

## Where fact and memory meet: The amateur historian's contribution to military history

*Deon Fourie and Marius Whittle\**

"I have written too much history to believe in it. So if anyone wants to differ from me, I am prepared to agree with him." Henry Adams

"You write lovely essays but you know nothing about history."  
History teacher at Lydenburg High School, 1957<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In this paper, tongue in cheek and guilty of the amateur's errors the authors present a facet of a subject that has attracted their interest for decades. Complete amateurs in the field of History they have worked in the pragmatic field of Strategic Studies which seeks to control future events but looks into military history for guidance. One author had the presumption to teach an Honours course called The Evolution of Warfare.

Their intention is to illuminate and evaluate the extraordinary role played by amateur military historians in writing South African military history and of frequently providing sources for professional historians on various wars through the publication of personal accounts, written for the most part by unsophisticated people with little or no academic ability or education.

Military history has an enormous, enthusiastic following, the envy of historians in other fields were they aware of it. An editor of Purnell's *History of the Second World War* told one author that each week Purnell sold 260 000 copies of that part-work.<sup>2</sup> Small wonder that when they followed it with *The History of the First World War*, they were berated by irate readers asking "What next - the Boer War, and then the Crimean War ...?" as though the Star Chamber had decreed that Englishmen were bound to subscribe.

To amateur readers it certainly was a drug that possessed them. Purnell used a cocktail of journalists, enthusiasts, military commanders and veterans of particular military events and numerous professional historians –

---

\* Deon Fourie is a retired Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Having served a lifetime in the Citizen Force (Reserve Force) he retired in 2007 as a Brigadier General. Captain Marius Whittle holds an MA in International Politics (Strategic Studies) and is a Reserve Force member of the SA Army's Pool of Specialists.

1. Cited in M. Spaarwater, *A Spook's Progress* (Zebra Press, Cape Town, 2012), p 18.  
2. Jenny Shaw, 1978, former editor for the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies.

such as the young John Keegan – in 95 illustrated weekly parts that cost 50 South African cents each in 1966.

The range of amateur military history is wide. In Charing Cross Road or St Martin's Lane and in the connecting alleys, bookshops stock a variety of military publications by current and long-dead amateur military historians. They include books with any military historical twist – Greek, WW2, German, Cromwellian, Napoleonic, Rhodesian and Namibian weapons, tactics, antique military dress, organisation, special units, the Légion Étrangère Française, Janissaries, and medals, are all there – if you have the pounds sterling.

In Paris the *bouquinistes* on the banks of the Seine also sell the same sort of reading.<sup>3</sup> In late career employment the French armed forces use numerous colonels to write French military history. The Service Historique de l'Armée in Paris publishes fifteen journals for professional soldiers – mostly amateur readers.<sup>4</sup> In Germany, despite the alleged Allied order for the destruction of German war culture, bookstores deal in military history – by the same brand of amateurs.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, amateur military historians' answer to a demand and for many, they serve a purpose that is personal to their readers.

### **What we think “military history” means**

Fifty years ago military history was about sea, land and air campaigns, battles and warfare. Today, writers include theoretical questions of strategy, tactics and logistics and the related doctrines, with leadership, its significance and the characteristics of important commanders. From mid-twentieth century they included studies of the sociological and cultural features of past wars, warfare and military life. They became concerned with the development of the features that had previously been taken for granted. Military history now includes the evolution of military organisation, technology, military industry, operations research (a branch of science that developed in the Second World War), changes in the causes of war and the passage of warfare from elementary fighting through to space age and information technology warfare. The approach called the “Revolution in Military Affairs” tries to explain the influence of technology as the cause of fundamental changes in warfare – although some authors think of it as the technological changes themselves or organisational responses.

- 
3. *Bouquinistes* are sellers of used books from little stalls along the banks of the Seine.
  4. Best known is the *Revue Historique des Armées* published by Service Historique de l'Armée in Paris.
  5. Reference to destruction originates from apparent “Holocaust denialists”. The memorials one sees in Germany show this to be mere allegation. In parliament in 1946 Churchill and other senior politicians quashed a proposal to destroy German memorials. See *House of Commons Debates*, 29 May 1946, 423, columns 1153–4; <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1946/may/29/war-memorials> Accessed July 2012.

Military history is not a simple tale to be told. Authors of military history face cruel challenges. Participant observation can be of significant help. Interpreting what commanders or their subordinate officers have done, demands wide-ranging knowledge and even experience. Authors require knowledge of military organisations – formations, units and supreme headquarters, leadership and devising command decisions, their flow and execution, interpreting field intelligence, and understanding the enemy's thought – all under the pressure of bombardment, high speed movement and fire, and fear and threat of imminent death and injury. They must comprehend the difficulties of co-ordination, administration, supply, communications, field engineering, and the psychology of the human being under the same circumstances. Seldom will officers themselves have all these capacities, certainly not subordinate officers and non-commissioned officers – let alone the junior other ranks.

Military courts of enquiry for discovering causes of defeat might be quite fair. However, if held at the height of a war – as sometimes happens – when important witnesses may be prisoners of war or dead, they may reach conclusions different from those reached much later by trained historians with adequate evidence and approaches. This is not obvious to the amateur or even the professional historian, but it is very important to the evaluation of commanders.

Amateurs are often quite unaware of primary sources and how to find them. A colleague from a quite different discipline, who began researching a biography of a South African military figure, suffered excruciating frustrations when his requests at archives for files concerning his subject produced almost no useful information. Amateurs, certainly when they begin research, seldom know how official files are archived and research can be incomplete or entirely blocked.

### **What are the professionals?**

Before we gallop ahead, swords drawn, with dubious footnotes and questionable sources, we must explain what we mean by "amateurs". Referring to a book review a friend recently said to us: "Academics seem never to know what they want". However, professional historians know what to look for and what to ask of a writer.

To us, professional historians are people trained to understand the philosophy of history, research methodology, the relative value of sources, the possibility or impossibility of objective truth, the purpose and the meaning of historical research and writing, the implications of politics, economics, imperialism, colonisation, slavery and the impact of societies on one another, the origins and effects of war, the political consequences of battles and the meaning of defeat. We think of them as knowing about recording, evaluating and interpreting documents and oral history and, aware of the defects of memory, they understand why sources must be

cited. Of course, not all professionals obey the rules and some prefer to be political pamphleteers to being dispassionate scientists.

In an esoteric field such as military history, professional historians are also lost in a maze of military terms, military slang and jargon. However competent as a whole J.H. Breytenbach's *Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899–1902* may be, chapter 1 reveals that he did not know the distinction between an army corps and the Army Service Corps – no small void in his technical knowledge for a work of this magnitude. And can one blame him when the British Army used corps in three different senses?<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps to recognise the amateur's significance for military history, some British universities promoted its study in their cloisters by appointing what we would think were technically "amateurs" to be their professors of Military or War History.

In 1909, Oxford appointed Spenser Wilkinson as the first Chichele Professor of Military History. Though a barrister he preferred to be a journalist, gradually drifting into writing on military subjects for the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Morning Post* in London. An industrious writer, among his better known works were *The Brain of an Army* (1890), a history of the German general staff; *Hannibal's March through the Alps* (1911); and *The French Army before Napoleon* (1915). He was succeeded by two more "amateurs" – in 1925 by Maj. Gen. Sir Ernest Swinton, a retired officer and military writer and in 1946 by Captain Cyril Falls, a military journalist and First World War veteran. Only when Falls retired in 1953 was an appointment made of a professional historian – Norman Gibbs. He reigned until 1977 and his successors were what we regard as professionals – not least Sir Michael Howard.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Howard's work, laurels flourish in the field of military history.

