

John Keene interviewed by Mike Cadman 19/09/07
 Former Regimental Sergeant Major – Rand Light Infantry

	TAPE ONE SIDE A
Interviewer	Can you give me a bit of a background about how you came to be in the military, when you started, just a little sort of thumbnail sketch of your career in the military.
John Keene	<p>I was born in 1946, which is nine months after the end of the Second World War. And I went to Maritz Brothers College, Inanda. My father had been in the Rand Light Infantry during the Second World War and had been badly wounded at ? My grandfather on my father's side was a merchant navy captain and he had been responsible for landing Anzac troops in the Dardanelles during the First World War. My mother's father came out to South Africa in Imperial Military Railways during the Anglo Boer War. So throughout my life I considered that warfare was a natural part of human existence. Through my father I knew all of his comrades in the Rand Light Infantry (RLI), and I'd formed a picture of what the army should be like. At school we were mostly English speaking boys and most of our fathers had also served in the Second World War in one or other of the arms, either the air force, the army or the navy. And the mindset that we had developed at that stage was that our fathers had fought a war for liberation of the human race and that the world offered a lot. The big problem that seemed to be on the minds of our parents was the threat of Communism. However when we were at school we were taught by Marist Brothers who were always very liberal in their thinking and we had no conception of the problems of apartheid that was developing at the time. But we were told that the government that had come into power in 1948 was inimical not only to the Catholic Church but to anybody that was not Afrikaans. As far as the army was concerned at school we were taught that one had to do one's duty to the country and that one of the great threats to the country was this question of Communism. Of course it was very topical at the time. The Korean war was being fought in 1952 and that was against the Communist onslaught in Korea. One listened at ones grandfather's knee to the progress of the war in Korea and one read about it in the Rand Daily Mail which was the newspaper in Johannesburg at the time. It was always understood at school that English speaking people were not really wanted in the Defence Force. And until 1962 or so it was virtually understood by most English speaking boys that if you had an English name that you would never be balloted. But that changed in 1963 and it seemed that the army was starting to take in English speaking boys.</p>
Interviewer	Can you tell me just briefly, when you say balloted, what does that mean?

John Keene	<p>Well the process was that when you were 16...that was more or less when you were in Standard Nine...the school received documents which had to be filled in by all the boys. And that meant that you had to register. You registered when you were 16 at school. And then when you got into matric you received a letter from the Defence Force, a pink letter, which had a number on it, and you were already allocated a Force Number at that time. And then you had to report to the Union Grounds for a medical test. And that was the first experience you had of the Defence Force. All the boys lined up there from the different schools and you had to pee in a bottle and you went into the Drill Hall and they had Medical Corps people, and at that stage it wasn't the South African Medical Services, it was the South African Medical Corps which was part of the army. And there they tested your nuts for whatever they did, and made you cough and all the rest of it. And then you went back to school and the next thing you got a card which said that you had been allocated to a regiment and you were to report for service at such and such a time. In those days the period of basic training was nine months. So I was called up to the Rand Light Infantry but although you were allocated to a regiment at that time, when you did your basic training you were not actually a member of the regiment, you were posted to a place as I was like 1 SSB training regiment, which was in Bloemfontein. And while I say that, you know you really didn't have anything to do with your regiment, all the boys that were posted to the Rand Light Infantry or the Transvaal Scottish or whatever the other regiments were in the country were sent to certain places for training. Like at 1 SSB we had the RLI and the Durban Light Infantry, and the Natal Carbineers, and some of the newer Afrikaans regiments like the Regiment Noord Natal, and Regiment Vrystaat and so on. So we arrived in Bloemfontein...well first of all we assembled at the union grounds with our civvie kit on and a suitcase. And then we were all herded on to Park Station where we were put on to the trains and then there were Permanent Force people standing in the trains making sure you didn't drink and all that sort of stuff, because at that period the Defence Force was dry. Troops were not allowed to drink and in fact there was very strict control over the bars which had been instituted by Frans Erasmus. He in fact had closed down the messes.</p>
Interviewer	Who was Erasmus?
John Keene	<p>Frans Erasmus was the Minister of Defence. And it was interesting that his name was absolute mud as far as the English speaking people were concerned who had anything to do with the Defence Force, because when the Nationalist Party came into power, it was him who was responsible for cleaning out the Defence Force of any remnant of association with the British, and particularly those English speaking officers that had served during the Second World War. There were still quite a few around but in those senior ranks there were virtually nobody left excepting in the air force and in the navy. But in the army it had</p>

