

Book Review

Gunship Over Angola : The Story of a Maverick Pilot

Steve Joubert

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“Most war stories”, according to Hynes, “begin with a nobody-in-particular young man, who lives through the experience of war, to emerge at the end defined by what has happened to him.”⁴⁴³ One such “nobody-in-particular young man” was national serviceman 74257684BC Private Stephen Pierre Joubert, born on 3 July 1958 in Chingola, then Northern Rhodesia.⁴⁴⁴ Since the age of five, he and his family lived in Pretoria. He had a typical childhood in most respects.⁴⁴⁵ Barely seventeen years old, he, like many other young men, reported for national service. One year later, in 1977, he stood in a “perfectly pressed” uniform with “buttons and badges [that] sparkled like diamonds” in a large room in a nondescript building at the South African Airforce (SAAF) Gymnasium in Valhalla, Pretoria.⁴⁴⁶ Facing him was an intimidating, expressionless collection of brass seated in a semicircle. It was Joubert’s second Pilot Selection Board interview for the Pupil Pilot’s Course. Among the brass was the legendary aviator, World War II and Korean War veteran, then chief of the SAAF, General Bob Rogers. The general asked the first question, “[h]ow long have you wanted to be a pilot?” Joubert responded, “[s]ince I stopped wanting to be an ice cream seller, sir!”⁴⁴⁷ Two years later, “on an early November day”, 21-year-old Joubert with wings pinned to his chest stepped onto AFB Ondangwa in South West Africa, now called Namibia.⁴⁴⁸ The events that followed changed him forever. It was as Hynes notes, “out of that nobody, war has forged a self”.⁴⁴⁹

Lieutenant Stephen Joubert was not the next Sailor Malan or Edwin Sales, but one of many South African servicemen who served in the War for Southern Africa between 1966 and 1989. The colloquially termed ‘Border War’ erupted in Namibia. Hostilities after that spilt over to Angola and Zambia. Within the broader Cold War context, it was one of the numerous proxy wars.⁴⁵⁰ The major theatre of operations of the South African Defence Force (SADF) was in the operational area in northern Namibia bordering Angola. As one of the services, the SAAF played its own, often distinctive, role in this regional conflict. The first half of the narrative in *Gunship over Angola* is set in South Africa, far removed from hostilities. During this time, the contribution by the SAAF was primarily limited to using Alouette III helicopters and Cessna 185 liaison/visual

reconnaissance aircraft in counter-insurgency operations. The main bases for the SAAF were established on Namibia's northern border at Ondangwa, Rundu, Mpacha and Grootfontein, and satellite bases at Ruacana, Eenhana, Nkongo, Buffalo and Omega. After 1975, more bases were added as hostilities intensified, demanding the SAAF to play a more prominent role.⁴⁵¹ Some of these are mentioned in Joubert's account. During this later phase of hostilities, Joubert had his first taste of battle, and began logging pilot-in-command hours, which comprises most of the second part of the book.

Around the late 1970s and early 1980s, all SAAF aircraft types were deployed in the operational area as the conflict escalated. The role of the SAAF also expanded to include close air support, search-and-destroy missions, troop, casualty evacuation, artillery fire control flights and resupply missions.⁴⁵² During this time, the Soviets, Cubans and other allies supplied their proxies with more complex and sophisticated technology, such as radar installations and SAM-7 missiles. Thus, the threat of anti-aircraft fire intensified with a concomitant increase in SAAF casualties.⁴⁵³ In response to the heightened lethality on the battlefield, SAAF pilots developed new tactics, such as low-altitude flying, which reduced the deadliness of these weapons.⁴⁵⁴ In many respects, airmen, such as Joubert, had a more distinctive war experience than the boots on the ground. Furthermore, their war experience was not static, but constantly changing. For instance, during one or more operational tours, the experiences could have varied between different intervals as the nature of war evolved. Regarding this, Joubert very capably teases out these developments in the war and the response of airmen to these changing circumstances. Such diversity in South African experiences is rather scarce in contemporary historiography.

Since 1966, a plethora of titles on the 'Border War' has appeared.⁴⁵⁵ Early titles up to the late 1980s tended to glorify participation by South Africans.⁴⁵⁶ Among these were a lacklustre official history and several general histories published around the conclusion of hostilities.⁴⁵⁷ From the 1990s onward, a new trend of published personal accounts reached the shelves, which gained impetus since the 2000s. Quite often, revised editions of titles published in the previous decade re-appeared to feed readers' growing appetite for war reminiscences. Initially, most of these titles adopted a mostly 'top-down' approach.⁴⁵⁸ In recent years, accounts 'from below' have begun to fill the historiographical hiatus and opened a window into the lives of 'ordinary men'.⁴⁵⁹

Interestingly, as Wessels notes, military enthusiasts have always had an insatiable craving for literature on special operations.⁴⁶⁰ It is surprising that such enthusiasm has not extended to the excitement and vivacity of the war in the sky. Alternatively, the dearth of literature on such topics has defused or redirected interest in them. The role of the SAAF, particularly the experiences of airmen, has largely been absent in South African historiography. The contribution by the SAAF has been limited mainly to mentions or sections in literature on the war,⁴⁶¹ – with some exceptions.⁴⁶² It is here that Joubert's book makes a valuable contribution to the lacuna in current historiography.