Perhaps it is unfair to even mention the amateurs occupying university chairs when one would not think of excluding the amateurs Thucydides, Josephus and Tacitus whose works on military history remain classics almost 2 000 years after they lived.<sup>8</sup>

- 
6. J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899–1902* (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1969), 1, Chapter 1, "Die Britse Leër, Afd. 15", and "Die Britse Leërdienkorps", p 41. Corps meant any military body, a branch of the army, such as the logistic branch called the Army Service Corps or a formation called an Army Corps of two to three Divisions, totalling some 40 000 men.
  7. Sir Michael Howard (1941–), Chichele Professor of the History of War, then Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford; and Robert Lovett, Professor of Military and Naval History at Yale. Commissioned into the Coldstream Guards in WW2, he fought in the Italian Campaign with a battalion supported by the Pretoria Regiment's tanks. Wounded twice, he earned the Military Cross. At King's College, London in 1945 he established the Department of War Studies.
  8. Thucydides (460–395 BC). His *History of the Peloponnesian War* about the war between Sparta and Athens in 411 BC earned him the title "the father of 'scientific history'" for his strict standards in collecting and analysing evidence. Titus Flavius

## What then are amateur military historians?

Generally amateur military historians tend to write romantically about campaigns and battles on land, at sea, and in the air and the manner in which they were conducted, although some write about organisations and personal experiences.

Amateur military historians have almost always outnumbered academic writers. Most were officers but the Anglo-Boer War and especially the First World War drew numerous other ranks into authorship. In the past, few South Africans wrote military history. Almost no South African regular officers produced memoirs or accounts of war. Amateur writing has predominated. Formerly journalists were the major South African contributors, writing regimental histories on contract. The present generation of amateur writers, engaged as many were in active military service for some 20 years, has published an unusual quantity of books, several by other ranks and, surprisingly, by former career servicemen.

For the most part, these amateur military historians know nothing or very little of scientific approaches to research and writing history. Usually they want to tell a tale – indulging themselves in writing books and articles and giving lectures – about past wars and warfare; about the regiments and great and lesser commanders, including sometimes themselves and their own military experiences. Most are untrained in the subtleties of research, evaluating evidence and writing history.

Why do they write? In her book *Negotiating with the Dead*, Margaret Atwood says that they write:

... to serve "history", to record the world as it is, to set down the past before it is all forgotten, to excavate the past *because* it has been forgotten, to satisfy my desire for revenge, and to show the bastards.<sup>9</sup>

We think this is a very telling characterisation of the amateurs' reasons for dallying with writing military history.

Asking for whom the amateur historians write may tell us much about amateur military historians:

"We talked of War", Dr Johnson said ... were Socrates and Charles the Twelfth of Sweden both present in any company, and Socrates to say, "Follow me, and hear a lecture on philosophy"; and Charles, laying his hand on his sword, to say, "Follow me, and dethrone the Czar"; a man would be ashamed to follow Socrates. Sir, the impression is universal; yet it is strange.

---

Josephus (37–100AD) (Yosef ben Matiyahu) was a Galilean commander who became a Roman citizen, wrote *The Jewish War* on the revolt against the Roman occupiers of Israel, 66–73 AD. Tacitus (56–117 AD) a Roman senator who wrote *The Histories* and *The Annals*, which included military history, during the years 14–68AD.

9. M. Atwood *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002), pp xix-xxii.

... the profession of soldiers and sailors has the dignity of danger. Mankind [gives] reverence to those who have got over fear, which is so general a weakness.<sup>10</sup>

Probably the main reason for the wide military history reading public is the romance of war, nurtured by reading – fiction and non-fiction; by the cinema; ceremonial parades; bands thumping out rousing marches; old soldiers' tales stimulated by a few noggins; and nowadays of course, by the History Channel on DSTV. All these manifestations develop images of romance – danger, gallantry, heroism and action, the thrill of confronting overwhelming odds – and gallantry decorations and campaign medals.

Frequently, however, the amateur writers and their readers have experienced military life and become emotionally bound to it in a way unlikely for writers and readers of political, social or economic history. The emotional bonds encourage soldiers and former soldiers to participate vicariously through reading and writing about war. One meets a surprising number of them in bookstores, museums and lectures – and in bars. Winston Churchill is supposed to have said: "Nothing is more exhilarating in life than to be shot at to no effect".

The South African Military History Society, established in 1967, provides the largest concentration of amateur writers and readers in the country. One interesting feature of the society's meetings has always been the mixture of elderly and very young veterans. One wonders whether the interest is not also a healing process for the post-traumatic stress syndrome.<sup>11</sup>

An important motive is didactic. For the true professional – Regular or Reserve – reading about warfare is a way of gaining experience that infrequently comes their way. Most of the soldier's life is spent rehearsing for war. War is seldom met in its reality. The soldier must gain experience by reading about campaigns and the mistakes and successes of others. This is not always understood even by military professionals.

A Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd, once wrote that he "had never had time to study the details of military history". He always found time to hunt, retorted the military commentator and historian, Basil Liddell Hart. He added that it was as though the president of the Royal College of Surgeons never had time to study anatomy. Professional soldiers, even at their best, are still amateurs of war.<sup>12</sup>

---

10. J. Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1917), p 80.

11. One author's parents, children in the Anglo-Boer War, often spoke about it and the First World War. As a boy during the Second World War he recalls that films, radio, newspapers and conversation were always about the war. How could one not be swept up? Men he knew joined the Ossewa Brandwag as teenagers to participate in something military until they were old enough to enlist to fight "up North".

12. Quoted in B.H. Liddell Hart, *Thoughts on War* (Faber, London, 1944), p 118.

The stamp of the majority of amateur writers on military affairs and war is that they are unschooled as critical analysts of society. They imagine that there is only one true history; that what is history for one is history for all – facts are facts, there can be no doubts, checking evidence of battle is unknown to them, there are no alternative views. Writing as an amateur seldom teaches that credulity is wrong; that memories fade; that the battlefield is confused and disorderly; that things were not what they seem to be in memory later; that history must not be tailored for the sake of comradeship. Unlike the Duke of Wellington, they imagine that if you were engaged anywhere in a battle you are capable of describing it.<sup>13</sup> This enables some to write rapidly and to publish quickly.

### Who are our amateurs?

Writing military history in South Africa was always neglected by comparison with countries like Australia or Canada. Moreover, comparatively few memoirs or accounts of war are to be found.

Some amateur military historians wrote about South African subjects during the nineteenth century. The Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 spurred the enthusiasm of British officers attracted by its peculiar features – the greatest defeat of British arms in recent memory and the disaster to the Bonaparte hopes. It remained a popular subject into the twenty-first century and publications by professionals and amateurs continue to appear. In contrast, one is hard put to find military accounts of the Transvaal War of 1880–1881 other than those by Colonel Bellairs, C.N.J. du Plessis, Norris Newman and Charles Williams.<sup>14</sup> Only at the time of the centenary was there a flickering of interest and the professional. Arthur Davey's "The Siege of Pretoria, 1880–1881", though published in 1956, has not earned the attention it deserved. Almost surprisingly, in 2002 Bridget Theron-Bushell and in 2005 John Laband, produced works on this war – but they too are professionals.<sup>15</sup>

Soon after and even during the Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902, amateur writing flourished. As the war commenced, the Executive Council of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, urged by Cmdt Gen. P.J. Joubert,

- 
13. "The history of a battle is not unlike the history of a ball. ... no individual can recollect the order, or the exact moment at which [events] occurred, which makes all the difference as to their value or importance". The Duke of Wellington - John Croker, 8 August 1815 at <http://www.qotd.org/search/search.html> Accessed 15 January 2013.
  14. Lady Bellairs (ed.), *The Transvaal War, 1880–81* (Blackwood, London, 1885); T.F. Carter, *A Narrative of the Boer War: Its Causes and Results* (Remington, London, 1882); C.N.J. du Plessis, *Uit de Geschiedenis van de Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek en van de Afrikaanders* (De Bussy, s.l., 1889); J. Kotze, *Biographical Memoirs and Reminiscences* (Maskew Miller, Cape Town, 1934); N. Newman *With the Boers in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, 1880–81* (William H. Allen, London, 1881); A. Davey, "The Siege of Pretoria, 1880–1881", *Archives Year Book for South African History*, 19, 1, (Government Printer, Parow, 1956).
  15. B.M. Theron-Bushell, *Puppet on an Imperial String: Own Lanyon in South Africa, 1875–1881*, DLitt et Phil thesis Unisa, 2002; and J. Laband, *The Transvaal Rebellion: The First Boer War 1880–1881* (Pearson Longman, Harlow, 2005).