	<p>been virtually expunged of any trace of English speaking values or association with Britain. So we arrived down in Bloemfontein and we were all herded off the trucks and that was quite a psychological shock to most of the people because there they were exposed for the first time to this rabid abuse from Afrikaans speaking NCOs. And from the moment you put your foot on the platform you realised you were in a completely new social environment. Most of the English boys, although they had had to do Afrikaans at school, were totally incapable of speaking the language. And then they had to, in a very short space of time, get used to speaking Afrikaans because that was the only way in which you could communicate with the PFs, as we used to call them. Now the term PF was regarded as...to us people, as virtually an insult. If one talked about the PF, you immediately thought about somebody that was totally incapable of rational thought. And that it was a sort of repository for people that were incapable of applying themselves in any other social milieu. Be that as it may, when one went to 1 SSB training regiment it was a very pleasant environment because it was outside of Bloemfontein at that time....now it's right in the middle of Bloemfontein virtually.</p>
Interviewer	PF stands for Permanent Force?
John Keene	<p>Yes. There was the CF and the PF. The CF were what we were, and in those days we still referred to ourselves as the ACF. Although the official terminology had been changed to Citizen Force. And there we started our basic training and all of the training staff was Afrikaans. There was not one single English speaking Permanent Force corporal that was on the staff of the training team. And the same applied to the officers. When we arrived there the most senior rank that dealt with you was a full Corporal. They were mainly Lance Corporals and full Corporals. Supposedly supervised by what they call a...the officer was an assistant Field Cornet in those days, or a Veld Korner as we used to call it. So the 2nd Lieutenants were assistant Field Cornets and the full Lieutenants were Field Cornets. So for the first six weeks you were on the parade grounds from reveille until lunch time. And it was square bashing, backwards and forwards and backwards and forwards. After the first 6 weeks the troops were mustered. Now the musterings then were either into the infantry companies, which were riflemen, and then you had the support companies or headquarters companies, as they called it then, which consisted of the Vickers medium machine gun, the six pounder, the anti tank gun, the three inch mortar, and then there were other musterings like cooks, clerks, drivers. They had an intelligence section as well. These were people that were trained to deal with things like maps and so forth. And then the radio operators. Battalion radio operators. In those days you had two different kinds of radio operators. You had the battalion radio operators and the regimental radio operators. The regimental radio operators were people that were attached to the signals corps. Anyway after the first six weeks you were then mustered.</p>

