

Book Review

COMPOSITE WARFARE: THE CONDUCT OF SUCCESSFUL GROUND FORCE OPERATIONS IN AFRICA

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Pinetown: 30 Degrees South Publishers
2015, 576 pages
ISBN 9781928211761

Africa is still one of the most conflict-ridden places on earth – from civil strife and civil war to various forms of mostly irregular war. Although much has changed since the end of the Cold War in 1989, many people, especially women and children, are still dying in Africa because of armed conflict. And Africa is not isolated from the geostrategic realities that are troubling the rest of the world. Global threats, like international terror in the form of Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab and others, are also a reality for Africa’s strategists. Three ironies seem to underpin much of the conflict in Africa. Firstly, and through a somewhat illogical tradition, Africa’s armed forces tend to be largely underfunded and lacking in professionalism. Many African countries are in dire need of better-funded, better-equipped, better-trained, better-organised and well-led armed forces. It will not be wrong to argue that, in general and as a continent, Africa seems to be under-militarised. Secondly, since independence, African governance seems to be plagued by centralised, militarised, often oligarchic, forms of administration that tend to create grievances among those who see themselves as victims of abuses, and frustrations among those who seek to exercise their civil and political rights in a democratic way. From a paradoxical perspective, Africa is in want of more professional militaries and less military influence in governance. Thirdly, peace-

*Scientia Militaria, South African
Journal of Military Studies, Vol
45, No. 1, 2017, pp. 145–149.
doi : 10.5787/44-2-1198*

making in Africa is often seen as a business. Frequently, the facilitating entities and non-governmental organisation (NGO) role players, instead of the general public, are the real beneficiaries of the peace dividend.

Needless to say – and this is not supposed to be judgemental and/or inconsiderate – there are political interests groups and non-governmental entities that have an interest in sustaining African armed conflicts. Eeben Barlow's book *Composite warfare: The conduct of successful ground force operations in Africa* is an honest effort to address these challenges from an inside African military perspective.

These realities are compounded by the fact that much of what is being written about armed conflict in Africa, is written by scholars, defence analysts and experts from outside Africa. Moreover, it is often written from a holistic top-down, peace studies perspective that tends to portray African statutory armed forces as part of the problem, downplay the role of these forces, or write them out of the narrative. Very little is being written from within Africa about the role of armed force and armed forces in resolving African armed conflict, even less by military practitioners about their own professions. How many African military retirees, for example, make an effort to record their experiences of and perspectives on African armed conflict? Barlow is therefore correct in his assertion, "... there has been a trend to intellectualise conflict and war [in Africa] to a point where it has become increasingly difficult to understand even basic concepts and principles".¹ He expresses the view, "... there is a belief that by intellectualising conflict and war [in Africa], new answers, approaches, and methods will be forthcoming".²

The author of *Composite warfare*, Eeben Barlow, needs no introduction. He has made his mark in the military and private military domain in Africa. In the introduction, he makes it quite clear that his book was written from an operator's perspective, providing a bottom-up outlook on war in Africa. It is the perspective of someone who has served as an "... advisor, military strategist, special operations commander, brigade commander, occasional division commander, and special advisor to several chiefs of staff"³; someone who has experienced the "campfires, bad food, terrible water, heat, cold, total exhaustion, hostile jungles, and heat-baked plains along with mosquitoes, flies, snakes, spiders (not forgetting fire-ants), bullets and bombs"⁴ of African battlefields; someone whose view on African conflict and war was shaped by the thoughts, ideas and visions of those with whom he served in Africa.

According to the author, the book is about the conduct of military operations in Africa, specifically, as reflected in the title, the conduct of successful ground operations in Africa. The purpose of the book, the author asserts, is to enlighten African scholars and soldiers on how he believes they ought to go about defending their countries.