commissioned as the official historian Nicolaas Hofmeyr, a clergyman, school inspector and occasional novelist, who had written about the Jameson Raid. Going to the Natal theatre he began a work that was published unofficially in 1903 as *Zes Maanden bij de Commando's*.<sup>16</sup>

Well-known examples of amateur accounts of the Anglo-Boer War by South Africans are the war memoirs of Generals C.R. de Wet, J.C. Smuts and Ben Viljoen; and Commandants Lodi Krause and Ben Bouver; as well as those by Deneys Reitz, Roland Schikkerling, J.P. Bosman and Mostyn Cleaver, a colleague of Smuts, who was the state attorney. Some were diaries or accounts written soon after the war but several were published only much later in the century.<sup>17</sup> De Wet's work appeared first in Dutch and then in German, French, Russian and English; only much later did the Afrikaans version appear. Krause, Smuts and Cleaver were lawyers. The others had no more than ordinary nineteenth-century South African schooling. Some achieved in command appointments and some remained in other ranks throughout the war. Probably the majority of the recollections only appeared 30 to 40 years after the war. *Veg en Vlug*, a collection of reminiscences compiled by J.C. Steyn, only appeared in 1999.<sup>18</sup>

Among the foreign amateur publications was Sophia Izedinova's description of the experiences of the Russian-Dutch hospital team who served with the ZAR commandos. A volunteer nurse, her book was only published in South Africa in 1977 – and a street in Pretoria was named Sophia Izedinova Drive. Notable was young Winston Churchill, a former cavalry officer with political ambitions, who published newspaper reports under the title *From London to Ladysmith via Pretoria*. In 1900 *The Times* commissioned journalist Leo Amery to write the history of the war and Sherlock Holmes's originator, Arthur Conan Doyle, an ophthalmologist, wrote *The Great Boer War* which appeared in 16 editions while the war was on.<sup>19</sup> Typical of books that appeared later were *Private Tucker's Boer War*

- 
16. N. Hofmeyr, *Zes Maanden bij de Commando's* (W.P. van Stockum, Gravenhage, 1903); *De Afrikaner-boer en de Jameson-inval* (Jacques Dusseau, Cape Town, 1896). A popular novel he wrote was "*Fanie: 'n Storie van Vriendskap en Liefde en Avonture* (Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, 1930 [1923]).
  17. C.R. de Wet, *De Strijd Tusschen Boer en Brit* (Höveker & Wormser, Amsterdam, 1903); B. Viljoen, *Mijne herinneringen uit den Anglo-Boeren Oorlog* (Verslags, Amsterdam, 1902); J.P. Bosman, *Slaan en Vlug* (privately published by L.W. Bienedell, Pretoria 1909); B. Bouver, *Memoirs of General Ben Bouver* (HSRC, Pretoria, 1980). D. Reitz wrote his *Commando: A Boer Journal* (Faber, London, 1929), when exiled in Madagascar soon after the war. See also R. Schikkerling, *Commando Courageous: A Boer's Diary* (Kearland, Johannesburg, 1964); G. Natrass and S.B. Spies (eds), *Jan Smuts: Memoirs of the Boer War* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1994); J. Taitz (ed.), *The War Memoirs of Commandant Ludwig Krause, 1899–1900* (Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 1996); M. Cleaver, *A Young South African: A Memoir of Ferrar Reginald Mostyn Cleaver Advocate and Veldcornet* (W.E. Hortor, Johannesburg, 1913).
  18. J.C. Steyn, *Veg en Vlug: Manne en Vroue Vertel hul Ware Verhale uit die Anglo-Boereoorlog* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1999).
  19. S. Izedinova, *A Few Months with the Boers: The War Reminiscences of a Russian Nursing Sister* (Perskor, Johannesburg, 1977 [1903]); W.S. Churchill, *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria* (Longmans, London, 1900). Leo Amery read classical

*Diary*, the diary of a British Army soldier recording daily life during the Boer War. Colonel Maurice Grant, as a professional soldier, wrote articles for *Blackwood's Magazine* under the pseudonym "Linesman". He published them in several books on the war – such as the *History of the War in South Africa, 1899–1902* and the well-known and recently re-published *Words by an Eyewitness: The Struggle in Natal*.<sup>20</sup>

Several journalists and other observers wrote about the Anglo-Boer War. Frans Engelenburg, a Dutch barrister and journalist in the ZAR and Gustav Preller, a veteran of the war and former Mines Department official, published in 1904 *Onze Krijgs-Officiëren* – a collection of brief biographical notes on officers of the Transvaal forces.<sup>21</sup> Two decades later, Engelenburg also published a biography of General Louis Botha. Military observers with the British and the Boers from the USA, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Japan and Norway also wrote reports, some of which were unearthed by Prof. Cornelis de Jongh of Unisa and published in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>22</sup> In 1999, Prof. Pieter Labuschagne, a political scientist at Unisa, wrote a monograph entitled *Ghost Riders of the Anglo Boer War* about the ever-present but barely mentioned 10 000 *agterryers* who accompanied the Boer soldiers on commando during the war, sharing their hardships but never their glory.

---

moderations and *literae humaniores* at Oxford. In the war he reported for *The Times*. It is claimed that articles by him contributed to Buller's discharge from the Army. Towards the end of the war Amery began writing *The Times History of the South African War* in seven volumes. See also A. Conan Doyle, *The Great Boer War* (Nelson, London, 1903 [1900]).

20. P. Todd and D. Fordham (eds), *Private Tucker's Boer War Diary: The Transvaal War of 1899, 1900, 1901 and 1902 with the Natal Field Forces* (Elm Tree Books, London, 1980). Amateur historian Col Maurice Harold Grant (1872–1962), who served in the Anglo-Boer War, and both World Wars, was better known as the writer of numerous works on old English landscape painters and sculptors, as well as articles in magazines such as *Blackwood's*, the *Spectator* and *Country Life*. His books on the Anglo-Boer War were *Words by an Eyewitness* (Blackwood, London, 1902); *History of the War in South Africa: 1899–1902* (Hurst & Blackett, London, 1906) and *Mechanism of War* (Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1902). He played a major role in the writing of Sir Frederick Maurice's semi-official *History of the War in South Africa, 1899–1902* (Hurst and Blacket, London, 1906).
21. G.S. Preller (1875–1943) was a journalist, cultural leader and an early Afrikaans literary critic. With three years schooling, he worked as a shop assistant, a legal clerk and as an official. He was an author of non-fiction and largely self-taught. He served in the Anglo-Boer War and was a prisoner of war in India. After the war he became a journalist and editor of *Land en Volk*, and later of *De Volkstem* and *Die Vaderland*. Preller's works with a military interest include books on Piet Retief, Andries Pretorius, Louis Botha, Jack Hindon and Gideon Scheepers. He is regarded as having shaped many myths of Afrikaner nationalism. His books were popular, but he relied heavily on oral sources. He was considered a significant historian although an amateur. See I. Hofmeyr, "Popularizing History: The Case of Gustav Preller", *Journal of African History*, 29, 1988, pp 521–535.
22. F.W. Engelenburg, *Onze Krijgs-Officiëren: Album van Portretten met Levens-Schetsen der Transvaalse Generaals en Kommandanten* (Volksstem, Pretoria, 1904); *Generaal Louis Botha* (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1928); C. de Jong, "Kommandant Marie Georges Demange, Franse Militêre Attaché in Suid-Afrika, Februarie–Junie 1900", *SA Military History Journal*, 9,1, June 1992.

Past wars produced other ranks who kept journals or wrote about their experiences. The First World War in which major participants raised mass armies resulted in a proliferation of writing by survivors who were well-educated and talented writers. In the British and European armed forces there were large numbers of amateur historians during and after the war. Apart from being among the war's most distinguished poets, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon wrote about their experiences in the First World War. Sassoon was recommended for a Victoria Cross although in his disillusionment with the conduct of the war he had flung the ribbon of his first Military Cross into the Mersey River. Graves never lost his affection for and relationship with his regiment, the Royal Welch Fusiliers, of whom he wrote in his poem, *The Last Post*:

Lying so stiff and still under the sky  
Jolly young Fusiliers too good to die.