	<p>And I was mustered into the anti tank platoon where we were trained on a 6 pounder anti tank gun. During the Second World War that had been part of the artillery but it was now an infantry weapon.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Was it still considered to be relatively effective at that time?</p>
John Keene	<p>There were a lot of things changing. As I say this was in 1964, I reported on the 2nd of October 1964. And everything was very much the same as it had been during the Second World War. The vehicles that were used were still the old Fords from the Second World War and the uniforms that we had were basically the Second World War uniforms. Although in July 1964 they had brought in, instead of the old serge battledress, it was a woollen combat dress, they called it, but it was the same design as the Second World War battledress. And we also had the short khaki DV trousers and shirts. And we used to wear the anklets with the hose tops and we had the old Second World War boots with hobnails on and those horseshoes that were on the heels. We used to wear a jacket for training. It was a two piece outfit - we had long khaki trousers called DV, what we used to call DBs or DVs, and a five button jacket that was called a monkey jacket and there was a...some people called it a (<i>fuck suit/vark suit?</i>) as well. You used to wear that with your boots and your anklets. And then we used to wear skeleton webbing, and this was the pattern 1964 webbing that had just been brought in. The previous intake which was the July 1964 intake, was still wearing the Pattern 37 webbing from the Second World War, of which there was tons left. We also had the new French style steel helmet with an inner. The inner was a plastic type of thing which the blokes called a doiby or a <i>mosdop</i>. The Afrikaners used to call it a <i>mosdop</i>. So it was the October intake which was the first one to...or in fact it was the July intake which was the first to wear this new helmet and this 1964 webbing. We all had to learn how to put this stuff together, we were never taught how to do it, we just worked it out by ourselves. The rifles that we had were the FN rifles. They were brand new FN rifles, we got them out of the box and they were still covered with grease and the paper that we got them in. And in order to get all the grease off the chaps went into the showers with their rifles to clean the rifles off. The training program included, obviously, rifle shooting – that was my particular interest in being in the army, to be able to shoot. Because my father was a shottist and at that stage if you wanted to be a shotist you still used the old .303, the Number IV .303. And at that stage we also had the Bren gun. The .303 Bren. The Vickers were still being fired with .303 ammunition as well. The six pounder anti-tank gun was a piece of artillery that had also been used during the Second World War. It was brought in for the first time in 1942. And we were still using it in 1964. It was replaced subsequently by the 3.5 inch rocket launcher when the six pounder was made obsolete finally in June 1966. So my intake was the last that actually used the 6 pounder. We used to do our exercises with the gun on Hora (sp??) Flats where the</p>

paratroopers were...used to do their training as well because 1 Parachute Battalion was right next to...1 SSB was on the furthest...the most westerly side of Tempe military base, and next to it was the armour, and after the armour was the 1 Parachute Battalion headquarters. Now what happened during your first three months...and we only had three months at 1 SSB...apart from being mustered into the various musterings in the infantry, the paratroopers came and asked anybody who wanted to be a paratrooper. And in order to be a paratrooper you had to have a letter from your parents to say that they approved of your going for parachute training. And at that time most of the boys were between 17-18. There were a lot of boys that were 17. I had just turned 18 in May of 1964. But there were still a lot of boys that were still 17. So those that wanted to join the paratroopers went off for a sort of selection course where they were selected for their physical fitness. They had to run and carry somebody and all that kind of stuff. And those that weren't selected for parachute training were sent back as what they call RTU - return to unit. There was no disgrace in it but it was always kind of a disappointment to those that wanted to be paratroopers if they didn't make the selection course. And then also they had interviews for officers course. Now the officers course was at the army gymnasium, which was then in Pretoria, where the South African military health services base is today. And it was quite close to the military college in those days. The military college was subsequently changed to the army college and it's now the war college. Any case so, those people that applied for officers training went to an interview and we were interviewed by the OC of 1 SSB. And the OC of 1 SSB at the time was Commandant Jack Dutton who subsequently became a Lieutenant General. He was one of the anomalies in the Permanent Force because he was one of the people that was actually an English speaking person, and his 2IC was a chap called Redsmart (??). But throughout your three months period there you never saw the OC. The highest you saw was a Veld Kornet, who was your company commander. Once you had completed your 3 months training in Bloemfontein...and incidentally we used to go and fire the six pounder guns at De Brug, which was further west from Tempe, a big training ground where they had big exercises. After you'd done your training at 1 SSB, if you had succeeded in the officer's selection you went off to the army gymnasium to do 3 months of officer training there. I was selected for officer training and I went off to the army gymnasium. I started there in January 1965. That officer training was really intense and it was specifically for what they call Citizen Force junior leaders. In those days you used to wear candy stripes on your epaulettes to show that you were a junior leader and you also wore candy stripes around your cap. It was a sort of (*inaudible*) and white stripe band that you put around your cap. The officer commanding of the course, and it was one company at the army gymnasium who did Citizen Force junior leaders, it was called E company army gymnasium. The company commander there was