Composite warfare is based on a number of assumptions. The author is, firstly, of the view that Africa is currently "... the dumping ground for bad advice,

and old and sometimes obsolete weapons”⁵ from militaries and governments from outside Africa and that there is a need for African governments to “... shrug[ged] off the disinformation and ‘intelligence’ fed to them by foreign powers”.⁶ The book is, secondly, based on the assumption that African armed forces generally are “incorrectly structured, [and they] utilise outdated doctrine, are poorly trained, and ill-equipped”⁷ to deal with the complexity of African armed conflicts. Barlow, thirdly, assumes that Africa is suffering from many so-called ‘half-fought wars’ that are never won. These half-fought wars in Africa, the author argues, are the result of a lack of “... actionable and credible intelligence, poor strategies and plans, acceptance of poor advice, inadequate doctrines, lack of training and equipment, and lack of political direction and independent will”.⁸ What is needed instead is “... focussed violence in the form of fire and manoeuvre”,⁹ especially where political rhetoric and the threat of violence are no longer effective deterrents. The book is, fourthly, also based on a particular assumption about the political nature of African conflict and war. Barlow argues that these conflicts and wars “... are not fought along politically correct lines”,¹⁰ these wars are “... brutal, vicious, and savage, and often fought at close quarters”.¹¹ There is simply too much at stake in African conflicts and wars, Barlow declares, for these wars to be fought “... to achieve stalemates merely to satisfy international organisations, foreign governments, and NGOs”.¹² From a military angle, the book relies, fifthly, on the assumptions that African conflicts and wars are relying primarily on land power with very little if any close air support, that these wars are of a low technological nature, and that they are predominantly infantry-based and dependent on ‘boots on the ground’. One has to accept that it is this last assumption that underpins the sub-title of the book, namely *The conduct of successful ground force operations in Africa*.

Military theory serves two purposes. It is, firstly, explanatory. Explanatory theory searches for knowledge and a theoretical understanding of war and warfare independently of any practical value. The understanding of war and warfare in Africa is therefore a goal in and of itself. Military theory is, secondly, normative to the extent that it constitutes guidance about how to wage war and conduct warfare. In the context of Africa, the normative nature of military theory produces guidelines about how war in Africa should be waged and won.¹³ A book on military theory, such as *Composite warfare: The conduct of successful ground force operations in Africa*, is often confronted with the challenge of how to balance the explanatory and normative dimensions of military theory and how this relates to Africa. However, the author succeeds exceedingly well in harmonising his understanding of the nature of conflict and war in general and in Africa in

particular in Part One of the book, with a normative outline of how to go about conducting successful ground operations in Africa in Parts Two and Three.

A closer look at the content of the book and the in-depth understanding of war and warfare in Africa by the author raises the question about the uniqueness of the publication and, more specifically, whether a book that deals with the conduct of war in Africa in such detail has ever been published. The book is comprehensive in approach and in detail. The comprehensiveness of the publication, however, makes it difficult to recommend it to a specific audience. There is, on the one hand, enough for military theorists and strategists to examine and reflect on from a scholarly perspective. On the other hand, there is enough detail for armed forces to use the publication as a training manual for company and field-grade officers in the conduct of operations in Africa. The comprehensiveness of the book may also be raised as a point of criticism. The question is whether Barlow is not trying to do too much with the book. One is left with a question regarding the real purpose of the book. Is it meant as a scholarly textbook for educational purposes or is the book meant to be a training manual for armed forces?

All professions develop their own tools and language for effective communication. The military profession is no exception. The need to operate in highly uncertain, confused and stressful environments has caused armed forces through the ages to invent their own form of bureaucratic language and communication that is often captured in a 'conventions of service writing' manual. The military language and style of writing have, as far as possible, been stripped of ambiguity and redundancy. The military, for example, is well known for their use of acronyms. It is a form of language opposite to what the academic world considers indispensable for free, undirected thought. From a language and style perspective, *Composite warfare: The conduct of successful ground force operations in Africa* is relatively well written. However, the outline, structure and layout reflect, to some degree, the characteristics of the bureaucratic military style of writing. This specifically concerns the excessive use of headings and bullets in the text. Given that the book is probably intended as a textbook and training manual for armed forces in Africa, this point of criticism may actually be a positive factor in increasing the utility of the book.

In general, the book is a valuable contribution to the understanding of the nature of conflict and war in Africa and the preparation, planning and structuring of armed force and armed forces in Africa. From that perspective, the book is interesting reading for anyone who has an interest in African security. However, it should be compulsory reading for military practitioners – both those from Africa

and those who deploy into Africa in an expeditionary capacity for training and other purposes.

Endnotes

¹ E Barlow. *Composite warfare: The conduct of successful ground force operations in Africa*. Pinetown: 30 Degrees South, 2015, 14.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See J Angstrom & JJ Widen. *Contemporary military theory: The dynamics of war*. London: Routledge, 2015, 8–9.