Both men's works on the First World War are still to be found in libraries and as reprints.<sup>23</sup>

Several other books appeared from the pens of officers and men such as the artist Frank Richards (F.P. Woodruff), *Old Soldiers Never Die* (1933); an Army Medical Officer in the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers, Capt J.C. Dunn, DSO, DCM, *The War the Infantry Knew* (1938); L. Wyn Griffith, *Up to Mametz* (1931); and *The First Hundred Thousand* by Ian Hay – both contemporary personal accounts.<sup>24</sup> The book *Not so Quiet ... Stepdaughters of War*, was an autobiographical novel by Helen Zenna Smith (the pen name of Evadne Price) told through the eyes of a woman ambulance driver serving close to the trenches, was an early feminine impression of the real war.<sup>25</sup>

The four official South African histories of the First World War were written by amateur historians. One of them by John Buchan, educated in Classics at Oxford and admitted to the bar while gaining a reputation as a fiction writer. In 1914 he wrote for the War Propaganda Bureau which published exaggerated reports of German atrocities in Belgium. Then, a lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps, he wrote speeches and communiqués for Gen. Sir Douglas Haig, becoming director of Information in 1917. After writing several works such as *The Battle of the Somme, First Phase* (1916) and Thomas Nelson's 24-volume *History of the War* (1914 to 1919), Buchan was appointed by the South African high commissioner in London to write *The History of the South African Forces in France*, published after the war.<sup>26</sup>

---

23. R. Graves, *Goodbye to All that* (Cassell, London, 1957 [1929]); S. Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (Faber, London, 1930).

24. I. Hay, *The First Hundred Thousand* (Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1915).

25. H. Zenna Smith, *Not so Quiet ... Stepdaughters of War* (Albert E. Marriott, London, 1930).

26. J. Buchan *The South African Forces in France* (Nelson, London, 1920); and J. Buchan, *Official History: Union of South Africa and the Great War 1914–18* (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1924); N. Clothier, *Black Valour: The SA Native Labour Contingent 1916–1918* (Natal University Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1987);

Devoted almost entirely to the 1st SA Infantry Brigade the book has a brief appendix on the SA Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport Companies yet nothing of the Native Labour Corps (SANLC) or the loss of 823 members of the 5th Battalion, SANLC, aboard the SS *Mendi* in 1917. The Cape Corps Battalions who fought successfully in German East Africa and Palestine are not mentioned.

The second official history of the war, appearing in 1923, was compiled by Major J.G.W. Leipoldt, a land surveyor who served as an intelligence officer during the war. Relying heavily on Buchan, the work described the 1914 Rebellion and German South West Africa (GWSA), German East Africa (GEA), the Infantry Brigade in Egypt and France. There are also appendices on the SA Heavy Artillery, Signals, Medical Services, Railways and Trades Companies and the Horse Transport Companies, and the preparation and maintenance of the forces. Leipoldt recognised the presence in GSWA, Europe and GEA of 58 823 black soldiers, the 25 090 who served in the SANLC as well as the Cape Corps and their 3 901 losses.<sup>27</sup> Recollections by members of the Cape Corps began appearing in the 1920s, including A.J.B. Desmore's *With the 2nd Cape Corps thro' Central Africa* (1920) and I.D. Difford's *The Story of the 1st Cape Corps* (c.1921). Fuller descriptions were written only in later years by two other amateur historians, Norman Clothier a businessman and president of the SA Legion, whose book *Black Valour*, is about the SS *Mendi*; and *The Unknown Force*, about the roles of black, Indian and coloured soldiers in the two World Wars, by Lt Gen. Ian Gleeson, former Chief of Staff (CGS) of the Defence Force.<sup>28</sup>

The remaining official histories appeared just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Both were by Brigadier-General Jack Collyer, the retired CGS of the Union Defence Forces. His books were *The Campaign in German South West Africa, 1914–1915* and *The South Africans with General Smuts in East Africa*, 1939. Just as the war began he published a series of articles on mounted rifles, for example "Mounted Rifles Tactics".<sup>29</sup> Before enlisting as a private in the Cape Mounted Rifles in 1889, he was educated in England at St Paul's School (also the future Field Marshal

---

and I. Gleeson, *The Unknown Force: Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers in the Two World Wars* (Ashanti, Rivonia, 1994).

27. J.G.W. Leipoldt's work was published by the General Staff, DHQ, Pretoria *The Union of South Africa and the Great War 1914-1918*, Official History Government Printing & Stationery Office, Pretoria, 1924).
28. N. Clothier, *Black Valour: The SA Native Labour Contingent 1916–1918* (Natal University Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1987); and I. Gleeson, *The Unknown Force: Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers in the Two World Wars* (Ashanti, Rivonia, 1994).
29. J.J. Collyer, *The Campaign in German South West Africa 1914–1915* (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1937); *The South Africans with General Smuts in East Africa, 1914–1915* (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1939); and "Mounted Rifle Tactics", Article 2, *The Army Review*, 7, October 1914, pp 349–514.

Montgomery's school) and he wrote extremely well.<sup>30</sup> He was a corporal when he was commissioned in 1900, during the Anglo-Boer War. He was clearly intelligent and served as CGS to Louis Botha and to Jan Smuts. His first book was the better of the two. But he wrote without reference to German records which must have influenced his interpretations. He was obviously well-read in his field and was not shy of being critical; his books provide valuable insight into early South African military organisation, training, operations and defects. Generals seldom write without help and perhaps this was also true of Collyer.

Some South Africans kept diaries and accounts of their views of the First World War. A few were published but only privately or only appeared many years later. Examples are the memories of the East Rand Post Office telegraphist Arthur Betteridge, who served in the 4th SA Infantry as a private in France and then as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps; C.M. Murray's *The Doctor and the Rebels*; and those of one of our first military pilots Maj. Gen. Kenneth van der Spuy who published his memories of the First World War in 1966. It was left to regimental histories such as those of the Transvaal Scottish, the Rand Light Infantry and others to supplement the official histories. Relatively famous is G.W. Warwick's *We Band of Brothers: Reminiscences from the 1st SA Infantry Brigade in the 1914–1918 War*.<sup>31</sup> Hardly any mention was made in the regimental or other histories of the black, coloured and Indian soldiers attached to most battalions as drivers and in other roles, including that of gun crews in some artillery units.

Though the distance from the 1916 Battle of the Somme had lengthened the National Party government discovered a need for foreign friends in the 1970s and an interest in the South African role at Delville Wood was discovered and encouraged. Ian Uys, a chartered accountant from the Rand who also served in a commando, who had begun writing historical books in the 1970s, wrote about the Battle of Delville Wood. From 1983 to 2006 he published four books on the battle, *Delville Wood* (1983), *Longueval* (1986), *Roll Call: The Delville Wood Story* (1991), and *Devil's*

---

30. St Paul's School a public school, founded in 1509, is attached to St Paul's Cathedral, London. With one of the highest Oxford and Cambridge acceptance rates of any institution, it ranks among the top five public schools.

31. A. Betteridge, *Combat in and over Delville Wood* (Ernest Slatter, Pretoria, 1986); R. Murray (ed.), "The Doctor and the Rebels: The Diary of Charles Molteno Murray in the Boer Rebellion of 1914", *South African Medical Journal*, 90, 12, 2000, pp 1195–1198; K. van der Spuy, *Chasing the Wind* (Books of Africa, Cape Town, 1966); and G.W. Warwick, *We Band of Brothers: Reminiscences from the 1st SA Infantry Brigade in the 1914–1918 War* (Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1962). Among other regimental histories with useful material on the war are F.B. Adler, *The History of the Transvaal Horse Artillery* (Specialty Press, Johannesburg, 1927); F.B. Adler *The SA Field Artillery in German East Africa and Palestine 1915–1919* (Van Schaik, Pretoria 1958); H.H. Curson, *History of the Kimberley Regiment 1876–1962* (Northern Cape Printers, Kimberley, 1963); H.C. Juta, *The History of the Transvaal Scottish 1902–1932* (Hortors, Johannesburg, 1933); B. Simpkins, *Rand Light Infantry* (Howard Timmins, Johannesburg, 1965); N. Orpen, *Gunners of the Cape* (CFA Regimental History Committee, Cape Town, 1965); and N. Orpen, *The Cape Town Highlanders* (CTH History Committee, Cape Town, 1970).