	<p>Captain Jack Turner. He later became a general and he became the OC of the Bophuthatswana Defence Force and he actually started up the Bophuthatswana Defence Force. They had some junior CF officers there that were very good. I must say that the quality of training on that course was outstanding. In three months they managed to hammer into you a huge amount of knowledge. But one of the things that was interesting to me there was that the staff took a great interest in what your political views were. And it was very important to them that you had the right political attitude. I didn't become an officer on that course because my attitude was one that had been inculcated at my school which was that the government wasn't naturally one to be trusted and I personally didn't have any issues with the <i>swart gevaar</i>. And on the basis of that...they grilled you quite closely on what your opinions were and why you had the opinions that you did.</p>
Interviewer	Was this formally during lectures or was it...?
John Keene	No, you were called apart...you were called in on orders and you would appear before the company commander and he would have an officer sitting next to him and he would ask you questions. And they would ask you...they'd observed that you had a little bit of a bad attitude and what was the matter with you?
Interviewer	Was this all the troops or just those that they perceived to have a bad attitude?
John Keene	I can't say. I don't know if it was all of the troops, but when it came to the end of the course, I had passed the course Q1, which was a first class pass, but I wasn't selected as an officer. And so it only appeared...well the reasons were...well there wasn't even a reason. When I later saw my pink - that is your sort of certificate - it just said this student is not suitable as an officer. For religious reasons. Something like that.
Interviewer	That's very interesting because they never asked you about your religious beliefs did they?
John Keene	I said I had a sort of open belief about things. I had quite a lot of interest in Zen Buddhism and alternative type of things. You know that I wasn't particularly taken with Christianity in any great form or anything like that. That I'd been to a Catholic school and I was quite open to Islam or anything else. I couldn't see the difference between one or another. So they weren't very happy with that sort of attitude at all. Anyways so I was then, after that training as which I emphasised was excellent because the discipline was incredibly strict and we had terrific Permanent Force NCO instructors. There were 3 of them. There was a Sergeant Henry Botha, and there was a Corporal Ackerman, and a Sergeant Bezuidenhout. They were responsible for the training of the entire company. In those days we had the most appalling type of inter troop initiation ceremonies. When you arrived at the army gymnasium the people that had just passed out and were waiting to be posted were there when the new intake arrived. And

	<p>when you arrived there you were subjected to the most incredible savagery. These people that had just passed out were in a state of almost...irrational hysteria and they got their hands onto you and for the rest of the night and the rest of the next day you were subjected to such a horrendous onslaught of violence that it was incredible. And this was something that went on for quite a long time in the Defence Force, particularly amongst those that were arriving for their basic training. You had a situation where they described one another. If you arrived there and it was for your basics you were called a <i>roof</i> or a <i>blou gat</i>. A <i>roof</i> was the lowest form, and then in your first three months you were a <i>blou gat</i> and then when you were in your last three months you were an <i>ou man</i>. And the <i>blou gatte</i> were regarded as the sort of slaves of the <i>ou manne</i>. And there was no supervision over this type of barbarism at all.</p>
Interviewer	<p>But it was known to the officers, I mean the hierarchy knew about it?</p>
John Keene	<p>Yes, they must have known about it. But that was the other interesting thing, although they used to have an orderly officer and an orderly NCO in those days they didn't seem to take much notice of what went on in the bungalows and that type of thing. So although one adapted to it, it inculcated, I believe, in the whole organisation a type of ethos that militated against the organisation being really efficient and against the development of good morale. I believe that it was addressed at a later stage but it nevertheless affected a lot of young people for quite a long time. Any case, having completed your officer training you were either made a one pip Veld Cornet or you went back to your post or your unit just as a private... (counter at 353)</p>
	<p>SIDE B</p>
John Keene	<p>So I went back to 2 SAI in Walvis Bay.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Which was part of South West Africa, which was still effectively South Africa in those days.</p>
John Keene	<p>And that base had just been built. Well it hadn't been in existence for very long. It was right next to the lagoon in Walvis Bay. And there the looseness of the organisation was quite amazing. This is what they called a full time force unit. So you start off with your basics for your first three months, then you went to for specialist training...or, if you didn't go for specialist training you then went to your full time force unit for the last 6 months of your period. In the first 6 months you were a <i>blou gat</i>, and in the last 6 months you were an <i>ou man</i>. And the <i>blou gatte</i> were the servants of the <i>ou manne</i>. At 2 SAI you did your normal training and in there we did training in the desert. They had three branches at 2 SAI. They had the 143 battery, that was the artillery, and they had D squadron, it was the armoured cars. And the armoured cars in those days were the Mark IV armoured cars with a two pounder gun. Those were armoured cars that had been made in South Africa during the Second World War. They weren't used by South</p>

