

Book Reviews

'We Fear Naught but God'

Paul Els

Covos-Day, Johannesburg: 2000

Price not known

The aura of mystery and secrecy, which surrounds special forces throughout the world, ensures a ready market for books on such units. The exploits of the British Special Air Service (SAS) and the US Green Berets, romanticised in films and novels, have contributed to this in no small way.

In South Africa we have seen books appear on the Rhodesian SAS and Selous Scouts, but until recently nothing of significance has been published on the South African special forces. Then the somewhat encyclopaedic, though hardly definitive, *The Silent War* by Peter Stiff appeared in 1999. Had on its heels has come Paul Els' softcover, *We Fear Naught But God*.

Els, though not himself a special forces operator, served for several years as a signaller with one of the South African special forces units. He appears to have maintained close links with his comrades after his retirement from the Army as a senior warrant officer in 1996. This seems to have been done principally through the Special Forces League, an organisation for former members of the special forces. Els has amassed a wealth of photographic material and anecdotal information on South Africa's special forces, and this book appears to be an attempt to bring this all together.

The book purports to be "The story of the South African Special Forces". Sadly, it does not achieve this. One must accept that when a serviceman or former serviceman writes a book, it has to be 'vetted' by Defence Intelligence before it is published. This clearly placed a major restriction on Els, as much of the story would still be regarded as classified information. Nevertheless, even with the information he was permitted to use, Els attempts to be both historical and anecdotal and ends up being neither. Instead, the reader is frequently subjected to an irritating hotchpotch of often-unconnected snippets.

However, there are some of those snippets that make stirring reading. Tales of courage and stamina in extraordinary conditions could have come straight out of the pages of the finest books of high adventure. Similarly, there are some fascinating items of military trivia, such as identifying the only man to have been

awarded decorations for gallantry by both Rhodesia and South Africa, as well as one decorated for gallantry by both the Portuguese and South African governments.

Unfortunately, these positive points are offset by a style of writing that reminds one of a “Boy’s Own Annual”, with the writer unashamedly apologist and offering no analysis or criticism whatsoever of the SA Special Forces. Glaring faults, such as operators leaving a clear track for their enemies to follow to their hides are simply glossed over; even when such mistakes result in casualties and the failure of operations.

A lack of contextualisation of the macro events in South Africa and the world make it difficult to understand the point of some operations, whilst others are described in a manner which makes it impossible to make head or tail of what took place. The Caiundo parachute jump is an example of this. Adding to the confusion is the inexplicable repetition, sometimes word for word, of certain events. This occurred on the same pages in the description of an attempt to destroy an enemy aircraft.

The absence of the bigger picture, but with such a strong emphasis on the nitty-gritty of certain operations, would doubtless give the book a strong appeal to those special forces operators who may have been involved in the story. Yet this would not encourage an outsider to read it and detracts from its value for the serious reader or student of military history. Particularly discouraging is the preponderance of drinking photos in the books. Perhaps heavy drinking was a characteristic of special forces, and given the stresses and strains of their work maybe this was inevitable. However, the writer would have us believe that they drew on other sources for their strength and fortitude. These photos belie this claim.

In his book, Els appears to still be frightfully entangled in the old National Party paradigm of the “total onslaught” and shows little insight into international political issues. At times it reads like a propaganda blurb for the old regime and for Unita. Nevertheless, he bitterly and correctly points out some of the glaring inconsistencies and bureaucratic bull of the Nationalist government. For instance, its appalling failure, nay refusal, to award medals to black soldiers because “they were not South African citizens.”

Unfortunately, the book sacrifices credibility due to its often-superficial nature and the failure of the author to assess his sources. Statements are rarely corroborated or substantiated. They rely on popular, secondary publications, or apparently on “war stires” told in pubs. The stories of how certain medals were won, for example, often appears to be almost transcripts from other publications (though full acknowledgements are given).

Extravagant, historically unsubstantiated statements (such as the Vikings having been the first seaborne raiders) and preposterous claims (such as covering 70km along a river by paddling a canoe for three hours and swimming for two) all add questions to the book’s credibility.

