

# South African Journal *of Military Science*

## *In Memoriam*

**Prof Ian Liebenberg, 1960-2023**

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With disbelief and a deep sadness, we heard of the sudden passing of Professor Ian Liebenberg on 11 October 2023. Ian was co-editor of *Scientia Militaria* from 2010 to 2016, and a colleague in the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University as the Director of the Centre for Military Studies. Since 2020 Ian was Professor in Politics at the University of Namibia. His distinguished academic career spanned the most important years of South Africa's transition and democratic consolidation.

Ian's contribution to the struggle for national liberation and the transition away from authoritarianism was not just academic, but embodied the spirit of dialogue, critique, and activism. Ian participated in the Dakar Meeting of 1987, where the still-banned ANC met with progressive South Africans in search for a democratic alternative in South Africa.

One of the main avenues of Ian's scholarly research concerned our transition away from authoritarian rule towards democratic civil control over the military in post-liberation South Africa. Ian's early work, such as the books he co-edited *The Long March: The Story of the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa* (1994) and *The Hidden Hand: Covert operations in South Africa* (1998) document the political crisis, the dynamics of reform and revolt, and the long haul to democracy. To this essential subject Ian brought the mind of a philosopher, the eye of a sociologist, the language of a political scientist, and the sensibilities of a historian. His education and writing were brought alive in the heart of a humanist.

That this was a deeply personal task was made clear in his first contribution to *Scientia Militaria*, titled ‘The quest for liberation in South Africa’, where he notes that: “To write an inclusive history of liberation and transition to democracy in South Africa is almost impossible ... I will draw on my own work in the field over the past fifteen years as well as other sources ... A wide variety of sources and personal experiences inform this contribution ... Also needless to say, one’s own subjectivities may arise - even if an attempt is made towards intersubjectivity.” This combination of academic discourse and self-reflection was a theme. In his 2019 contribution to *In Different Times: The War for Southern Africa 1966-1989* edited by Ian Van der Waag and Albert Grundlingh, he subtitled his chapter ‘An auto-ethnographic exploration of the (citizen) conscript in South Africa’ where he recounted an auto-biographical understanding of the times in which he lived. This was not just his own individual experience, but emblematic of the wider socio-political, and perhaps even the universal.

Ian’s breadth of thinking and understanding is reflected in the range of contributions of over 100 texts that have included journals such as *Politeia* (also as Guest Editor), *South African Journal of Philosophy* (also as book review Editor), *Journal for Contemporary History*, *South Africa Public Law*, *Journal of Public Administration*, *Society in Transition*, *Acta Academica*, *Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *Peace Review*, *Armed Forces and Society*, and *Scientia Militaria* (as Editor since 2009). The nature of his work, Ian’s multidisciplinary approach produced many partnerships, joint research and publication ventures. Internationally, these collaborations enlightened on the history of relations between Russia and South Africa from the 1890s, on the participation of Cuba in southern Africa, and on views on national security and defence from the Global South. His book, with Jorge Risquet and Vladimir Shubin, *A Far-Away War: Angola 1975-1989*, is an important scholarly contribution bringing a wider perspective on that conflict, including previously unpublished archival photos, and a comprehensive bibliography for researchers and students.

However, Ian’s contribution to research extended well beyond his own publications: Ian was always supportive of young researchers, freely giving advice, feedback and support selflessly and providing encouragement to those submitting articles for the first time. At a time of ‘publish or perish’ Ian’s advice that academic publishing was not about feeding career ambition, but about empowering critical engagement. In a recent email he shared the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that “One must take the risk of saying things that are in dispute, provided that vital problems are thereby raised”. Ian’s life-work and contribution to academia purely reflect this.

His energy, enthusiasm, wit, and stories will long remain with friends, old and new alike. Ian leaves Mariaan and their two children, and our thoughts are with them.

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**Raymond Steenkamp Fonseca**   
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