Wood (2006).<sup>32</sup> Uys was an industrious writer who produced at least fifteen books of which two were novels, and one a military "who's who". Eight dealt with military history. He wrote well – never losing his readers' attention – but inaccurately, relying heavily on interviews with the veterans. Sometimes one felt that his subsequent books were meant to correct the previous ones. Uys's *Longueval* told the story of Delville Wood from the German side. Unfortunately the writer had not uncovered in the Defence Force's Archives the English translation of the German 24th Reserve Division's war diary dealing with the battle, serialised in the British *Army Quarterly* in 1936.

H.H. Curson, a veterinary surgeon, who wrote scientific papers such as "On Certain Pathological Conditions in a Tiger", began his military historical writing before the Second World War. During this war he wrote numerous historical articles especially for the *Nongqai*, the Defence Force and Police monthly. Prolific but lacking training in methodology, his work was laced with assumptions and tended to be inaccurate. He wrote unit histories but was best known for his works on regimental colours and badges.<sup>33</sup>

Helped by Brig. Gen. George Brink and J.A.I. Agar Hamilton, the Union Defence Force prepared for professional recording of the history early in the Second World War. Brink, Deputy CGS, wrote in August 1940: "It is necessary to keep a comprehensive written and pictorial record of events immediately prior to and since the declaration of war". In November 1940 a Historical Records Committee was appointed and from this seed the Union War Histories Section developed, housed eventually in the Office of the Prime Minister. Only three excellent works were published between 1946 and 1960 when H.F. Verwoerd, prime minister at the time, closed the section. They also produced a great deal of useful supplementary material.<sup>34</sup> Working parties studied a variety of military questions and information for their chapter drafts. Manuscripts were sent to former Allied

---

32. I. Uys, *Delville Wood* (1983); *Roll Call: The Delville Wood Story* (1991); *Longueval* (1986), all published by Uys Publishers, Johannesburg; and I Uys, *Devil's Wood* (Fortress Books, Knysna, 2006).

33. See for example H.H. Curson, *Colours and Honours in South Africa* (CNA, Johannesburg, 1948); H.H. Curson, *Regimental Devices in South Africa 1783–1954*, (Caxton, Pretoria, 1954); F.B. Adler, A.E. Lorch and H.H. Curson, *The South African Field Artillery in German East Africa and Palestine 1915–1919* (South African National War Museum, Publication No. 1, Pretoria, 1958); H.H. Curson, "Pagri Flashes: 1900–1962", *Africana Notes & News*, December 1962; and H.H. Curson, *The History of the Kimberley Regiment 1876–1962* (no publisher, Kimberley, 1963).

34. J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *Crisis in the Desert, May-July 1942* (1952); J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton, and L.C.F. Turner, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles, 1941* (1957); L.C.F. Turner, H.R. Gordon-Cumming and J.E. Betzler, *War in the Southern Oceans, 1939–45* (1961). All were published by Oxford University Press. An account of the gathering of information by the professional war recorders appears in E. Axelson, *A Year in Italy* (E.H. Walton, Port Elizabeth, n.d.). See also J. Grey, "Standing Humbly in the Ante-chambers of Clío: The Rise and Fall of Union War Histories", *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies*, 30, 2, 2000, pp 253–266 at <http://scientiamilitaria.journals.ac.za> which unfortunately I found after the paper was written.

commanders as well as to German and Italian commanders. Replies were collated and where they corroborated the narrative, fragments were incorporated into the draft manuscripts. One German reply was full enough to have been published as an independent volume.<sup>35</sup>

For various reasons a greater number of published amateur history and recollections appeared in South Africa than after the First World War.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps South Africans had enjoyed better education than their forbears, the economy had risen out of the depression, and many more South Africans had served than in 1914–1918. There were fewer fatal casualties and no Spanish Flu. Perhaps this war also left less mental collapse than the previous one. Many South Africans were seconded to the British forces in Asia, the Desert and Europe and served with the RAF and the RN. Some had been prisoners of war in Germany and Poland and had endured the long marches to the west. There were now far more able to tell the tale ... although perhaps the majority waited for careers and families to develop before sitting down to write. In 2011 James Bourhill's *Come back to Portofino* competently described the 6th SA Division's campaign in Italy, relying on notes kept by his father and the letters of Trooper John Hodgson. Using his wartime diaries Keith Ford published in 2013 a description of his experiences in Somaliland, Abyssinia, the Egyptian and Libyan campaigns and the campaign in Italy.<sup>37</sup>

During the Second World War several journalists wrote on its phases in Abyssinia, Madagascar, the Western Desert and Italy. They included Eric Rosenthal, Carel Birkby, Harry Klein, Neil Orpen and others not historians. Much of their work was written as part of the government's attempts to justify participation in the war and to maintain public morale. Some continued writing about the war after 1945. Harry Klein, a public relations consultant, published *Springbok Record* in 1946 and *Springboks in Armour* in 1965.<sup>38</sup>

- 
35. One of the authors of this paper gained this information during research in the records of the Union War Histories and from Capt. J.E. Betzler and Professors Louis Fourie and Johan Barnard, who had been assistant narrators.
  36. For example W.L. Fielding *With the 6th Division* (Shuter & Shooter, Pietermaritzburg, 1946); J. Ambrose Brown, *One Man's War: A Soldier's Diary* (Howard Timmins, Aylesbury, 1980). This diary was secretly kept by the author and part was already published in 1942 by *The Saturday Evening Post*.
  37. J. Bourhill, *Come back to Portofino* (30° South Publishers, Johannesburg, 2011); and K. Ford, *From Addis to Aosta Valley, 1940–45* (30° South Publishers, Johannesburg, 2013).
  38. Eric Rosenthal, an attorney, became a journalist and wrote historical works on military subjects, including *The Fall of Italian East Africa* (c1941); *Fortress on Sand* (c.1942); *General Dan Pienaar* (1943); *Japan's Bid for Africa* (1944); *General de Wet* (1968) ;); and *South African Jews in World War II* (1950). Carel Birkby wrote *Springbok Victory* (1941); *It's a Long Way to Addis* (1942); *Close to the Sun: The Story of the Sudan Squadron of the RAF* (1944); and *Dancing the Skies* (Timmins, Johannesburg, 1982). Harry Klein was the author of *Springbok Record* (SA Legion, Johannesburg, 1946); and *Springboks in Armour: The Story of the South African Armoured Cars in World War II* (Purnell, Cape Town, 1965).

Besides some regimental and other histories he had published, from 1968 until 1984, Neil Orpen, a businessman and free-lance writer, was engaged in using the material assembled and drafted by the Union War Histories Section (UWH) to complete what it had stopped doing when it was disbanded. Lt Gen. H.J. Martin, former Chief of the SAAF, researched some of the volumes the UWH had not completed.<sup>39</sup> Orpen was rather cavalier about the material he found and did not take great care to ensure accuracy and co-ordination. Two volumes about the SAAF were produced by James Ambrose Brown a newspaperman, playwright and prolific novelist. They were *Gathering of Eagles* and *Eagles Strike*.<sup>40</sup>

In the 1980s the Defence Force sponsored the publication by Ashanti Publishers of a series of books on South Africa in both World Wars. They were written by a number of well-known journalists and novelists and one or two others with no particular specialist knowledge of history or the armed forces. They ranged from Gerald L'Ange's *Urgent Imperial Service* on the 1914-15 campaign in GSWA to *Flying Cheetahs in Korea* by historian Dermot Moore and novelist Peter Bagshawe. The collection included novelist James Ambrose Brown's *The War of a Hundred Days* on the campaigns in Somalia and Abyssinia in 1940 and 1941 and Capt. C.J. Harris's *The War at Sea*, about South African maritime operations during the Second World War.<sup>41</sup> Some were rehashed earlier publications and largely rather amateur.

