

## Book Review

# Die brug: Na die hel en terug in Angola

Deon Lamprecht

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Between 1966 and 1989, the South African Defence Force (SADF) was embroiled in hostilities in the ‘bush’, mainly on the ‘border’ between northern Namibia and southern Angola. Together with its União Nacional para a Independência de Angola (UNITA) allies, the SADF clashed with the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) and Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola (FAPLA) and its Cuban–Russian partners. Despite its prominence in white South African memory, this colloquially termed ‘Border War’ or ‘Bush War’ formed part of a wider Southern African conflict that stretched over three decades from 1959 until 1989. It was one of numerous proxy conflicts in the greater global, ideological struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States.<sup>2</sup> Since the cessation of the war in 1989, a plethora of titles on this regional conflict have appeared.<sup>3</sup> Some of these titles provide a broader regional narrative within the Cold War context,<sup>4</sup> while others narrowly focus on notable (or contested) battles.<sup>5</sup> Some are of the more popular variety,<sup>6</sup> while others are of the more academic type.<sup>7</sup> Some are general,<sup>8</sup> and others are more personal.<sup>9</sup> This historiographic trend has gained momentum in the last decade as “numerous authors and veterans are now (re-)treading the battlefields of Namibia and Angola”.<sup>10</sup> Deon Lamprecht’s *Die brug: Na die hel en terug in Angola* is one of these most recent additions. Lamprecht’s work falls somewhere between the popular and the personal variety. However, it is still of interest to academics, particularly, those of the ‘New Military’ vintage.

*Die brug* may remind some readers of Samuel Hynes’s work, *The soldiers’ tale*,<sup>11</sup> since Lamprecht strives to provide the ‘conscripts’ tale’, albeit in an ‘non-academic’ form. *Die brug* seeks to restore to the historical record the experiences of the thousands of white South African boys who were:

[S]tripped of their personal identity, cast in identical brown uniforms and forged with the hammer blows of instructors into a war machine ... above all it was a growing up ritual of that era – something ... [they] had to get behind before ... [they] could go on with the rest of ... [their] life.<sup>12</sup>

Lamprecht's narrative begins with their experiences at training camps, then moves on to the battlefield and finally to their return and reintegration into civilian life. To this end, Lamprecht focuses on a group of young conscripts in the 61 Mechanised Infantry Battalion (61 Mech) who served at the front between late 1987 and mid-1989. Lamprecht uses their collective reminiscences as a lens to explore the conscripts' war and post-war experiences. He illustrates these two distinct periods in the men's lives by neatly dividing his book into two parts.

The narrative begins in January 1987 as the young conscripts stand in their 'civvies' on hometown train platforms waiting in anticipation for their first great journey into the unknown. Here we meet the "Jannies and the Killiks, the Daniëls and the Mullers" who came from those places so familiar to us,<sup>13</sup> the Cederberg, Clanwilliam, Pretoria and other well-known rural towns and urban cities. They are the oldest brother of so-and-so; they were the head boy at this-or-that school. Someone you might have known. As the boys embark for Angola in November of that year, these identities stayed behind. This was a turning point in these boys' lives as they endured one battle after another over the following year. Two months after their arrival, the last remnants of their boyish pre-war individualities were finally washed away with their baptism by fire on 13 January 1988. This was the first offensive of Operation Hooper. However, they only achieved limited success in this offensive. Thus, the troops had to launch another attack on 14 February 1988 against FAPLA brigades east of the Cuito River. Despite these early offensives, they only truly met the stark realities of war later that month. The battles fought on 25 and 29 February, informally referred to as "Tumpo 1"<sup>14</sup> and "Tumpo 2"<sup>15</sup> aimed at driving FAPLA units over the Cuito River and destroying the bridge after that. The final war experience came with Operation Excite at Calueque on 27 June 1989. Fierce fighting quickly ensued. This closing chapter of the first part of the book virtually groans with death, chaos and agony. However, almost just as abruptly as events unfolded, the war ended the following day without either side seemingly able to deliver a decisive blow.

Years after the war, these ex-soldiers of 61 Mech all acquiesced that the "worst day of the war"<sup>16</sup> was at Tumpo 1. The indigestible, hellish events that transpired there remained with them through their civilian lives. The trauma of their war experience was what motivated them decades later to embark on a "journey of healing".<sup>17</sup> In 2018, these men found themselves once again at the ominous bridge in Angola.<sup>18</sup> It was this narrative, rooted in the bridge at Cuito Cuanavale, which inspired the title of Lamprecht's book.