	<p>African forces during the Second World War but we had, in South Africa, we'd made a couple of thousand of these armoured cars and that was what the armour was trained on. And then we used to do all the necessary continuous training with a six pounder gun, and then sometimes we had field exercises together with the armour and the artillery and that sort of thing. And we did long route marches and what have you. They had a vehicle parked out in the desert next to Dune 7 which was the highest dune in the Namib Desert. It was very enjoyable that period. There was nowhere for the troops to go so they more or less hung around the camp and then went into town, which was just outside the base. And they had a woman there called Mrs Propst who used to have a bakery. The food was so bad in Walvis Bay that the chaps used to virtually survive on what they got from Mrs Propst. And then of course the other issue was the question of sex amongst the troops in Walvis Bay because it was away from everywhere else. So the troops used to go into township there...there was a township of coloureds called Narraville. And they used to go and get up to nonsense in Narraville and there were always town pickets that used to arrest blokes coming out of Narraville and so forth. So there were always cases of gonorrhoea and things like that in the sick bay and they had their own Military Police camp there. So any source of misdemeanour was sorted out in Walvis Bay where you'd get up to 10 days in DB and that sort of thing. The access to the ships were out of bounds but the chaps nevertheless went down to the docks where they used to get liquor from the sailors and also they could buy dagga there in little matchboxes. So there was a lot of dagga smoking at 2 SAI. Another thing that they did in Walvis Bay is that they used to select guys to go and stand guard either in Cape Town or in Windhoek. And that was regarded as a great opportunity to get out of Walvis Bay. Right then when you'd finished your training in Walvis Bay you were then put on the train and sent back to wherever you came from, Johannesburg.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Now during this period, you're a whole bunch of young guys, you've gone through quite a bit of physical stuff in your training, you were at 1 SSB and now you've been off to 2 SAI, what was the perception of who you were training to fight?</p>
John Keene	<p>Oh that was very important, I wanted to get to that. Now we used to lie in the bungalows at night with our portable radios on, and when you fiddled around to get a station you'd pick up the fishing boats off Walvis Bay and they were Russian fishing trawlers, and we used to have emergency situations where the instructors used to say that the enemy has landed at Sandwich Harbour. I remember that there was this one emergency, we were lying in the bungalow one night and all of a sudden the platoon commander came and said we had to fall in, that the enemy had landed at Sandwich Harbour and we were going to...with tanks and what have you, we're going to have to go down there and sort this problem out. I tell you we nearly shat ourselves. Because we were taught that there were Russians off the coast,</p>