Mistakes are perhaps excusable, but not the blatant propagation of incorrect facts. The paratrooper attack on Cassinga (which incidentally had nothing to do with special forces, so really doesn't warrant mention in this book) is most definitely not rated as the biggest parachute assault after the Second World War. There have been many far bigger such operations. The special forces parachute jump on 14 December 1975 was not the first ever trans-border parachute jump by any South African unit. By that date 1 Parachute Battalion had already carried out two such jumps, both into Angola. The story of Willy Ward's downing of a helicopter during a river crossing is filled with inaccuracies, not the least of which is the fact that it happened with 1 Parachute Battalion in the early sixties when Ward was a young ballotee, and not in about 1974 when he was a member of special forces, as Els claims.

Technically, the book leaves a lot to be desired. Some of the technical shortcomings could have been avoided by proper proofreading before printing. There are many spelling and printing errors and inconsistencies, names are often misspelled and ranks incorrect, poor use is made of military terminology (often merely substituting a direct translation from Afrikaans, e.g. calling guns "cannons", range referred to as "reach", an airborne assault called a "transportation attack", a bar called a "balkie", a medal clasp called "clips" and a unit that was mobilised referred to as "militarized"), photos of weapons are incorrectly captioned (for instance, calling a 106 RCL or 75 RCL a B-10), individuals are incorrectly identified on photos and some appointment dates of commanding officers contradict one another. The navy, to be sure, would not be happy to be told that they have a Sergeant Major of the Navy!

Much of the detail contained in the chapters (such as lists of names, OCs, RSMs, etc.) could probably have been placed in appendices at the end of the book, as they tend to distract in the text. A major shortcoming is the absence of maps for the various operations. Even a general sketch map would have served to better explain certain actions. A serious omission in the story is the activities of the notorious Civil Co-operation Bureau (CCB), which, after all, was a part of special forces. But perhaps the restrictions placed on the author by Defence Intelligence played a part in this omission. The only references to the CCB are curiously and inexplicably complimentary, considering that the organisation has been totally discredited and that most of its members appear not to have been trained and selected special forces operators at all.

The constant and indiscriminate use of the term "members" (a common practice amongst soldiers in the old SADF) by the author is frequently irritating. When the individual referred to is a member of special forces, this may be acceptable. However, when it is applied to every Tom, Dick and Harry, one is tempted to ask: "Member of what – the human race?" Why not simply use the word "individual" or "person"?

The book reads as though the South African special forces suddenly disappeared in 1993, particularly when perusing the lists of commanders and RSMs. In fact, it even speaks of "the disbandment of special forces". Special forces,

however, are alive and well in the new SANDF and there was never any break in their lineage. Perhaps the only break is in the minds and hearts of those who long for an era which has passed forever and who cannot adjust to the new dispensation which has replaced it. This is reflected in the musical CD by Lourens Fourie, which is included with the book. The music is pleasantly catchy and the lyrics are stirring. Yet one cannot but feel that, like Vera Lynn, "There'll always be an England", they belong to a different world; a different age.

This is a book which may find favour amongst a certain section of the old special forces operators and their barroom buddies. It is not lacking in enthusiasm, but it is not a serious and analytical portrayal of South Africa's special forces. Its shortcomings result in it not doing proper justice to the story of a select band of warriors, some of whom were amongst the finest soldiers that South Africa has ever produced. They have served and continue to serve their country selflessly, but most of them readily admit their shortcomings and failures. They deserve an objective and professional record of their activities for the benefit of posterity. Not an exercise in backslapping self-congratulation.

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Vlamgat: The story of the Mirage F1 in the South African Air Force

Dick Lord

Covos-Day, Weltevreden Park: 2000

Price not known

The tempo of change in Southern Africa has caused one nearly to forget the Namibian bush war of the 1980. The historical scene has also been dominated by the centenary of the Second Anglo-Boer War and the memory of 120 years ago the year before last year with the crucial battle of Isandlwana and this year the battle of Majuba.

Although it is important to comprehend the impact of the above named events in our history we must not forget the closer events that also shaped our lives. During the past decade books like Willem Steenkamp's *Border War* gave readers an insight into the war in which South Africa was involved from 1966 to 1989. In this book and a lot of popular photographic studies the role of the South African Air Force received some attention. However, these studies cannot in themselves be regarded as the definite study of the role of air power in this conflict as they either cover to large a ground, or tend to be too popular inclined.

Dick Lord gained fame with his book *Fire, Flood and Ice* on the search and rescue missions of the South African Air Force. This time he put to paper an aspect that is close to the heart and in which he was personally involved the history of the Mirage F1 in the South African Air Force. This study involves a lot of