In the second part of *Die brug*, Lamprecht attempts to dissect the inner conflict with which these ex-servicemen were still battling nearly three decades after the war. The outcome of the fighting there remains contested even today in academic, military and public memory. This controversial issue combined with the men's gutted reaction at the sight of the former battleground, marks a poignant moment in the book. Lamprecht opens to the reader a unique window into the inner struggles of these men, which have been kept in gestation intentionally for many years. The vivacity of the veterans' emotions as they came to the surface are accentuated by the graphic description of the

redesigned battlefield into a “war theme park”.<sup>19</sup> The expressive crescendo of words peaked as the realisation dawned on these ex-servicemen that the war was not over for either side. The perniciously refabricated battleground, through the repositioning of wartime artefacts, serves as a symbolic reflection of the Angolan ruling elite’s vaulting determination to inflict an apparent SADF defeat in the historical record.<sup>20</sup> Through these recollections, Lamprecht shows the importance that these men attached to their status as veterans and their self-consciousness as former national servicemen, as the dormant identities re-emerged and boiled to the surface. Despite being infused with a spirit of healing, their voracious inner conflict grew in complexity as they journeyed on, leaving them with still more unanswered questions and provocative inner tribulations.

In short, Lamprecht’s book touches on a turbulent decade in South African history and captures the temper of the times on a distant war front with varied success. Lamprecht’s battle sequence narrative deftly drops the reader in the operational area with the men of 61 Mech as they experience, all too often, the ‘fog of war’. However, either intentionally or unintentionally, Lamprecht’s garrulous mention of names during the action – also all too often – submerges the reader in a ‘fog of names’. Most of the names hold little meaning since little is known about who they were, their relationships with their compatriots or what their experiences should add to the reader’s understanding of unfolding events. The absence of character development in the first half of this book hampers any sentimental reaction that the loss of a comrade – or even a humorous anecdote – might have evoked in the reader. The absence of a list of abbreviations might also confuse and perplex a novice reader on the topic. To this can be added comparative references made to Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novella, *The heart of darkness*,<sup>21</sup> which explores issues surrounding imperialism. Lamprecht’s intention with such referrals remains unclear. Lamprecht explicitly sets out to write about a group of young conscripts in 61 Mech. However, large sections are dedicated to the ‘Burgemeester’ (regimental sergeant major [RSM]), and ‘tiffies’ (support personnel) as well as the actions of 82 Mechanised Brigade under Operation Packer. These sections are valuable since they provide context and chronology to the narrative. However, the contribution is diffuse in the absence of explicitly introducing the RSM and support personnel and placing them in the broader chronicle of events. The viscerality of these men’s lives only really becomes life-like in the second part of the book. It is only then that these men become three-dimensional and assume complex and individualised personas. Of course, a volume such as this cannot do justice to every aspect and angle of the experience of this war. While it may falter in certain areas, it makes up for such weaknesses in other areas.

Lamprecht succeeds where the book achieves a balance between both the ordinary and the extraordinary moments of war, the enduring boredom as well as the fleeting excitement. This balance allows Lamprecht to paint a textured picture of life during war. The spare and terse prose describing experiences at the front is vividly evocative of what it must have been like for these men beyond pitched battle. Lamprecht manages to juxtapose the changing terrain subtly through 61 Mech’s military advance and the passing seasons. During the initial action, the seasons changed in much the same way as the men as a result of their experiences. The soldiers complain of the sweltering heat

in the Ratels' interior in summer and the depressing cold as winter dawns. Similarly, the terrain changes from thick sand and dense vegetation to sparse shrubbery with limited cover against predatory MIGs. The narrative is further studded with memorable vignettes. One is of a young conscript stripping naked to shower in brief summer rain. Another tells of conscripts' attempts to add a pinch of homeliness by domesticating snakes and monkeys as pets, or the difficulties of 'fish-boning' in convoy to make them less likely air targets. The inclusion of informal nomenclature of military equipment, vehicles and personnel widens the window into the quotidian realities of life at the front. These range from the deliciously named 'kwêvoël' (Samil 100-truck), to 'rooi oë' (Soviet BM-21 Rocket Launchers), 'rowe' (fresh recruits), 'oumanne' (experienced soldiers), 'makkers' (comrades), 'koptiffie tent' (psychologist's tent) and 'gousblom' (echelon base). Reference is also often made to the officious "generals in Pretoria"<sup>22</sup>, emblematic of the fixed military hierarchy that too often sedated reason voiced from the lower ranks on the ground. To this is added the tedious paperwork for the obdurate military bureaucracy as well as long periods of inactivity and uncertainty since everything depended on "need to know".<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Lamprecht provides the reader with a glimpse into the dynamics of the social and cultural expressions of society at the time and the failures of the military system. When troops passed from the war front to the home front, they had to visit "The Tent",<sup>24</sup> where they saw the "head doctor".<sup>25</sup> The futility of state therapy is highlighted as the soldiers lamented, "who knows what the army will do if you talk? ... you sign a form that the army has offered you counselling and you [get out]".<sup>26</sup> After all, "they have been raised" with the dictum that "cowboys don't cry".<sup>27</sup> Unlike similar literature, the medical aspects of war are also included, ranging from outbreaks of malaria and hepatitis to medivacs.

