

# RECCE: SMALL TEAM MISSIONS BEHIND ENEMY LINES

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*Koos Stadler*

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*Recce: Small team missions behind enemy lines* is an autobiography by Colonel (retired) Koos Stadler. The book mainly covers his career as a Special Forces officer and reconnaissance soldier during South Africa's so-called Border War in Namibia (formerly South West Africa) and Angola, and his involvement in operations against the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) and its military wing, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). It also covers operations against the African National Congress (ANC) and Angolan forces.

Stadler, a highly decorated Special Forces operator of the former South African Defence Force (SADF)<sup>a</sup> and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF),<sup>b</sup> served in several command and staff positions in the Reconnaissance Commandos<sup>c</sup> in a career that culminated with a tour of duty as South African military attaché in Saudi Arabia. His career in tactical reconnaissance began with 31 Battalion, the former Bushmen<sup>d</sup> Battalion of the SADF, located at Omega Base in Namibia's Caprivi, from November 1978 to December 1981. He subsequently served in the Reconnaissance Commandos (Recces) where he specialised in unique small team missions and strategic reconnaissance from 1984 to 1989. The book

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focuses primarily on the latter period, but his service in 31 Battalion provides a valuable run-up and understanding of the theme of the book. Stadler's aim with the book was to describe his experiences as a small team

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<sup>a</sup> The pre-1994 South African military.

<sup>b</sup> The post-1994 South African military

<sup>c</sup> South African Special Forces. Also known as the Recces, thus the title of the book.

<sup>d</sup> Also known as the San people.

operator, in order to shed light on the employment of small teams as a strategic reconnaissance concept and capability of special forces.

The book is written in a narrative and descriptive format and it is a personal, though authoritative account. The use of personal notes, recollections of former colleagues and the use of official documentation are mentioned, without any specifics or source references. The author follows a chronological approach in the book by describing a *capita selecta* of Small Team and other Special Forces operations. Each operation contains background on the strategic and operational context, how the operation was executed, as well as the outcome, with some conclusions. The book is written predominantly on the level of tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs). In the author's note, he provides an outline of the aim of the book, its scope, his own military career and how he became involved in small team reconnaissance operations.

The book is organised into four parts. In the first part, the reader is introduced to the nature of small team reconnaissance work, with a striking extract of a specific high-risk operation that is described in more detail later in the book. This sets the scene for the book. The author provides a background of his childhood days, the beginning of the Bush War and his early military career. Reference is made to key people, adventures, events, exposure, and experiences that prepared and shaped the author for special forces work. The second part of the book deals with the author's training and service at 31 Battalion. As the SADF's Bushmen Battalion, it conducted counterinsurgency operations extending to 60 kilometres into Angola or Zambia. The author's tactical reconnaissance work as part of combat patrols and in locating SWAPO and Angolan military bases since February 1979, are discussed with specific reference to key lessons that were learned about the art of reconnaissance and counterinsurgency. The author noted, for example, that success with counterinsurgency (and reconnaissance work) is relative and that at times, withdrawal from a risky situation may be more prudent than becoming involved in an unnecessary firefight, and possibly compromising a future attempt on the same target.<sup>1</sup> The author's involvement in several semi-conventional operations of the SADF in Angola, such as Operation Saffraan (March 1979), Operation Protea (August 1981), and Operation Daisy (November 1981) are highlighted. The refinement of the composition and functioning of tactical reconnaissance teams, for different types of operations, forms an important component of this part of the book. This discussion concludes with the ending of the author's short-term service in the SADF and his commencement with theological studies at Stellenbosch University.

In the third part of the book, the author explains his realisation that theological studies were not his life-passion and his consequent decision to pursue

his dream to become a Special Forces operator. The pre-selection period, the gruelling Special Forces selection and training and his qualification as Special Forces operator are briefly discussed. The author describes his initial deployments in Special Forces, which delayed his dream to serve in the small teams. This included a short stint with 53 Commando of 5 Special Forces Regiment – for counterinsurgency work at Nkongo in Ovamboland, in August 1984, followed by a trying period of pseudo-guerrilla operations (with former SWAPO soldiers) as part of 51 Commando. The author concludes this discussion with reference to the establishment of the Small Team capability as a sub-unit of 5 Special Forces Regiment.