- 
39. N. Orpen, *South African Forces in World War II: East African and Abyssinian Campaigns* (1968); *South African Armed Forces in the Second World War: War in the Desert* (1971); *South African Forces in World War II: Victory in Italy* (1975). See also H.J. Martin and N. Orpen, *South African Armed Forces in the Second World War, Eagles Victorious: Operations of the South African Forces* (1977); H.J. Martin and N. Orpen, *South Africa at War: Military and Industrial Organization and Operations in Connection with the Conduct of the War, 1939–1945* (1979). All the works thus far in this footnote were published by Purnell, Cape Town. Other works by N. Orpen are: *South African Forces in World War II: Salute the Sappers*, 2 volumes (Sappers Association, Johannesburg, 1981 and 1982); *Gunners of the Cape: The Story of the Cape Field Artillery* (CFA Regimental History Committee, Cape Town, 1965); *Prince Alfred's Guard, 1856–1956* (Books of Africa, Cape Town, 1967); *The Cape Town Highlanders, 1885–1970* (Cape Town Highlanders History Committee, Cape Town, 1970); *History of the Transvaal Horse Artillery, 1904–1974* (THA Regimental Council, Johannesburg, 1975); *Airlift to Warsaw: The Rising of 1944* (University of Oklahoma, Norman, 1984); and *The Dukes: A History of the Cape Town Rifles* (Cape Town Rifles Dukes Assn, Cape Town, 1984). For his lifetime of military history writing Orpen was made an Officer of the *Order of the Star of South Africa*.
40. J. Ambrose Brown, *South African Armed Forces in the Second World War, Gathering of Eagles: The Campaigns of the South African Air Force* (Purnell, Cape Town, 1970); and *South African Armed Forces in the Second World War, Eagles Strike: The Campaigns of the South African Air Force* (Purnell, Cape Town, 1974).
41. Publications in this Ashanti series include G. L'Ange, *Urgent Imperial Service* (1991); P. Bagshawe, *Warriors of the Sky* (1990); D. Moore and P. Bagshawe *Flying Cheetahs in Korea* (1991); J. Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days* (1990); and Capt C.J. Harris *The War at Sea: South African Maritime Operations during World War 2* (1991). Other works on WW2 (also published by Ashanti) are J. Kros, *War in Italy, with the South Africans from Taranto to the Alps* (1992); E.C.R. Baker, *Ace of Aces, M. St. J. Pattle* (1992); and A. du Toit *South Africa's Fighting Ships Past and Present* (1992).

The appearance in 1949 of a Union Defence Force magazine entitled *Commando* provided an avenue for publication opened to amateur writers. Many were veterans of the war, especially serving officers. Prolific, they wrote widely in English and Afrikaans. They included historical descriptions of events in the recent war; reminiscences of the Permanent Force and the SAAF in close air support in the Western Desert campaigns. Some preferred to remain anonymous. Colonel Harry Cilliers, a pre-war permanent officer was a keen contributor. One officer calling himself "P.J." wrote a widely read series of studies on tactics comparing examples in Italy with the experience of commanders such as Wellington. Others such as pilot Major Thys Uys wrote about the SAAF's experiences in the Second World War and Korea. Officers debated the employment of the forces in warfare or described wartime innovations. Apart from the variety of subjects the benefit was the encouragement to write about their profession. Stimulation came from the UWH which fed the magazine with various articles and series called "Good Show Corner".

This initiative ended from 1954 when *Commando* fell into the hands of editors transferred from the Department of Agriculture and became primarily a social news magazine. Occasionally articles on professional subjects appeared but the image of a magazine aimed at the military profession disappeared. Although in 1962 a new editor, Johan Nell, a newspaperman, tried to restore the previous character, the enthusiasm for amateur history writing was lost in the SADF.

The staff of the South African National War Museum also contributed to *Commando*. Initially they were also amateurs. The first head of the museum was retired Brigadier G.T. Senescall, DSO, ED, who was succeeded in 1951 by Captain George Duxbury, a land surveyor who had joined the Permanent Force artillery after the war. In 1967 the museum was the midwife for the SA Military History Society. The latter has been the source of an enormous amount of military history writing by amateurs whose contributions appear in the quarterly journal of the society, the *South African Military History Journal*. By no means all the authors have been amateurs and the journal has published work by professionals such as Professor Jacob Mohlamme well known for his research on black participants in the Anglo-Boer War and Professor André Wessels has made significant contributions to the history of South Africa in the Second World War.<sup>42</sup>

Strangely, concerning the so-called Border War (1966–1989) there has been an apparent lack of interest on the part of the professional historians. With the exception, perhaps, of journal articles by Leopold Scholtz, André Wessels and Leo Barnard, few academics have cared to

---

42. Examples of their work are J.S. Mohlamme, "Soldiers Without Reward: Africans in South Africa's Wars", *South African Military History Journal*, 10, 1, June 1995; A. Wessels, "South Africa and the War against Japan 1941–1945", *SA Military History Journal*, 10, 3, June 1996 and A. Wessels, "The First Two Years of War: The Development of the Union Defence Forces, September 1939 to September 1941", *SA Military History Journal*, 11, 5, June 2000.

venture into the political labyrinth of recent South African military history. Some academic studies of the SADF and the period covering the Border War have been written from the perspective of political scientists rather than historians.

Works such as these lie in the murky borderland of academic disciplines such as Political Science and Security and Strategic Studies that frequently rely on history to buttress their hypotheses, although most such analysts are not historians. What should their relationship be to "history"? Should the "dependent" disciplines wait patiently for the distilled wisdom of their history counterparts or, as they often do, strike out on their own, however imperfectly?

Is it true that South African military history ends at the Second World War because not enough time has passed to gauge recent military experience objectively? Should it be the justification for the lack of professional historical work on the conflict? Whatever the answer, the lacuna is being filled by a number of writers ranging from other academics, military veterans, and some quite gifted amateurs. They have been remarkably prolific but is it history? While strictly speaking much of it might not be "history" it does form a substantial part of the historical sludge from which the gold dust may ultimately be panned.

An example of the problems faced by current historiography of the Border War is evident in analyses of the Battle of Cassinga. This event was first broached by the journalist Willem Steenkamp in 1983 in his quasi-official account of the SADF's cross border raids, *Borderstrike*. It performed the function of placing an official version of the operation in the public domain to counter accusations by SWAPO that it was a massacre of innocents. Eleven years later the Namibian Archives published Annemarie Heywood's booklet *The Cassinga Event*, which gave a Namibian view. For some time in occasional articles, Cassinga continued to percolate in a sea of propaganda. Its anniversary became a seminal event in the Namibian calendar. In post-apartheid South Africa to remember its perceived victims a student's hostel was named after the camp while the airborne fraternity angered the new government by also commemorating the event annually. Two views of the operation prevailed. The former Chief of the SADF, General Jan Geldenhuys, saw it as a "jewel of military craftsmanship", while, unsurprisingly, to the Namibian authorities it was a "massacre".<sup>43</sup>

Brig. Gen. McGill Alexander wrote a Master's dissertation on the subject in 2003,<sup>44</sup> as a paratrooper and veteran of the Border War and trained as an historian, with official sources open to him. He seems the ideal researcher to describe and analyse the controversial operation. Throwing a

---

43. W. Steenkamp, *Borderstrike* (Butterworth, Durban, 1983); A. Heywood, *The Cassinga Event: an Investigation of the Records* (National Archives of Namibia, Windhoek, 1996); J Geldenhuys, *A General's Story: From an Era of War and Peace* (Jonathan Ball, Jeppestown, 1995), p 93.

44. E.G.M. Alexander, "The Cassinga Raid", MA dissertation, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2003.

rigorous academic light on the subject he interpreted what he found in the records and made clear his sources and reasoning. The dissertation was freely available and was also sent to the operation's commander. His conclusions, however, did not endear him to all.

