

## *Book Review*

# **The Battle of Bangui: The inside story of South Africa's worst military scandal since Apartheid**

*Warren Thompson, Stephan Hofstatter and James Oatway*

*Evert Kleynhans<sup>471</sup>*

*Stellenbosch University*

---

Cape Town: Penguin Books  
2021, 288 pages  
ISBN 978-1-77609-473-8

The Battle of Bangui has assumed near mythical proportions within South Africa, and specifically in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). During the battle that occurred in March 2013, a small force of crack South African troops engaged a 7 000-strong Seleka rebel force in an effort to stem their advance on Bangui – the capital of the politically unstable and resource-rich Central African Republic (CAR). Over the course of two days, the South African force fought a number of gallant actions and inflicted heavy casualties on the advancing rebel forces. However, the South Africans could not hold out indefinitely, especially against overwhelming odds and after taking some casualties during the ensuing fighting. Moreover, they soon found themselves surrounded in their makeshift base within Bangui, where they were ultimately forced to negotiate a ceasefire with the Seleka rebels. Following the ceasefire, the South African contingent returned to South Africa, and so began the process of trying to make sense of the rationale to deploy SANDF troops to CAR, and what exactly happened during the so-called ‘Battle of Bangui’. Most importantly, the country, the defence force, and the respective families, had to come to grips with the unnecessary loss of South African lives in a seemingly distant corner of Africa.

In early 2021, Penguin Books published Warren Thompson, Stephan Hofstatter and James Oatway’s *Battle of Bangui: The inside story of South Africa’s worst military scandal since Apartheid*. In the book, the authors set about to get to the elusive truth surrounding the South African deployment to the CAR, which was underpinned by a bilateral defence agreement signed between the two countries as far back as 2006. As investigative journalists, Thompson, Hofstatter and Oatway uncovered the political, diplomatic and economic reasons that led to the deployment of SANDF troops to CAR. These varying reasons were, and for the most part still are, kept secret from the South African public and Parliament. However, the authors left no stone unturned in trying to get to the bottom of the story. Over a period of seven years, they gained exclusive access to both the officers and men who fought in the battle; investigated classified information

related to the events; travelled to Bangui to obtain documentation and meet the Seleka rebel leaders who took part in the battle; interviewed the exiled former president of the CAR François Bozizé in Paris, and talked to the families of the fallen South African soldiers. As a result of their untiring efforts, the authors managed to present a hard-hitting and factual account that reports on the strategic, tactical and logistical blunders, along with the secret diplomatic and commercial deals that ended in the now infamous Battle of Bangui.

The military historian Ian van der Waag argues that the military historiography cycle generally passes through several distinct phases. The first phase is dominated by journalism and war reportage, which is followed by official histories in the second phase. The third phase comprises personal and regimental accounts, with the last phase culminating in academic works that are far more critical than the above in their approach.<sup>472</sup>

To date, only two books have been written on the Battle of Bangui. The first book was authored by the well-known defence analyst Helmoed-Römer Heitman, and was titled *The Battle in Bangui: The untold inside story*.<sup>473</sup> This latter book, only some forty pages long, appeared mere weeks after the events culminated in the CAR, and offered the first vignette into what had happened in Bangui over those two fateful days in March 2013. However, one has to question how Heitman obtained his detailed information in the first place, and whether this publication was not a simple propaganda stunt from the defence force and/or government to stymie enquiries into the debacle. Next followed Thompson, Hofstatter and Oatway's 2021 publication, which trumps Heitman's earlier version of the events.

If one follows Van der Waag's analogy, then these two publications definitely fall into the first phase of the military historiography cycle. What should logically follow next is an official history authored by military historians and/or strategists working within the broader Department of Defence. These authors should have access to the classified information withheld from Heitman, Thompson, Hofstatter and Oatway, and their role would be to offer a more complete, pro-government and pro-SANDF, version of the events. One can only speculate if and when such an official history will materialise. Hopefully in the future we will also see the publication of some personal and regimental accounts dealing with the Battle of Bangui, which will in all likelihood then be followed by a more critical academic response. The above will of course all depend on the availability of and access to classified material laying bare the SANDF deployment to the CAR.

All in all, the *Battle of Bangui: The inside story of South Africa's worst military scandal since Apartheid* is a riveting read from start to finish and a welcome addition to the historiography. Thompson, Hofstatter and Oatway offer an unrivalled account of the Battle of Bangui, filled with heroism, camaraderie, terror, sorrow and triumph over adversity. In doing so, they offer a fresh perspective on an episode in the South African military history that some in the establishment might conveniently want to forget. The book comes highly recommended, and can be considered for inclusion into university course material, particularly modules that deal with military history, strategic studies and political science.

## ENDNOTES

---

- <sup>471</sup> Evert Kleynhans [MMil, PhD (Mil) (Stell)], is a senior lecturer in the Department of Military History of the Faculty of Military Science at Stellenbosch University. He is also an Assistant Director of the Southern Africa Chapter of the Second World War Research Group, as well as the editor of *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*. His primary research interests include the South African participation in both world wars.
- <sup>472</sup> IJ van der Waag & A Grundlingh (eds). *In different times: The war for southern Africa, 1966–1989*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2019, 3–4.
- <sup>473</sup> HR Heitman. *The Battle in Bangui: The untold inside story*. Parktown: Parktown Publishers, 2013.
- 