

Book review

Eerste Daar

WS van der Waals

Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis

2021, 256 pages (excluding 24 pages of photographs)

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In the introduction to his book, Van der Waals claims that the book is largely based on a manuscript that he wrote for his children about 15 years ago, and he acknowledges that it is not an academic work.⁵⁶⁴ With this disclaimer of sorts, Van der Waals firmly places his book in the memoir segment of recent South African military historiography. While this is true – the book certainly reads like a memoir – Van der Waals manages to incorporate much more than just personal reflections and recollections in his work. Perhaps due to his academic background, his narrative is lifted above the proliferation of recent memoirs by South African Defence Force (SADF) soldiers by occasional analyses and opinions interspersed throughout the book.

Eerste daar follows a largely chronological approach, like most biographies. Chapter 1 traces with Van der Waals's early life in the Netherlands, and includes incidents from his childhood and early school years as well as the family's emigration to South Africa. Van der Waals highlights incidents in these, his formative years, that would shape his thoughts and principles later in his life. The following three chapters deal with different phases of the author's military career, and span more or less a decade each.

The second chapter of *Eerste daar* deals with Van der Waals's early military career and roughly spans the 1960s. It is different from many biographies as the focus does not necessarily fall on the author's experiences during this phase, but rather highlights the decisions that he had to make, and the influence that they would have on his later life. In doing so, the chapter provides an interesting perspective on the career paths and prospects open to soldiers in South Africa in the early 1960s. Naturally, the chapter includes the author's involvement in Operation Blouwildebess, the SADF–South African Police (SAP) airborne assault on Ongulumbashe in 1966. In a trend that continues throughout the book, Van der Waals is quite humble about his role in the operation, perhaps even too much so. The reader occasionally gets the impression that events are glossed over because Van der Waals does not wish to appear too boastful. This is reflected in the brief way in which the author's stints in Angola and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) are discussed and continues in his description of how he, as a junior officer, implemented the principle of "mission command" or decentralised command (likened to the German *Auftragstaktik* of World War Two by the author).⁵⁶⁵ The chapter concludes with Van der Waals's studies up to the MA level.

Chapter 3 roughly covers the 1970s, and includes a brief recap of the socio-political situation in Angola and Portugal, as a prelude to Angolan independence in 1975. This overview is broad enough to give an uninformed reader some background, but not so exhaustive that it detracts from the biographical nature of the book. The chapter includes Van der Waals's essentially diplomatic role in Angola prior to that country's independence, and provides an interesting perspective of a peacetime soldier (despite Operation Blouwildebees in 1966, the SADF was largely a peacetime force in the early 1970s) in a warzone (Portugal was, to all intents and purposes, at war with Angolan liberation movements at the time). Naturally, the chapter includes references to Operation Savannah, the SADF's first official operation in Angola. Van der Waals focuses on his own involvement in the operation, which was to act as liaison between UNITA (Jonas Savimbi's liberation movement) and the SADF, and provided training to UNITA soldiers. Van der Waals blends tactical and operational recollections of the operation quite well. Military strategists might find his narrative slightly frustrating, but the average reader should have no problem following it. After Operation Savannah, Van der Waals was transferred to Army Headquarters as SO1 Operations (civil affairs), turning him into something of a public relations officer. This section of the book focuses on how the author approached civil affairs as more than the 'plough and plant' norm of the time, and also reflects on lessons that he learnt in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Taiwan.

In Chapter 4, which covers the 1980s with a few years on either side, it is narrated how Van der Waals's career became increasingly diplomatic. The chapter recalls his service as military attaché in Paraguay and – temporarily – in Chile. This part of the book contains an interesting, though very brief, South American perspective on the Falklands War. After his service in South America, Van der Waals was transferred to Military Intelligence (MI) back in South Africa, where he focused mostly on internal threats to the government. In this section, he discusses many well-known incidents from the 1980s and provides an overview of the role that MI played in opposing unrest within the borders of South Africa. Although it did not fall under his purview, Van der Waals also briefly provides his take on the controversial issue of Cuito Cuanavale. In the late 1980s, Van der Waals was transferred to the office of the Chief of Staff: Operations as Director: Operations. This coincided with a decline in SADF involvement in Namibia and Angola and, in contrast with the preceding 15 odd years, operations became internally focused. As such, the author essentially continued the work that he had begun at MI, although from a different position. The chapter concludes with the author's final military appointment, as the SADF's Director of Foreign Relations. This section of the book highlights Van der Waals's role in establishing military-diplomatic relations with countries that had formerly opposed the SADF, such as Swaziland and the newly independent Namibia. Van der Waals ends his recollection of his military career on an unusual note: contrary to many senior SADF personnel at the time, he contends that he resigned from the SADF in 1992 because of discontent with the SADF and not out of fear for his future in the soon-to-be-formed South African National Defence Force (SANDF).