When in May 2007 some airborne veterans become aware of it, they were angered at some of the conclusions – although probably few had read Alexander's work. From Alexander's integrity to his intelligence were questioned. Stoic under acrimonious criticism, he responded with care and restraint. A hot response came from the operation's commander, Col Jan Breytenbach, who wrote his own, purportedly definitive account of what he understood had happened, published as *Eagle Strike* in 2008. It weighed in at 587 pages and posed almost as many questions as those it sought to answer. More recently in *The Battle of Cassinga* another veteran, Michael McWilliams, has claimed to have finally laid to rest the simmering controversy by introducing an exercise book picked up by a paratrooper during the operation purporting to show the true nature of the base.<sup>45</sup>

Possibly some of the truth may be found with the help of battlefield and forensic archaeology – if that is what is really wanted. Unlike a paper trail grown cold from neglect or supposed manipulation, Cassinga may still be read like an impartial history book as were the mass graves of 2 000 Napoleonic soldiers of 1812 outside Vilnius in Lithuania and the relics of Custer's last stand at Little Big Horn. If nothing more, Cassinga's graves could enable forensic pathologists to establish beyond doubt the number of people killed; how they died; and their ages and gender. And archaeologists could establish through the identification and tracking of individual cartridges and their ratio, the weapons used and the course of the fighting. Both parties derive their identity from a particular version of the event, as Heywood mentions, and accordingly there is much to lose for those proved to be wrong.

The weakness of the amateur military historian emerged from this dispute – partisan, emotional, angry and lacking tangible evidence – in contrast to the trained historian's impartial, carefully researched and restrained approach.

The majority of accounts of the SA Defence Force's major Angolan campaigns of 1987 and 1988 have been written by amateur military historians. The two most prominent, Fred Bridgland's *The War for Africa* and Heitman's *War in Angola: The Final Phase*, were written by a journalist and military commentator respectively.<sup>46</sup> Both are gifted writers and analysts but not trained historians. Evidence of their works having become templates for

---

45. J. Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike! The controversial airborne assault on Cassinga* (Manie Grove Publishing, Sandton, 2008); M. McWilliams *Battle for Cassinga: South Africa's Controversial Cross-Border Raid, Angola 1978* (30° South Publishers, Johannesburg, 2011).

46. F. Bridgland, *The War for Africa* (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1990); H. Römer-Heitman, *War in Angola: The Final Phase* (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1990). Römer-Heitman holds an MA in War Studies from King's College, London.

academic and popular accounts can be seen in how often they are cited in the bibliographies of writers attempting to unravel events at the Lomba, the Chaminga highlands and the Tumpo triangle.

Bridgland provides an intriguing example of the problems encountered by the amateur historian. He was the author of *Jonas Savimbi: a Key to Africa*, a work recognised as a clearly partisan interpretation. The book was in marked contrast to his later obituary of Savimbi written after he was killed in an engagement with the Angolan army in 2002. Bridgland had moved from ardent admirer to vehement critic.<sup>47</sup> In view of his later opinions, one may ask where his evaluations may have been questionable. How could he have researched and written a 513 page account of the life of the man and his movement, UNITA, and not detected what lay behind the mask? Bridgland defends himself by pointing out he was merely a biographer and documented and wrote about the various human rights abuses perpetrated by UNITA as he became aware of them.

Narratives from participants have also appeared, the most popular of these being Clive Holt's *At thy Call we did not Falter*. Holt, a former national serviceman who served with 61 Mechanised Brigade during Operation Hooper, wrote his personal account as a catharsis, in an increasing throng of individuals who identify their military service and experiences, rightly or wrongly, as an underlying cause for various setbacks in later life. It should be read with this in mind.<sup>48</sup>

On the opposing side in the war, Oswin Namakalu published *Armed Liberation Struggle: Some Accounts of Plan's Combat Operations*. A SWAPO member, Namakalu interviewed a number of PLAN veterans to create a snapshot of what it was like to be a PLAN member.<sup>49</sup> He suffers from all the pitfalls associated with the amateur historian but his work is nevertheless valuable in that his is one of the few accounts written on PLAN. Interestingly, he cites Willem Steenkamp and Römer Heitman's works in his references – an amateur historian citing amateur historians. Perhaps this is a tentative step towards valuable groundwork being laid for the professionals?<sup>50</sup>

A number of former members and veterans of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) the armed wing of the ANC, have also tried to save their history for posterity. Tsepe Motumi, an MK veteran, contributed one of the first accounts of recent MK history to the Institute for Defence Policy's

---

47. F. Bridgland, *Jonas Savimbi: A Key to Africa* (Macmillan, Johannesburg, 1986).

48. C. Holt *At thy Call we did not Falter* (Zebra Press, Cape Town 2005).

49. SWAPO is the acronym for the South West African Peoples' Liberation Army and PLAN stands for People's Liberation Army of Namibia.

50. O.O. Namakalu, *Armed Liberation Struggle: Some Accounts of Plan's Combat Operations* (Amsberg Macmillan, Windhoek, 2004).

publication *African Defence Review*, an article entitled, “Umkhonto we Sizwe: Structure, Training and Force Levels, 1984 to 1994”.<sup>51</sup>

From other former MK members – all amateur historians – there are three fairly recent works. Thula Bopela and Daluxolo Luthuli published *Umkhonto we Sizwe: Fighting for a Divided People*, while James Ngculu wrote *The Honour to Serve: Recollections of an Umkhonto Soldier*. A recent addition is *The Making of an MK Cadre* by Wonga Welile Bottoman. With regard to MK history, a popular account called *Operation Vula* was written by Dutch novelist and participant Conny Braam.<sup>52</sup>

Recently a Kavango tracker who served with Koevoet, Sisingi Kamongo, with Leon Bezuidenhout, published a written account of Kamongo’s experiences, *Shadows in the Sand: A Koevoet Tracker’s Story of an Insurgency War*. This is the first account of a black Namibian who served in the South African security forces. It opens the door on yet another dimension to the conflict which most likely would have remained shut had it not been for the motives that drive amateur historians.<sup>53</sup>

The books mentioned thus far – but for Wonga Welile Bottoman’s *The Making of an MK Cadre* – have all been published by professional publishing houses. However, a new phenomenon has emerged all but removing the final barrier to amateur historians – digital printing. Prior to this advance the cost of producing a book was substantial. Without established authors to guarantee sales, few publishers were ready for the financial risk of publishing unknowns. Digital printing and “print on demand” ensure now for an affordable sum that anyone can publish a book. Vanity publishers have never been busier or more accessible making a considerable impact on what detractors call “grenslit” (border literature).

The most prolific author of this genre is Paul Els, a former paratrooper and Warrant Officer in the Signal Corps. Author of one of the first books on Special Forces, *We Fear Naught but God*, he has gone on to self-publish a number of books on the Bush War to some acclaim but generally not well received by serious students. When Covos-Day, the original publishers of *We Fear Naught but God* shut its doors, Els reclaimed his copyright and in 2009 published a revised edition in his own name. Previously he published in 2004 in Afrikaans an account of Operation Blouwildebess called *Ungulumbashe: Die Begin van die Bosoorlog*. An English version became available in 2007. Els’s work is for the popular market. It is by no means

---

51. T. Motumi, “Umkhonto we Sizwe: Structure, Training and Force Levels, 1984 to 1994”, *African Defence Review*, 18, August 1994, pp 1–11. Motumi is currently director general of Military Veterans’ Affairs.

52. T. Bopela and D Luthuli, *Umkhonto we Sizwe: Fighting for a Divided People* (Galago, Johannesburg, 2005); J. Ngculu, *The Honour to Serve: Recollections of an Umkhonto Soldier* (New Africa Books, Claremont, 2009); W.W. Bottoman *The Making of an MK Cadre* ( LiNc Publishers, Pretoria, 2010); C. Braam *Operation Vula* (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2004).