The last and most comprehensive component of the book commences with the author's eventual transfer to the Small Teams sub-unit at Special Forces and ensuing specialised exercises and skills training for deployment, including language training in Portuguese and specialised communications techniques. The key personalities in the Small Teams community are introduced with reference to their experience, as well as their unique working relationships with the author. The narrative about Operation Cerberus (September 1985), during which Angolan heavy transport aircraft had to be targeted, depicts the resourcefulness of UNITA forces ('Union for the Total Independence of Angola') and the ability of Special Forces soldiers to inflict significant damage behind enemy lines. This operation, like many others in the book, serves as an example that Special Forces operations require significant time, thoroughness and patience to plan, rehearse and execute. Another operation, Operation Killarney (December 1985 to January 1986) during which the railway line between Namibe and Lubango (near Caraculo) in Angola was targeted with demolitions to disrupt the Angolan and SWAPO supply lines, is also discussed. This operation depicts how dedicated scientific expertise and support can provide the required effects for military operations, as well as the practical and unique solutions that special forces often have to develop to ensure success. The discussion also includes an outline of operations against African National Congress (ANC) targets. Operation Caudad (May 1986) in Harare (Zimbabwe) was one of several simultaneous operations against ANC structures in Gaborone (Botswana) and Lusaka (Zambia). In Harare, an ANC house and offices were targeted. Later in the book, another operation against the ANC in Tanzania, Operation Angel (August 1987) is described as a failed attempt to attack the ANC top structure. This operation highlights some challenges with interagency cooperation during covert operations. Operation Colosseum (October to November 1986), an attack on SWAPO's Eastern Front headquarters, portrays the tension between sufficient time required for proper perimeter reconnaissance of a base or target, and limited time available to execute a deliberate attack. The operation highlights the pressures that

operational security concerns can place on the available time to execute an operation. Operation Abduct 1 (January to February 1987) at Menongue and Operation Abduct 2 (November to December 1987) at Lubango, were aimed at destroying Angolan fighter aircraft on the ground with demolitions. These operations are probably the most prominent ones addressed in the book, given the high level of risk involved. Only Small Teams were able to execute such operations. The author describes how he had to get professional psychological help to manage his fear between the execution of the latter two operations.

In the epilogue, the increasing demand for Small Teams during Operations Modular, Hooper and Packer, the SADF's conventional support for UNITA in the Angolan Civil War in the late 1980s are highlighted. The author describes what happened to his close colleagues in the Small Team community after Operation Abduct 2 and how he ended up in the tactical headquarters of the final Small Team operation of the Bush War. The book concludes with a brief outline of subsequent achievements and milestones in his career and personal life, including his 200-km hike in the Empty Quarter of the Arabian Peninsula.

### **The main arguments and lessons learnt**

The author makes two main arguments in terms of reconnaissance work and small teams. Firstly, he emphasises the importance of small tactical reconnaissance teams (often trained by special forces) for locating opponents and their bases behind enemy lines and guiding assault forces to a target for deliberate attacks or raids, as performed by 31 Battalion (and 32 Battalion<sup>e</sup>).<sup>2</sup> During the Bush War, this enabled Special Forces to focus their attention on strategic level tasks. Secondly, Small Teams for strategic reconnaissance missions are a critical Special Forces capability for strategic level tasks, especially strategic reconnaissance, and small teams have to be employed correctly and with due consideration of past lessons learnt. This is the main focus and intrinsic argument in the book.

From the experiences in various operations, Stadler mentions several lessons learnt that shaped the way that Small Teams refined their way of conducting operations.

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<sup>e</sup> 32 Battalion was an SADF unit which operated in both Namibia and Angola during the Bush War. It specialised in counterinsurgency and later took part in semi-conventional operations in Angola. It was led by SADF officers and consisted largely of former Angolans that initially fought for the FNLA (*Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola*) against the MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*), during the Angolan Civil War.

Firstly, standard military practice, doctrine and textbooks do not necessarily always provide solutions against an adaptable opponent and new ways of operating must be conceptualised, tried and tested, even to a point of pushing the boundaries of standing military orders.<sup>3</sup> Stadler points out, for example, that the initial conventional practice of sending no less than a ten-man section on reconnaissance, did not work. Thus, the rules had to be adapted for operational requirements to experiment with smaller teams that were less detectable, before the success and importance of small reconnaissance teams were realised by higher headquarters. Secondly, Small Team operations had to be overseen and controlled by their own tactical headquarters and dedicated signals component given their unique signal requirements to avoid critical messages from Small Teams getting lost in high volumes of radio messages from other, larger groupings.<sup>4</sup> The inherent argument being that if one radio message from a Small Team was missed, it could have had dire consequences. Thirdly, detailed preparation was required in terms of studying the situation, planning with all relevant role players, preparing contingencies, doing rehearsals and preparing equipment.<sup>5</sup> The reality with Small Team operations is such that any small error or lack of planning can result in mission failure, or even worse – capture or death.<sup>6</sup>

Fourthly, the presence and *modus operandi* of Small Teams' should not be wasted on targets with little value.<sup>7</sup> The argument was that opponents were responsive and a successful method could not be repeated. Operators, therefore, had to know when to withdraw if the initiative was lost, when to attack a target and when not, and when to run. This presupposed that operators had to have a clear understanding of the tactical, operational and strategic consequences of their decisions and actions. This makes the 'labelling' of Small Teams by their executive officer at the time, Commandant Boet Swart<sup>8</sup> as "Small teams, big packs, small brains"<sup>9</sup> quite comical for its irony.

