

Book Review

OMEGA, OOR EN UIT: DIE STORIE VAN 'N OPSTANDIGE TROEP

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War narratives are in essence categorised as a distinct literary kind of its own. In his masterpiece *The soldier's tale: Bearing witness to modern war*,⁴⁵³ Samuel Hynes argues that mankind is generally curious about war. Hynes contends that it is often easier to respond to one man and his 'war', than to try to comprehend the overwhelming statistics associated with modern wars – especially in terms of the overwhelming numbers of soldiers, battles and casualties. For Hynes, it was important to “understand what war was like, and how it *feels*, we must ... seek the reality in the personal witness of the men who were there”.⁴⁵⁴ As such, the recording of the personal narratives of soldiers are extremely important. These narratives, however, can be subdivided into two broad categories depending on differing needs – the need to report and the need to remember. Accounts that fall into the reporting category generally comprise letters, diaries and journals that are kept as the war unfolds. The value of these sources is varied, but in essence, they offer immediacy and directness in recording the personal experience of war. The second category comprises memoirs. Memoirs are indeed much more reflective in nature, in that they are written years after the actual experience of war. Moreover, memoirs give a selective overview of “what the young self did, what happened to him, what changed him”.⁴⁵⁵

In 2016, Tafelberg published François Verster's *Omega, oor en uit: Die storie van 'n opstandige troep*. Verster's book broadly falls into the category of a reflective memoir, in which the author details his experiences as a national serviceman in the former South African Defence Force (SADF). From basic training at Oudtshoorn, to his deployment as a primary school teacher at the Omega Base in the Caprivi, the author records both the highs and lows of his time in uniform. The book is definitely not your run-of-the-mill 'Border War' memoir. As a genre, 'Border War' memoirs are generally written by a distinct mnemonic community, which includes some amateur historians and journalists, a large group of former national servicemen and a swathe of retired generals. This mnemonic community is more often than not concerned with the actual fighting, and rarely reflects on their personal experiences during the war.⁴⁵⁶

Verster's approach in *Omega, oor en uit* is, however, distinctly different from the mainstream 'Border War' memoirs. Verster's account of his time in the SADF indeed details his journey from innocence into experience, in which he both questions and tells the story of his military experience in an effort to discover its true meaning. All in all, it is an attempt to set the war, and at times his own life, straight. The book comprises fourteen key chapters, in which the reader is regularly transported from Verster's then present – an archivist at the Cape Archives Depot and later at Naspers – to the past – a national serviceman in the SADF. The text is rich and descriptive, and offers a fresh perspective on several social aspects underpinning life as a national serviceman on the so-called 'Border' – such as leisure time utilisation and the provision of education, for example. Unfortunately, the anecdotal account of life at Omega becomes rather repetitive at times, particularly the constant moaning and fault-finding of a self-proclaimed *opstandige* (rebellious) *troep*. Whether or not the author was in fact *opstandig* during his national service is a matter left open for debate. Nevertheless, Verster's account of his time as a national serviceman is commendable, in that it offers a counterpoint to the majority of drum and trumpet accounts available on the 'Border War'.

All in all, *Omega, oor en uit* is definitely worth reading. Verster succeeds in what Hynes proposed in *The soldier's tale* – he offers an honest account of what his 'war' was like, how he felt about it, and, most importantly, how it affected him. The book is recommended for inclusion into university course material, particularly modules that deal with the wider milieu of war and society. If more former national servicemen perhaps followed Verster's approach, an entire different history of life on the 'Border', and readjustment to civilian life, will appear.

Endnotes

⁴⁵³ S Hynes. *The soldier's tale: Bearing witness to modern war*. London: Pimlico, 1997.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁴⁵⁶ A Wessels. "Half a century of South African 'Border War' literature: A historiographical exploration". *Journal for Contemporary History* 42/2. 2017. 42.