	<p>they were just waiting to come in and land troops in South West Africa and take it over. So we were actually convinced that the Russians were waiting to come in. And that's when you were 18. And we were convinced that that was what we were going to do, have to fight Russians. And at that stage I'd never heard...although it was 1964...I'd never heard of the ANC. I didn't know what it was. Never heard of it. It was never mentioned, spoken about, or anything. Right then we came back to South Africa and then the next thing that happened is that you got a letter from your regiment to say that you are now in the Rand Light Infantry and you must report on Monday night for drill. So you arrived at the union grounds and there you were met by NCOs and officers who were now wearing regimental kit.</p>
Interviewer	The Union Grounds are now Sturrock Park?
John Keene	No, the Union Grounds were opposite the Drill Hall...
Interviewer	In downtown Johannesburg where Joubert Park is now.
John Keene	<p>Yes, where Joubert Park is, that was the Union Grounds. The union grounds was the headquarters of the Transvaal volunteers just after the Anglo Boer War. Opposite was the Drill Hall which was the headquarters of the Transvaal volunteers when it was started and it was later taken over by the Union Defence Force and subsequently the SADF. And it was the headquarters of Witwatersrand Command. By the time we were called up half of the union grounds had been taken over for a car park. It was called a Jack Mincer car park. It's where the taxis are all today. And they had these bungalows along the northern side of the union grounds which was the regimental headquarters of some regiments, of the Citizen Force regiment. So we arrived there, and again we were put into companies. And so I arrived there...my first parade with the Rand Light Infantry was in October 1965. And you were taught what your regiment stood for and all that. And I already knew all about that from my father. And the OC at the time was a friend of my father's who had been with him in the Second World War. And the process in the Citizen Force then was that you would go to parade every Monday night.</p>
Interviewer	So now you're no longer 24 hours in the Defence Force?
John Keene	No, now you stayed at home.
Interviewer	Now you're at home doing whatever your career is.
John Keene	<p>Yes, doing whatever you're going to do. And then your regiment would have a camp every year and it would be a 3 week camp. The obligation in those days was that you did your 9 months training, and then you had to do 3 three week camps, and after 4 years you were out. That was it. And then you were issued with a discharge certificate and that was the last you ever had to do with the army. So I arrived there in October '65 and then the first camp that I did was in July 1966. I did a camp with the Johannesburg regiment in Potchefstroom. And it was for 3</p>

	<p>weeks. I went in July '66 because I'd started at Wits and I applied to go to do my camp in the holidays and the Johannesburg regiment was doing it in the July holidays. So that was 1966 and by then I'd been promoted to a corporal. And then in about...I think it was November '66 I was promoted to a sergeant...the quick promotion came on the basis that I had learned all this work that you needed to know at the Army Gymnasium and I was a crack at drill and all that sort of stuff. And then 1967 we went to camp again for operation Spitskop 2. Which was a brigade exercise in Potchefstroom. There were about 5000 troops there. And we were brigaded together with the Cape Town Rifles, the Dukes, and the Transvaal Scottish, and of course all the artillery and armour and stuff together. First time I'd seen Sherman tanks operating. These exercises that they had, I have to tell you, as far as the troops were concerned were the most complete shambles you've ever come across. The organisation was done by the Permanent Force and this camp in 1967 in Potch, I think it was in April, it rained incessantly for the three weeks that we were there, and all the troops had gyppo guts, virtually the whole time. And the idea of the exercise apparently was this, what they called marrying up, where you had disparate units coming together. The thing was called 101 Motorised Battalion. And it was then that I realised that things were really pretty disorganised in the Defence Force. I was then promoted at that camp to a WO2. And we did the normal things like that shooting practices and we operated with the support weapons and all that. And then we had an exercise at the end and the amusing thing about that was when we arrived in our areas where we were supposed to operate from the PF umpires came around and discovered that our battalion was facing the wrong direction. We had been sitting in trenches there for about a week not knowing what was happening. So that came to an end. That was in 1967. And that was the year in which they started National Service.</p>
Interviewer	<p>But during these exercises, you're now a bit older, because you're Citizen Force, all the guys have now gone to university or started their careers. Did the Citizen Force have the same sort of attitude that the Russians were just waiting to come ashore whether it would be on the West Coast or anywhere else?</p>
John Keene	<p>Up until that time that was still considered to be the problem. Because the exercises that we did were purely conventional. It was purely conventional, artillery firing behind you, infantry in trenches, the anti tank gunners prepared to take on tanks coming at you, and that's what we were taught, that the Russians are coming and the Russians were the threat and that was what we were preparing for. That was, I'm telling you the information that even the company commanders and the battalion commanders had. And in those days still the battalion commanders of the Citizen Force were mostly Second World War veterans. So we were still operating in the mindset of the Second World War, excepting instead of the enemy being the Germans, the enemy was now the Russians. Then 1967 there were major changes. All</p>