The title of Joubert's book, *Gunship over Angola: The story of a maverick pilot*, is somewhat misleading. Granted, its glossy cover and bold title will catch anyone's eye peering through a bookshop window or browsing on the web. The same applies to

the pulse-throbbing publisher's blurb. The first impression of the book is both striking and dramatic, which understandably it aims to do and certainly achieves it, but this simultaneously distracts from the value of the book, albeit perhaps inadvertently. Joubert's book is much more than a vividly graphic description of a battle sequence in the sky. It does include such battlefield narratives and plenty to spare with all the sensory elements to make readers feel like they are experiencing the battle first-hand. The book also provides a unique perspective, which Joubert had as an airman involved in the chain of casualty evacuation. Against this bird's eye view, Joubert's account highlights the subtle nuances between civilian, battle, landmine and other forms of casualties, as well as the influence of racial prejudices on evacuation and treatment. However, the title is only descriptive of the second half of the book.

The first part of the narrative begins with a brief description of Joubert's genealogy and family life through early childhood and adolescence, leading up to Joubert reporting for national service. Compared to others who loathed the idea of military conscription, Joubert saw this as an opportunity to become a pilot, since his family was not affluent and could therefore not afford private funding for his training. After basic training, he was transferred to the Air Defence School at Air Force Base (AFB) Waterkloof, followed by his operational deployment at Ellisras. He was then selected for the Pupil Pilot's Course 1/77 as a candidate officer at the Central Flying School (CFS) Dunnottar. The next phase was to attend the Flight Training School (FTS) Langebaanweg, which included a seven-day Survival Course at Kranshoek. A three-month Officer's Course at the South African Air Force College (SAAFCol) followed. Joubert writes, "a combination of factors"⁴⁶³ led to him becoming a helicopter pilot; thus, he was posted to 87 Advanced Flying School (AFS) at AFB Bloemspuit. He finally became a fully-fledged Alo III commander in the 17 squadron. The next day he departed for the centre of airborne operations for his first operational tour, which is covered in the second half of the book.

The first half of the book is dismissed in the title despite the value of this half for opening a rare window onto the rigours of becoming a SAAF pilot, which entails much more than practical flight hours and adrenaline-fuelled aerobatics. The book also provides a realistic glimpse of everyday experiences, ranging from exhilarating to frustrating and even to infuriating. To this can be added the obstinate nature of the military regime and obtuse military hierarchy entrusted to mould chivalrous officers and command daring pilots – all of which contrasts with the all too often romantic and nostalgic notions held by many of heroically masculine brass, buttons and uniforms.

As previously noted, the book is divided into two parts; the first is titled "The age of innocence", followed by "Time to grow up". The suggestive juxtaposition of the two titles aptly reflects, as Hynes remarks, "[n]obody, however young, returns from the war still a boy and in that sense, at least, war does make men."⁴⁶⁴ Joubert's account also resonates with more recent literature, which tends to spotlight the legacies of trauma, violence and conscription interlaced with calls for healing and reconciliation with the past.⁴⁶⁵ Such themes often mirror a sense of admonishment for the state and the military's failure to provide psychological support and assistance to these men. As Joubert poignantly argues:

If I bear any grudge at all, it is against the military establishment, not for moulding me into the fighting man that I became for ten years ... but rather because they blatantly shirked their responsibility to switch me back into a balanced, considerate and compassionate human being when my fighting days were over.

The Official Secrets Act (No. 16 of 1956) “discouraged” men like Joubert from not only “questioning the status quo” but also seeking professional counselling.⁴⁶⁶ As Joubert comments, “seeking counselling from anyone, amateur or professional ... was banned outright by the authorities and dire consequences were threatened.”⁴⁶⁷ As a result, Joubert was “not functioning at an optimum emotional level [...] for a long time to come”.⁴⁶⁸

The impact of war experiences and a combination of other factors inspired Joubert to write this book. As he acknowledges, “[i]t is often said that ‘writing about it’ is one of the most cathartic things that human beings who have undergone trauma can do.”⁴⁶⁹ Joubert concludes with words of encouragement to others of his generation to make amends with the past – whether through writing or through talking. Unfortunately, readers were only given a slight glimpse into the experiences alluded to in a few brief paragraphs. The shortcomings of the military and war trauma might explain why Joubert chose not to immerse the reader fully in his inner conflict and sense of isolation and alienation in post-war civilian life.

