirit within the country at the time and, in particular, the widespread support during the 1970s and 1980s for the security forces by the white South African community in general. This is augmented by an honesty about questions that were raised during that time concerning the hypocrisy of politicians and sometimes also of senior military leaders. A good example of this is the description by the author (pp. 131-132) of his own disillusionment in the aftermath of a briefing at the School of Infantry during which a major pointed out that the military is only responsible for 20 percent of the war against the “communism onslaught in South Africa”.

The most important contribution of the book is the understanding the reader develops for the unconventional nature of unconventional war. The book is indeed about an unconventional battalion in an unconventional war! Yet, one develops an understanding for the uneasiness of conventional bureaucratic militaries towards an environment and a problem that requires unorthodox thinking and solutions. This is the kind of challenge with which conventional bureaucratic militaries often have to deal, but for which they are often quite ill-prepared. Thirty-Two Battalion was indeed created in an unorthodox way by unorthodox soldiers to deal with an unorthodox environment. This is a way of thinking and doing that needs to be studied in greater depth by all bureaucratic armed forces of the world, especially by large militaries that have developed a tradition of fighting small wars badly. Historical narratives, such as this particular work, provide a good case study for an analysis of unconventional a-symmetrical “wars of the weak” that once again dominate the strategic landscapes of the post-9/11 world. This particular fact provides an important incentive and rationale for the translation of this book into English to ensure that a wider international audience would benefit from its insights and descriptions.

Dr Abel Esterhuyse, Department of Military Strategy, Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University