	<p>of us who had now done 2 camps...we were getting ready to do our last camp, and National Service was brought in and then we were told that you couldn't go out after 4 years, that you were going to have to stay for 10 years.</p>
Interviewer	<p>How did the guys respond to that?</p>
John Keene	<p>The guys didn't respond to that well. It was a huge blow. And I'm talking about blokes in the Citizen Force who now were faced with another 6 years of having to do camps. So, it was an advantage to the organisational structure of the regiment, because now they knew that they had people for longer than the 4 years before. Because by the time a bloke who is having to do 4 years, had done his 4 years, he's only started to really learn the ropes, and then he left. So now you had people that had to stay longer. So the troops got more experienced. And it actually from a regimental point of view it worked better because you had experienced NCOs now that could deal with the new chaps coming in. But what happened was that the administrative system that had existed up to then was entirely manual. The pay was done manually, the call ups were done manually, there was nothing done on a computer. But when they instituted National Service things started to become computerised. And there were always problems with the records. People would be on the record and people would be off the record and people that shouldn't have been on the record were there. It was just a shambles. Trying to keep up with the administrative changes and to have the necessary staff to do it properly, it just didn't happen. Like for example in a battalion in a Citizen Force you would have the clerks. You'd have the chief clerk and he would be responsible for all the files and that sort of thing, and if he didn't come in on a Monday night for some reason, he was sick or he'd asked for leave or something, the work wouldn't get done and it would start piling up and then the administration started to break down. In our regiment we had an OC called Dave Vos who was one of these chaps that was interested in computers in the early days and he tried to create his own computer system to handle the records. And while it was reasonably successful there were always holes in it. So what happened after the announcement of the extension of National Service to 10 years was that... the battle became one of trying to keep up with your personnel administration. So then these camps started, and the first camp that we did where we heard about... Then when this issue came in, then the camps instead of being every year were every second year. So the next time we went to camp was in 1969. And that was the first camp that we ever heard about the ANC. And this was now changed from conventional warfare to what we call the Coin Ops. Counter insurgency operations. That was the first time we'd ever encountered this concept. And we had a big exercise called Exercise Tambotie, which took place in the Vaalwater area. Now most of the troops that were on that exercise were now confused between conventional and non conventional operations. So on that camp we started to the</p>

	beginning of patrolling, looking for insurgents. And the training was based on what the British had done in Malaysia. All the training exercises and the training films we were shown was related to what the British had done in Malaysia. And I can tell you that when the troops came away from that camp they didn't know what the hell was going on. They didn't know. The forces were called AntiSA forces. Anti South Africa Forces.
Interviewer	Do you think this was introduced because of what was going on in the early stages of the bush war in Rhodesia and also the increased independence wars in Angola and Mozambique?
John Keene	Absolutely yes. So...I've probably skipped over certain influences that were taking place, but in Mozambique the Portuguese were still there, and the same applied in Angola. The Portuguese were still in Angola. This was long before 1975, you mustn't forget. And UDI...when did UDI take place?
Interviewer	1964. (<i>This is incorrect. It was 11 November 1965. M. Cadman</i>)
John Keene	'64. So UDI had taken place and we were getting stories from people that...obviously the PF offices had information about Mozambique and Angola and what was going on there, but that didn't filter down to the ordinary troops at all. That was Portugal's business. Angola was miles away. Rhodesia was completely different from South Africa, it would never happen here, this is South Africa you know. So that was in 1969. And then in 1971, the regiment first went to the border. What happened then was that we were going on training and one group went to Madimbo, which is on the Limpopo, and the other group went up to Caprivi. And that was the first time that we'd seen the new kit, this new Nutria kit. Before that we were still wearing the khaki and overalls and that sort of thing. And then all of a sudden now they were dishing out this fantastic new kit.
Interviewer	That was the brown uniform that was standard with SADF up until about 1990.
John Keene	Yes. We first saw it in 1971. And then as I say, one company went up to Caprivi, and they came back from Caprivi with all these stories about what was going on there. But mostly they seemed to have been fishing in the river and all that, catching tiger fish and one thing and another. So that was 1971. Then in 1973 we did another camp in...it was called Operation Gazankulu. And that again was a development of this Coin work where we're starting to do patrols along the border and that sort of thing, looking for insurgents.
Interviewer	And that would have been based in what is now Limpopo province? Then the Northern Transvaal.
John Keene	Yes. And that was also a kind of a brigade exercise because they'd started to form these Citizen Force brigades, 18 brigades had been formed, and the headquarters was...that Hudson Ntsanwisi was the head of Gazankulu. And they had the

