

Book Review

Ratels on the Lomba: The story of Charlie Squadron

Leopold Scholtz

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Ratels on the Lomba bursts onto the page like a shot from a cannon, full of dramatic scenes of warfighting, with blood flowing and where bullets are pinging off armour plates. It is, however, far more than just another book on the Border War (1966–1989). If you are looking for a feel-good book, describing how the valiant South African Defence Force (SADF) fought and won, then look elsewhere. This book tells the story of a small sub-unit, fewer than 100 men strong, from the perspective of the soldier on the ground, where the bullet meets the meat. It reads more like a horror story than like a war story – but we will get back to that.

Based on the experiences of the men of Charlie Squadron, 61 Mechanised Infantry Battalion Group during Operation Moduler during the latter part of 1987, this book strips away the veneer of the propagandist inspired all-conquering SADF. The story is told by the men who were actual participants, not by some general in his air-conditioned office in Pretoria, nor by some historian writing for an academic audience. While Scholtz is undeniably an outstanding academic, he writes in the same way the tale was related to him, warts and all, and herein lies the gem of this tale. For many years, the men of Charlie Squadron went about their civilian lives, while deep within, their traumatic experiences bubbled and brewed, waiting for the chance to manifest themselves. This chance came, initially via a closed social media group, where the wounds of the past could be re-examined, with members slowly breaching the topic of their experiences with one another. This ultimately led to them sharing their experiences with Scholtz, who combined their testimonials with primary research of official documents housed within the South African Department of Defence Documentation Centre (the Military Archives) to produce a first-class eye-witness account of what it felt like to be a teenage conscript fighting a brutal war on the edge of the world.

This book, as already stated, reads like a horror story. In it we learn of the national servicemen of Charlie Squadron, a South African Armoured Corps Squadron, deployed in the South African-designed Ratel Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV). Its variant, the Ratel 90 Anti-Tank IFV, packing a powerful 90mm main gun along with two 7.62mm

machineguns, formed the armour fist of a unique all-arms unit, 61 Mechanised Infantry Battalion Group. From the outset of this tale, we learn of the disorder and poor discipline prevalent within the squadron and how a new squadron commander, Captain PJ Cloete (one of only a handful of Permanent Force members serving within the battalion) was forced to practise some ‘tough love’ in order to get the men ready for combat.

We then follow them into one of the last unmapped and remote places still left on earth at the time, south-western Angola, where a huge Angolan–Cuban force of eight brigades supported by eighty Russian-manufactured tanks, approximately 18 000 men, was bearing down on the stronghold of the Unita Rebel Group located at Mavinga and Jamba. Unita, a South African ally, was lightly armed and could not stop this force. After an appeal for assistance, the SADF decided to deploy a small force to aid Unita in its defence of Mavinga and its all-important airstrip. How the fat cats in Pretoria expected a force numbering fewer than 3 000 with no heavy armour of their own to defeat this horde was a question often asked by the members of Charlie Squadron.

That Charlie Squadron was not only expected to defeat them, but also that they had to do so without suffering any casualties or equipment losses only reinforced the notion amongst the men that they were being sacrificed on the altar of the egos of Defence Headquarters. As the only element within 61 Mech capable of destroying opposing tanks, Charlie Squadron found themselves in the vanguard of the attack. The fact that they were now being ordered to confront an enemy – far greater in size, armed with tanks – in thinly armoured Ratels, whose designers had never envisaged such madness as their vehicles being thrown into an arena wherein the opponent was better armed and better protected, played heavily on the teenagers’ minds.

After a traumatic first battle, where an understrength combat group led by Charlie Squadron attacked the 47 Brigade, the cracks within the system began to show. While remarkably only suffering one killed during the attack, this loss combined with the harrowing experience of fighting off enemy tanks in their outgunned Ratels, resulted in the squadron losing faith and hope in their top leadership. When a second man was lost during an airstrike by a MiG 21, which enjoyed complete air superiority over the battle zone, Cloete went back to his headquarters and told them, “my men didn’t get the pass they were supposed to get and they have been through one of the most traumatic experiences you can think of. These troops are going to want to get out and run away. That’s what they’re going to do. If they get another contact, there’s no way in which this squadron is going to get involved in another battle.” The deeply shocked youngsters were approaching breaking point.

Shamefully, the SADF, who micro-managed the entire operation – with both the Chief of the SADF and the Chief of the Army personally flying in to ‘discuss’ the conduct of the operation – refused to send in more forces, especially South African tanks – despite the fact that the South African President, PW Botha, who also flew into Mavinga to confer and who pointedly asked the generals why the SADF was not deploying any of its 200 tanks that had been bought and upgraded at enormous taxpayers expense. It would cost Charlie Squadron launching a second assault against another

Angolan brigade, which was to fail miserably in achieving its objectives before Pretoria would finally authorise the deployment of a single tank squadron of only 13 tanks.

This 'soldiers' tale' is one of bravery under extreme duress, of the formation of lifelong friendships, the bonds of which can only be formed by those who have stared death in the eye together, and how South Africa was more than willing to send its armed forces into battle, under-equipped and in many circumstances poorly led. Major General Roland de Vries who was to retire as the Deputy Chief of the South African Army poignantly describes the dysfunctional top leadership of the day, "It did not matter how many plausible options we present; it always seems as if the shittiest option gets selected." This is a book that should be read by every South African, especially those who yearn for the past and who remember a time when the South Africa was supposedly more civilised and a better place to live!

ENDNOTES

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