

Book Review

1 RECCE – THE NIGHT BELONGS TO US Alexander Strachan

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Combining the writing abilities of a seasoned literary author with the intricacies of a good military story is almost a guarantee for a good book. And this is precisely the case with *1 Recce – The night belongs to us*. It is without doubt a well-written book and an outstanding read. The book fills a gap in the existing South African military historiography by documenting the story of the formation and building of 1 Reconnaissance Regiment of the former defence force to full operational capacity.

Border War literature is experiencing an unprecedented boom at present. The reasons are diverse and complex. Publications about Special Forces – *Recces* as they are generally known in South Africa – are especially popular. The reasons for the popularity of Special Forces literature are quite obvious. In most cases, Special Forces literature contains all the basic elements of a good story: adventure, excitement, courage, unprecedented hardship, secrecy and heroes. And this is also the case with *1 Recce – The night belongs to us*. The Border War, South Africa's counterinsurgency campaign against SWAPO in Namibia and the country's involvement in the Angolan civil war constitute the background against which Strachan's story of the creation and growth of 1 Reconnaissance Commando as a military unit of the former South African Defence Force unfolds.

The author of the book, himself a qualified specialist forces operator, is somewhat vague about his intentions with the book. He simply declares that the book tells the story of 1 Reconnaissance Commando, the mother unit of all the Special Force units of the South African military. However, from his author's note, it is clear that Strachan tries to shed light on certain key themes. These include amongst others the comradeship between Special Force soldiers, the typical operations carried out by the unit, the almost superhuman selection process, the survival of Special Forces in the bushes of Africa, and the distinctiveness of these types of units. However, in

reading the book, the reader is also introduced to the development of various specialist skills within the context of Special Forces, such as pseudo-operations, sharpshooters, different parachute abilities, assault diving, two-man reconnaissance, demolitions, mountaineering and rope work, as well as medical training.

The book is based primarily on interviews with the former and first members of 1 Reconnaissance Commando of the former South African Defence Force. Of course, the role played by certain individuals in the creation and development of the unit is emphasised. The most important person in this regard is the legendary Colonel Jan Breytenbach and his so-called 'Dirty Dozen' of men that constituted the nucleus of the unit during its first years of creation. But historical writing that only relies on the memories of the people who were involved in particular historical events may be problematic. People forget, tend to overestimate their own experiences and roles, are often careful to place themselves under the magnifying glass of criticism, and often hero-worship people with whom they shared danger. In retrospect, there are often romantic ideas about the past and excessive criticism of the present. The book tells an interesting story and is of a historical nature. However, it is not based on extensive historical research neither is it a regimental history of 1 Reconnaissance Commando. This, however, does not change the fact that the book makes an important and interesting contribution to the documentation of the history of Special Forces in South Africa. It also does not change the fact that the book is well written and tells a fascinating and extremely readable story.

The boldness and bravery of Special Force soldiers at grassroots level are uncovered by Strachan in a fascinating way when he describes the endurance and human perseverance in the selection and training of Special Force operators and in the planning and execution of operations that often border on the limits of what is humanly possible. The reader is exposed to an inner perspective of the selection process that these soldiers have gone through and their work and way of life as special soldiers. Military veterans of the former South African Defence Force will also find the description of the bureaucratic and other struggles that were required to create a specialist unit in an army that was very conventional in nature, culture, and outlook in the 1970s quite interesting. It is not unlike what was experienced in other armed forces that went through the same process of formation in the creation of their Special Forces capabilities. The divergent nature of operations performed by 1 Reconnaissance Commando and the diverse geographic environments in which members of the unit had to operate add colour to the story.

Of course, there are topics or themes, which are highlighted in the book that will provide for interesting speculation and debate by amateur historians and soldiers. One such topic is the relative informal nature of the initial selection processes and how these were controlled and manipulated by the existing Special Force operators to ensure that only soldiers who had the right qualities and temperament were selected. This eventually played out in an interesting standoff and healthy debate between the Special Forces operators responsible for selection and the psychologists who were increasingly involved in the process of selection. South Africa's comprehensive

involvement in the wars in Mozambique and former Rhodesia is another topic of discussion. Furthermore, the diversity of specialist skills within the Special Forces is something that could trigger many debates – what exactly the abilities of Special Forces were and what their shortcomings were within the broad military context. The close cooperation, interaction and integration between Special Forces and the intelligence agencies were also matters that not only led to great secrecy, but also placed their utility under suspicion. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that 1 Reconnaissance Commando was also the mother unit of the later controversial Civil Cooperation Bureau.

There is also much food for thought for those who are interested in Special Forces operations from a broader military perspective. What, for example, is the combat value of Special Forces in situations where they are used merely as specialist infantry in operations? During the Border War, and as is quite clear from the description of the various operations in the book, the specialist value of Special Force soldiers was often undermined by using them in operations of a nearly conventional nature in cooperation with normal infantry fighting units, such as 32 Battalion, the Paratroopers and 101 Battalion. Secondly, what is the actual contribution of Special Forces to the war effort as a whole? In many cases, right through the world, the contribution of Special Forces is often overemphasised. Confidentiality, authorisation of special operations at the highest levels of decision-making, or the attack and destruction of important targets do not imply that these operations are strategically important or essential. Strategic impact and effect are often only noticeable in retrospect and most of the operations described in the book were, at most, of operational value. Of course, by raising these fundamental questions one does not want to disregard the heroism and exceptional skill with which Special Forces conduct their operations.

The book contains various anecdotal accounts that will be of great interest to the general public. The stories of a tiny monkey called Doppies, after which the famous Fort Doppies was named, and the tame lion, Teddy, who made Fort Doppies his home, are just a few of the examples from the book. But the book also contains a deep story of humanity and the quest for meaning, peace and reality. Perhaps Alexander Strachan's biggest contribution with *1 Recce – The night belongs to us* is the realisation that war is a deep human activity in challenge, conduct and consequence.