*Die brug* is similar to similar works as it resonates with other literary compilations of personal accounts. Lamprecht's work is thus devoid of the 'top-down' experiences of prominent political or military figures and analytical discussions on a grand strategic level. As he states, "of all these things the [men of 61 Mech] ... knew little".<sup>28</sup> Unlike most histories on this war, Lamprecht's work follows a colourful, sensory 'bottom-up' approach, which adds to our understanding of what the conscripts did, what happened to them, and what changed them. More significantly, Lamprecht follows these narratives both until and after 1989. As Hynes argues, to "understand what war is like, and how it *feels*, we must turn away from history and its numbers, and seek the reality in the personal witness of the men who were there".<sup>29</sup> It is here that Lamprecht succeeds to recover these men from statistics and make a valuable contribution to the growing corpus of literature on the war. One individual that increasingly gains attention as the story unfolds is the quintessential mother of one of the fallen national servicemen. Her inclusion in the conscript's tale adds a valuable layer to the realities of war. It is especially here that Lamprecht does not try to conceal those elements that made these men ordinary. As one veteran sardonically noted, "[d]ead is dead. Fear is fear. You do not become more or less dead ..."<sup>30</sup> *Die brug* is essentially about those individuals who fought in the war, whether at the front or at home. As Lamprecht states in the arresting opening paragraph of the dedication, "[t]o all whose inner journeys continue and their loved ones who experience it. And to all who did not come home and their relatives."<sup>31</sup>

*Die brug* is not just another book on South Africa's Vietnam. Instead, it is a literary experience through the textured reality of war that leads the reader towards a succinct, crisp and sobering cathartic precipice of the conscripts' tale.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Anri Delpont is a lecturer in the Department of Military History in the Faculty of Military Science at Stellenbosch University. This book review is dedicated to Oom Org, who would have enjoyed reading and discussing this book almost as much as he would have enjoyed reviewing it.
- <sup>2</sup> IJ van der Waag. *A military history of modern South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2015, 245–246.
- <sup>3</sup> For a historiographical overview of available literature, see A Wessels. “Half a century of South African “Border War” literature: A historiographical exploration”. *Journal of Contemporary History* 42/2. 2017. 24–47.
- <sup>4</sup> See JW Turner. *Continent ablaze: The insurgency wars in Africa 1960 to Present*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1998; VG Shubin. *The Hot “Cold War”: The USSR in southern Africa*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008; S Onslow (ed). *Cold War in southern Africa: White power; black liberation*. Oxon: Routledge, 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> See F Bridgland. *Cuito Cuanavale: 12 months of war that transformed a continent*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007; L Scholtz. *The SADF and Cuito Cuanavale*. Jonathan Ball: Johannesburg, 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> See L Scholtz. *The SADF in the Border War, 1966–1989*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013.
- <sup>7</sup> See IJ van der Waag & AM Grundlingh (eds). *In different times: The war for southern Africa, 1969–1989*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2019; G Baines. *South Africa’s ‘Border War’: Contested narratives and conflicting memories*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015; I Liebenberg, J Risquet & V Shubin (eds). *A far-away war: Angola, 1975–1989*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2015.
- <sup>8</sup> See W Steenkamp. *South Africa’s Border War 1966–1989*. Gibraltar: Ashanti, 1989.
- <sup>9</sup> See K Stadler. *Recce: Small team missions behind enemy lines*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2015; J Geldenhuys. *A general’s story from an era of war and peace*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1995; J Geldenhuys. *Ons was daar: Weners van die oorlog om Suider-Afrika*. Pretoria: Kraal, 2011; A Soderlund & D Steyn. *Ystervuis uit die see: Uiters geheime seewaartse Recce-operasies (1978–1988)*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2018.
- <sup>10</sup> I Liebenberg, T du Plessis & G van der Westhuizen. “Review article: Through the mirage: Retracing moments of a war ‘up there’”. *Scientia Militaria* 38/2. 2010. 132.
- <sup>11</sup> SL Hynes. *The soldiers’ tale: Bearing witness to modern war*. New York, NY: Allen Lane, 2001.
- <sup>12</sup> D Lamprecht. *Die brug: Na die hel en terug in Angola*. Johannesburg: Delta Books, 2020, ix.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> J Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*. London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1899.
- <sup>22</sup> Lamprecht *op. cit.*, p. 77.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>29</sup> Hynes *op. cit.*, p. xii.

<sup>30</sup> Lamprecht *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v.