An overall conclusion deduced from the book is that Special Forces may inflict significant strategic damage, but it may also be very difficult against a skilful opponent and there were no guarantees about the outcome or consequences of an operation.

### **Evaluation of the book**

The book has many strong points. The author maintains his focus on the aim of the book very well and must be credited for not getting side-tracked. Furthermore, the book makes a contribution in terms of Afrikaans and English literature, especially for the way in which operations are described with comical

real-life stories. The detailed, yet concise descriptions, quality of language and style of writing, as well as the avoidance of unnecessary military jargon and bureaucratic-type writing, make this a valuable piece of literature.

The author's willingness, to describe some of his deepest feelings and personal struggles, while serving as an operator, adds an unusual quality to a book of this nature, which leaves the reader with much food for thought about real-life issues and questions. The author honestly admits and describes several mistakes and poor judgement calls that he made during operations and in working relationships. He also describes the fears with which he struggled throughout his reconnaissance career and especially as a Small Team operator and how he very wisely sought professional help from a psychologist to assist him manage his fear – something many soldiers unfortunately were reticent to do. Admitting these feelings, struggles and mistakes shows a high level of emotional intelligence and maturity and provides valuable lessons for the military profession.

The maps, illustrations and photographs complement the book. They enable the reader to develop a better understanding of the distances, the nature of the terrain and conditions, as well as the personalities involved.

Autobiographical works are by nature about the person and will always contain some elements of pride. This book is no exception. However, the author is clearly modest and self-critical in many ways. His confidence and pride in the capabilities of the South African Reconnaissance Commandos is in itself a reflection of the South African Special Forces of the time. One would expect nothing less from a person who received the *Honoris Crux* medal for bravery.

There are a few shortcomings to the book and the ones mentioned here are relative and open for debate. Firstly, at times, the author provides a too vague synopsis of the real nature of selection, training and working in Special Forces, or the relationship of the latter with the rest of the SADF or the South West Africa Territorial Force. For example, neither the practical difficulties of life in a Small Team observation post, nor the aftermath of combat receive much attention. The book is, therefore, generally inclined towards omitting certain unpleasant or sensitive details. Secondly, the author's work as a Small Team operator ends in 1989, with very little further detail on the Small Team capability. Was this capability, for example, not utilised during the critical period of transition inside South Africa during the early 1990s? Thirdly, although the aim of the book is focused on providing a narrative, it lacks some argumentative conclusion, especially in the end.

Several questions can be asked regarding Small Teams and their utilisation,

given the matters raised in this book. How can the misuse of Small Teams be avoided? How should the tactical command and control of Small Teams slot in with joint operations?

### **Relevance and value**

One might ask, what is the present-day value of an autobiography by a South African Special Forces operator from the era of the Bush War? The author makes several important, but brief arguments about counterinsurgency against SWAPO, that are still applicable to curbing insurgency elsewhere in Africa. Firstly, insurgents in the African bush cannot be beaten with sheer firepower or numbers, but only through outsmarting them and competing with them on their own terrain through operations based upon sound and tested intelligence.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, guerrilla warfare must be used against insurgents, not only to be successful with counterinsurgency, but also for Small Teams (or other entities) to survive.<sup>11</sup>

This book provides a valuable addition to the existing, but relatively limited body of knowledge on the role of Special Forces in South Africa and elsewhere, especially on strategic reconnaissance by small team operators. It provides essential reading for SANDF members, as well as aspiring ones, since it addresses key aspects of soldiering in Africa, including the importance of knowing the natural environment and bushcraft – aspects that are easily neglected in the Information Age. Future research on this theme could focus on the role of Small Teams during the sensitive transitional period from 1990, the new democratic dispensation and most importantly – in Africa over the last two decades.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Stadler, K. *Recce: Kleinspan-operasies agter vyandelike linies*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2015, 58.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 304–305.

<sup>8</sup> According to Stadler, Commandant Boet Swart (then Second-in-Command of 5 Special Forces Regiment) made this joking remark about small teams for

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choosing to return to their difficult work in the bush over a possible comfortable life and job in a base.

<sup>9</sup> Stadler *op. cit.*, p. 330.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.