The final chapter of *Eerste daar* details the author's post-military career. To the purely military-orientated reader, this chapter does not contain as much of interest as previous

chapters. It describes the author's role as Executive Director of Community Safety, a civil position in his local municipality. In this position, he was involved in the security arrangements for the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 and the subsequent inauguration of President Mandela. The chapter highlights this as well as several other high-profile events in which Van der Waals took part, mostly in a planning capacity. As in previous chapters, the author assumes quite a large degree of prior knowledge by the reader; for example, he never actually explains what an executive director of community safety does or what the extent of his responsibilities was. It is doubtful that many readers will have both the military background knowledge to understand the first few chapters completely and the civil background to understand the last.

Eerste daar has much counting in its favour. Although it is unashamedly an autobiography and, as such, falls in the memoir genre of historiography, Van der Waals – possibly due to his background as an academic and author – adds more to the corpus of knowledge than many other memoirs. This is mostly achieved by providing context of events and briefly analysing many socio-political situations and commenting on these. Where Van der Waals does choose to add personal anecdotes, they are invariably entertaining. Examples of this include interaction with American diplomats in Luanda,⁵⁶⁶ challenges with translating lectures from Chinese into Taiwanese,⁵⁶⁷ the author's return to Luanda in 1992,⁵⁶⁸ and his encounter with Willem Ratte in the build-up to the 1994 elections.⁵⁶⁹ Additionally, and to his credit, Van der Waals is very transparent in his opinions of various politicians and SADF officers. Naturally, this had an influence on the way in which he writes about them, but the reader is well aware of his bias and able to evaluate Van der Waals's comments accordingly. Notably, he has little time for the former Chief of the SADF, Jannie Geldenhuys, and is often critical of his actions. By contrast, he seems to have respected two other Chiefs, Magnus Malan and Constand Viljoen. The book contains several informative maps, most notably two⁵⁷⁰ that indicate the changing geopolitical situation in Angola in the lead-up to independence.

Van der Waals's personal writing style occasionally leads to some confusion. An example of this can be found in his discussion of Operation Savannah, where someone called "Eddie" is both in Rundu and to the north of Nova Lisboa at the same time.⁵⁷¹ He obviously refers to different Eddies, but the narrative is confusing nonetheless. This is, of course, not uncommon in memoirs. Van der Waals also highlights the inherent differences and tension between different genres of military history when he refutes historian FJ du Toit Spies's record of a certain event during Operation Savannah, and claims that his own recollection is more accurate.⁵⁷² Unfortunately, *Eerste daar* is only available in Afrikaans and, at this point, the publisher has no plans for a translation. In an era where research and scholarship increasingly tends to be "open", publishing a book only in Afrikaans – and quite high-level Afrikaans, at that – leans away from being "open". Of course, as Van der Waals's first language (technically, it would be Dutch, but by his own account, his Afrikaans soon surpassed his Dutch), his account is probably more fluid and fluent than any translation, and a translation would be subject to all the normal caveats that accompany translations. Nonetheless, his contribution would reach a much wider audience if it were translated. Judging by the history of his first book,⁵⁷³ there is a possibility that a translated version might still appear.

On the whole, *Eerste daar* is an entertaining read and well worth owning. It does not fall comfortably in the military history camp, with something of a political, or at least diplomatic, undertone throughout. As such, it probably contributes and appeals to a broader field of readers and study.

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ENDNOTES

⁵⁶⁴ WS van der Waals. *Eerste daar*. Pretoria: Protea, 2021, 11.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 86.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁵⁷³ WS van der Waals. *Portugal's war in Angola 1961–1974*. Pretoria: Protea, 2011.