53. S. Kamongo and L. Bezuidenhout, *Shadows in the Sand: A Koevoet Tracker’s Story of an Insurgency War* (30° South Publishers, Johannesburg, 2011).

scholarly but to his credit, he introduces episodes of the conflict previously unknown to the public. Most recently *Four SADF Operations* (2011) dealing with Operations Dikmelk, Super, Hurdle and Swivel appeared. Besides being a curate's egg, there is more than a hint of nostalgia in the work.<sup>54</sup>

This kind of publishing is by no means reserved to the lower ranks. In 2008 Brig. Gen. Peter Stannard wrote a compilation of accounts dealing with the life of the former Chief of the SAAF, Lt Gen. Denis Earp. Written, published and financed by Stannard for admirers of the SAAF, it was called *Beyond the Edge of the Sky*.<sup>55</sup> It contains vignettes of Earp's time as a fighter pilot in Korea, a prisoner of the Koreans and Chinese and as Chief of the SAAF during its most eventful period since the Second World War. Concerned that the accounts from Earp's life would be lost to posterity, Stannard wrote the work with Earp's permission. With no pretensions to be a historian, Stannard reveals the value of the amateur in recording.

Running parallel to the South African undertakings have been those published about the internal war in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). From the trickle that appeared soon after the end of the conflict a flood has followed but that is not within the scope of this article.

Print on demand has attracted so many would-be authors that a company called Just Done Productions has assumed a dominant role with some important books on the Border War. An example is Col André Diedericks's autobiography, *Journey without Boundaries*.<sup>56</sup> A Special Forces operator, who earned the Honoris Crux Silver and the Honoris Crux, Diedericks published a small initial private issue for friends before his death in 2005. It has resurfaced as a print on demand book from Just Done Productions. It is an important primary source on Special Forces history by a leading participant. Major dealers do not carry self-published or print on demand books but more and better quality titles are taking this format.

One should not forget the role of blogs and e-books in making amateur historians better known in cyberspace than on bookshelves. Perhaps this heralds for good or ill, the "democratisation" of history and a golden age for amateur historians.

A remarkable feature of the "grenslit" publications written by amateur military historians is that they have developed an almost fanatical popularity among their readers and collectors – who are not always identical. Books with little literary or historical merit are offered even by second-hand book dealers at incredibly inflated prices which are apparently paid. Colonel Jan Breytenbach's *Forged in Battle*, the contents of which are covered in the currently in-print *Buffalo Soldiers* is being offered for about R1 000

- 
54. P. Els *We Fear Naught but God* (Covos-Day, Weltevreden Park, 2000), *Ungulumbashe: Die Begin van die Bosoerlog* (PelsA Books, Pretoria, 2004) and *Ungulumbashe: Where the Bush War Began* (PelsA Books, Pretoria, 2011).
  55. C. Stannard, *Beyond the Edge of the Sky* (Crowbar Enterprises, Valhalla, 2008).
  56. A Diedericks, *Journey without Boundaries* (Just Done Productions, Gillits, 2007).

here and US\$500 in the United States.<sup>57</sup> This is due partly to feverish collectors who buy to possess rare books rather than to read them. But perhaps it is due not merely to nostalgia among buyers but also their need to reach back into a past they experienced and now seek to understand as well as to deal with the emotional conflicts resulting from the experiences of war. It might also be that they want to resolve for themselves the disputes in the media about who won or lost and why they were there.

## Conclusion

This study is only a résumé of a wide ranging field. Many amateur military historians who have written on South African themes have been omitted. We have mentioned a fair selection and hope that our examples throw enough light on what writers about South African military history have accomplished, although we have only been able to impart a sense of their contribution to our country's military historiography. We may have been a superficial, inexperienced and irreverent but then we do not imagine ourselves to be professional historians. That would be taking ourselves more seriously than we dare although we spend much of our professional lives reading, using and even writing what we think is military history.

We acknowledge that the dilettante tramples roughshod where the professional, encumbered by reputation and peers, fears to tread without any pretensions to being professional historians. Indeed most amateur historians would not understand the difference. Yes, they ignore possible alternatives and do not consider long term effects and unintended consequences. They are not necessarily the best or the most accurate. Their writing is usually racy, untrammelled by lists of endnotes and easily digested by the amateur reader.

We have tried briefly to explain what we think distinguishes the amateur from the professional historian. We have also repeatedly asked ourselves and yet have not been able to answer satisfactorily the question "Can the amateur ever become a professional military historian?" As amateurs ourselves, we leave the question unanswered – save to say that we have read some amateurs who improve with experience and by paying close attention to what reviewers have said about their publications. Ian Knight who began writing about the Anglo-Zulu Wars with minimal qualifications is an example of noticeable improvement.

The absence of interest in military history among South African professional historians – save from the continuing interest in the Anglo-Boer War – probably meant that the amateur ensured that much was recorded and published that would have remained neglected, unknown and lost to institutional memory. As it is, institutional memory is a casualty in many South African establishments – not least the armed forces. Most South

---

57. J. Breytenbach, *Forged in Battle* (Saayman & Weber, Cape Town, 1986).

African officers are “men of action” and do not appreciate the didactic value of historical studies.<sup>58</sup>

This study has introduced amateur military historians and is certainly not a plea for banning them. We believe that they have played an important role in South Africa and plead that they be encouraged. Far from being mere dabblers, as a body they have made significant contributions to saving institutional memory, even though their defects may test the professional's patience. Admittedly, erroneous history can lead to faults in the leadership of armed forces but amateur readers are seldom disillusioned by inaccuracy and contradictions. Dare we compare them to the pioneers in Physics and Chemistry in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as Émilie du Châtelet, Voltaire or Humphrey Davey – self taught, unqualified scientists but scientific pioneers none the less? In this collective role amateur military history writers and their eager readers have done a great deal to promote the development of a branch of history which we for two believe to be essential to the understanding not only of South Africa at war, but of our society at large.

### Abstract

Military history has an enthusiastic following that might astonish historians in other fields. Amateur military historians and readers often have experienced military life and became emotionally bound to it in a way unknown to readers of other history. The amateur military historians' facile writing enables readers – civilians and soldiers – to participate vicariously in warfare. The amateurs imagine there is only one true unqualified history, seldom check evidence thoroughly or consider alternative views. They forget that memories fade, the battlefield is confused, that the soldiers sees only a fragment of the fighting and that history cannot be tailored for the sake of friendship. Professional military history writing was always neglected in South Africa. Few regular officers wrote about their wars. Amateur writers have predominated in the field, journalists being the major contributors. However, a recent generation spent in military service has been producing numerous books, several by other ranks. Their contemporaries, the veterans of MK and APLA are writing about their military experiences. Digital publishing has dramatically affected the production of South African amateur military history.

**Key words:** Amateur historian; battlefield archaeology; Border War; professional historian; military history.

### Opsomming

Die krygsgeskiedenis geniet 'n aanhang wat ander geskiedkundiges mag verbaas. Amateur geskiedkundiges en lesers het dikwels die militêre lewe

---

58. There has been significant renewal at the Military Academy where Military Strategy is taught by competent enthusiasts and a penetrating school of Military History has developed.

ervaar en emosioneel daartoe verbind geraak op 'n wyse vreemd vir geskiedenislesers. Die amateur geskiedskrywers se oppervlakkige skryfstyl laat burgerlike en militêre lesers toe om oorlogvoering middelik te ervaar. Die amateurs glo dat daar net een ongekwalifiseerde geskiedenis bestaan, kontroleer selde bewyse of alternatiewe vertolkings. Hul vergeet dat die geheue onbetroubaar raak, dat die slagveld verward is, dat die soldaat net 'n fragment van die geveg ervaar en dat die geskiedenis nie terwille van vriendskap aangepas mag word nie. Professionele militêre geskiedskrywing is nog altyd in Suid-Afrika verwaarloos. Selde het beroepsoffisiere herinneringe of beskrywings van oorlog op skrif gestel. Amateurskrywers het die veld oorheers, veral joernaliste wat hoofsaaklik regimentsgeskiedenis geskryf het. Die jonger geslag geslag wat militêre diens verrig het, het egter al talle boeke geskryf, 'n aantal deur manskappe. Hulle tydsgenote, die veterane van MK en APLA het ook al hoe meer oor hulle militêre ervaringe begin skryf. Digitale uitgewery het die produksie van Suid-Afrikaanse amateur militêre geskiedenis dramatisies beïnvloed.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Amateur geskiedkundige; slagveldargeologie; Grensoorlog; professionele geskiedkundige; krygsgeskiedenis.