However, Joubert excels in achieving three-dimensionality with his humorous vignettes and anecdotes sprinkled from beginning to the near end of *Gunships over Angola*. The perfectly balanced humour ranges from youthful indiscretions to describing how innovative training techniques could help pupil pilots judge the correct height when landing an aircraft. In such cases, pupils had to sit on the roof of the ablution block, which “was mathematically calculated ... to be the precise height” before the plane levelled off for landing. Pupils had to hold a ruler in the left hand to imitate the plane’s throttle lever. A broomstick in the right hand represented the joystick, while the sweeping section represented the rudder pedals. To “add authenticity” to the “simulation”, pupils had to “imitate the noise of the radial engine”. As Joubert comments, he wondered what the response of their parents would be to see their sons, the elite of the SAAF, “flying imaginary aircraft in close formation, spasmodically moving hands and feet, while making toddler-like noises, while sitting on the shithouse roof.”⁴⁷⁰

The inclusion of a solid comical element in a morose war narrative might seem surprising – or not. Many writers have done so in the past. Among these are Mel Brooks, Charlie Chaplin, Taika Waititi, Roberto Benigni, and Vincenzo Cerami. However, in this instance, it could be that firstly, Joubert is a self-perceived “avid objectivist” or “maverick” who was subjected to a strict, hierarchical, often impractical military environment. Secondly, he writes that he hopes his family will one day take the time to read his story. Despite the intended audience, other readers with an interest in war reminiscences or the war ‘up north’, whether ‘civvy’ or soldier, academic or military enthusiast, *Gunship over Angola* is a must read.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁴⁴³ S Hynes. *The soldiers' tale: Bearing witness to modern war*. New York, NY: Viking, 2001, 5.
- ⁴⁴⁴ S Joubert. *Gunship over Angola: The story of a maverick pilot*. Johannesburg: Delta Books, 2019, 3, 12.
- ⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ⁴⁵⁰ JJ van der Waag. *A military history of modern South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2015, 245–246.
- ⁴⁵¹ MN Louw & JS Bouwer. *The South African Airforce at war: A pictorial appraisal*. Johannesburg: Chris van Rensburg, 1995, 141.
- ⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- ⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 142, 153, 162.
- ⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- ⁴⁵⁵ A Wessels. "Half a century of South African 'Border War' literature: A historiographical exploration". *Journal of Contemporary History* 42/2. 2017. 28–29.
- ⁴⁵⁶ See for example A van Wyk. *Honoris Crux: Ons dapperes: Our brave*. Cape Town: Saayman & Weber, 1982.
- ⁴⁵⁷ See for example FJ du Toit Spies. *Operasie Savannah: Angola 1975–1976*. Pretoria: SA Weermag, Direktoraat Openbare Betrekkinge, 1989; W Steenkamp. *Suid-Afrika se Grensoorlog 1966–1989*. Gibraltar: Ashanti, 1989.
- ⁴⁵⁸ See for example J Geldenhuys. *Ons was daar: Weners van die oorlog om Suider-Afrika*. Pretoria: Kraal, 2011.
- ⁴⁵⁹ See for example A Soderlund & D Steyn. *Ystervuis uit die see: Uiters geheime seewaartse Recce-operasies (1978–1988)*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2018; K Stadler. *Recce: Small team missions behind enemy lines*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2015; J Greeff. *A greater share of honour: The memoirs of a Recce officer*. Ellisras: Ntomeni, 2008.
- ⁴⁶⁰ Wessels *op. cit.*, p. 31.
- ⁴⁶¹ See for example P Bagshawe. *Warriors of the sky: Springbok air heroes in combat*. Johannesburg: Ashanti, 1990; D Lord. *Vlamgat: The story of the Mirage F1 in the South African Airforce*. Weltevreden Park: Covos-Day, 2000; D Wingrin. *Tumult in the clouds: Stories from the South African Air Force 1920–2010*. Pinetown: 30° South, 2012.
- ⁴⁶² See M Wilkens. *Chopper pilot: The adventures and experiences of Monster Wilkins*. Nelspruit: Free World, 2000; D Lord. *From fledgling to eagle: The South African Air Force during the Border War*. Johannesburg: 30° South, 2008; P Baxter. *SAAF's Border War: The South African Air Force in combat 1966–89*. Warwick: Helion, 2013; AIJ Venter. *The Chopper Boys: Helicopter warfare in Africa*. London: Greenhill Books, 1994.
- ⁴⁶³ Joubert *op. cit.*, p. 99.
- ⁴⁶⁴ Hynes *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- ⁴⁶⁵ See for example D Lamprecht. *Die brug: Na die hel en terug in Angola*. Johannesburg: Delta Books, 2020; P Zunckel. *SADF July 77 intake: A conscript's story*. Wandersbeck: Reach Publishers' Services, 2019.

⁴⁶⁶ Joubert *op. cit.*, p. 124.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

