

## *Book Review*

### **Soldaat en mens**

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In most paradigm militaries of the world, there seems to be an expectation for a general to write and publish his or her biography as soon as possible after retirement from active duty – a type of ‘first duty’ in retirement. These biographies are often critical for militaries, much like in the medical, law and clerical professions, to grow their body of knowledge and empower the next generation of soldiers. For armed forces in general, military history of this nature has always played an important role in the geographical and cultural contextualisation and shaping of their doctrine. Without a sound and comprehensive military historical foundation for the development of their doctrine, militaries remain dependent on the imported knowledge base of paradigm militaries.

One of the critical doctrinal challenges facing many African armed forces is the frequent absence of a unique and Africanised body of military knowledge. African armed forces are therefore often dependent on the military knowledge of those outside Africa, in particular the British and French militaries, for the development of their doctrine and the training of their personnel. Frequently, this translates into a tactical and strategic disconnect between African militaries and the uniqueness of the security and military challenges on the continent. This reality is quite evident in the regular use of the training manuals of paradigm militaries at staff, war and defence colleges in Africa and the training that is provided to African militaries from outside the continent. The numerous publications by soldiers of the pre-94 era in South Africa are in many ways still testimony of the professionalism and the unique African nature of the military at the time.

The publication of the autobiography of General Georg Meiring, who served as the last Chief of the South African Defence Force before 1994 and, on request of President Mandela, as the first Chief of the South African National Defence Force after 1994, is in many ways exceptional. From an historical perspective, the period 1989 to 1998 was perhaps the most challenging time in the history of South Africa. The defence force, on the one hand, had to maintain the peace and security in a country that was often on the brink of a civil war – some would even say that it was engaged in a low-intensity civil war. On the other hand, the defence force had to prepare, position, and transform itself for the future. In combination, these two challenges posed almost superhuman

demands to those in leadership positions. The integrity and cool-headed professionalism of Meiring as the Chief of the Defence Force at the time made an important contribution in stabilising the transitional process in South Africa.

Meiring's career was in many ways inimitable. Equipped with an MSc degree from the University of the Free State, he gave up an academic career to join the South African Army. By entering the military as a mature commando or reserve force officer with a sound academic foundation, definitely did not make for the archetypal, ordinary, and middle-of-the-road type officer. His academic background is recognisable in the nuanced and self-reflective style of writing in his autobiography; and in the balanced, yet often critical, reflection on his past, his relationships with his colleagues, and his frank and honest views of the soldiers and politicians who have crossed his path. His views of the individualities of people such as Dr Jonas Savimbi and Generals Malan, Viljoen and Geldenhuys are particularly informative.

His academic background set Meiring up for a career in the corps of signals. To rise as a signal officer and eventually become the Chief of the Army is an achievement in itself. In the South African Army, as in armies all over the world, operational command posts are mostly reserved for officers from the combat corps – the infantry, armour, and artillery. The various periods in which he held certain command posts were also of critical importance. In this regard, his period of command at Witwatersrand (1978–1981), South West Africa (1983–1987) and Far North (1987–1989) Commands must be singled out. It almost seems as if the military has deliberately moved him to the critical hotspots. His time as Chief of the South African Army (1990–1993) was also probably the most difficult and turbulent period in the history of the country. Finally, he had to balance the many and often contradictory challenges of the post-94 defence force as Chief of the SADF, later called the SANDF.

From a bigger and holistic perspective, two features in the book are of great value. The first is the importance of quality people and good leadership in armed forces. In general, armed forces invest much time, resources, and energy in leadership development. It is therefore particularly interesting when senior and retired officers reflect critically on their own leadership style, what they considered to be critical and what had 'worked' for them. Meiring's description of how he often had to redefine and reinvent himself every time he was appointed to a different position of command in a new or different setting is an important principle with wide application both inside and outside the military context. His exposition of his commanding principles for military leaders also makes for interesting reading: take command and use your common sense when you are appointed to a position of command; be accessible for your subordinates; know your organisation and people; do not make people wait unnecessarily; make timely decisions; and know your priorities. Throughout, he also emphasises using the principle of the eyes of the farmer make the cattle fat. In other words, military leaders must see and be seen at all times.

Much has been written about the need for decentralised command as a means for armies to achieve strategic effect. In this regard, Meiring emphasises two methods

that were of great value to him as commander. The first is the use of team building sessions where critical subordinates are placed in an island situation to work together as a unit and ensure that they share his vision as commander. The second method is an arrangement he had with his subordinates that everyone could say 'yes' to an initiative and the execution of a task, but that only he as commander had the prerogative to say 'no'. Meiring explains this by pointing out that the 'yes' must be fully accountable for and that the person who eventually gets the 'no' needs to know that it was a well-considered 'no'.

The second major contribution is the historical light that the book sheds on perhaps the two most difficult challenges he faced as Chief of the Defence Forces before 1994. The first is the role that Gen. Constand Viljoen, a person for whom he had great admiration and respect, played in the Bophuthatswana crisis in 1994 when white right-wing political elements stepped up to lend support to President Lucas Mangope. Meiring describes his relief after Gen. Viljoen eventually called him with the news that he would participate in the 1994 election. One can imagine the tension to which Meiring would have been exposed if he had to take military action against a rebel group led by Viljoen.

Another difficult situation discussed by Meiring in great detail and with great caution is the so-called Steyn report, which led to the dismissal of several military officers by President FW de Klerk. From the discussion, it is clear that several senior leaders and decision-makers had erred and blundered in many ways; and that decisions were impulsive and ill-considered. This, of course, did great damage to the legitimacy of the military. Pierre Steyn's appointment as Secretary of Defence after the 1994 election obviously laid the groundwork for tensions between the Chief of Defence and the Secretary of Defence, a situation that is still ongoing.

Even though Meiring makes it clear in the preface of the book that he does not like to write, the book is finely worded, well written, and excellently structured. He explicitly states in the preface that it is not his intention to "write down a piece of dead history" (p. 1). He also points out that it is not his intention to describe situations that could lead to "is-is not" arguments. Meiring explains that it is his intention to share his experiences and not necessarily to describe the events in which he was involved historically correctly. The book is therefore, according to him, not a history book, but "my story in my language". However, his story is so intertwined with the history of South and Southern Africa that his autobiography is necessarily a work of historical interest. Yet, it is a pity that a former Chief of the Defence Force publishes has to publish his book himself and that publication houses do not stand in line to publish such an important contribution to South African's military history. It is also a pity that the book is only available in Afrikaans. The book could further have benefitted from professional editing. The few spelling mistakes do detract from an otherwise excellent book. Taken as a whole, it is an important and exceptional contribution to the South African military historical mosaic from the early 1970s to the late 1990s.

## ENDNOTES

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