	headquarters at Giyani. So there the troops were learning to operate on maps in the bush and all that and how to form temporary bases and all that sort of stuff. But it was still very unimpressive. And again we had these Permanent Force people that seemed to us to have been heavily indoctrinated.
Interviewer	So now they're talking to you guys, by now you're in your early thirties if my maths is right, you've got some experience of the world, you're there as a warrant officer so you...
John Keene	And I was a regimental sergeant major by the time.
Interviewer	Ok, so you're quite senior in the organisation now. What was the view of the guys when they were being called up? Was it just an irritation in their lives that they had to do...
John Keene	Completely. Just a complete waste of time. The attitude was always...the attitude of the troops...I mean, by disciplining them and all that in sort of motivating them, you could get them working together, and because you were in a regiment you could instil a bit of regimental pride and that sort of thing. Because our regiment was one where I insisted on the kind of British style of discipline where you did as you were told, and made sure that the officers ate after the men and that the men were comfortable and that you looked after their welfare. You saw that their post was there, and the canteen was open and they had their beer at night and there was no nonsense, and they shot properly and they did everything they were supposed to do properly. So you built a kind of esprit de corps and morale.
Interviewer	And you were primarily an English speaking unit?
John Keene	Absolutely. Absolutely. But from 1967 when National Service started I think...whenever it was that General Malan became Chief of the Army, then we started to get Afrikaans speakers being posted into the regiment. And that started a lot of problems. Because the Afrikaans speaking blokes didn't enjoy the discipline. The do as you're told type of thing. And the minute that you gave them a hard time they want to talk to the dominee. Although we didn't have a dominee at the time...we sometimes used to have padre, but they would get miserable and they didn't like responding to the English commands and all that kind of...so there was always this problem between the English speaking person and the Afrikaans speaking person. <i>(counter at 350)</i>
	TAPE TWO SIDE A <i>(tape stretched/damaged)</i>
Interviewer	You were saying that you were starting to get an influx of young Afrikaans guys who were not necessarily enamoured with the way they were given commands and the discipline of the unit, which created some problems within itself.
John Keene	But the general feeling amongst the troops was that it's just something that has to be done. That if these Communists come

	<p>here well we've got to sort it out. Because then we were getting this heavy indoctrination. We'd have these people coming from the training teams telling us that the country was at threat now from Communist trained guerrillas that were being especially trained in Russia and all over the world and that their object was just to overthrow the government. And that we had to prepare because of international Communism wanting to take over South Africa particularly because it had all of these wonderful mineral resources and all that kind of stuff.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And the Cape sea route.</p>
John Keene	<p>The Cape sea route, that was all on as well. So the general bloke of about 20, 25, he doesn't care. He doesn't think, most of them don't read newspapers, all they want to do is smoke dagga and drink and screw women and the usual things you know. And get home and earn their loaf of bread, whatever you call it, and run his wheels. You know the intellectual capacity of the average chap wasn't great. And of course they'd been living in this environment where blacks had been suppressed and they didn't really think it was suppression or anything like that, they just thought that's the way blacks live. They live in townships, they work on farms, that's what they like to do.</p>
Interviewer	<p>But now you're a bit senior and you'd obviously thought deeply...when you first went into the army you'd thought about Buddhism and things most of these guys wouldn't have thought about. What was your perception of what was happening? When you had these guys coming in, propaganda, did you sort of scratch your head and say what were these guys on about?</p>
John Keene	<p>I just thought these were paranoid Afrikaners that had their own issues about life. And to me quite honestly I enjoyed being out in the bush and doing the training and the shooting and the working with the technical aspects of the thing, but the actual moral issues didn't strike me until...well in fact the moral issues had struck me. I was totally against this notion of apartheid for example. A fact that you couldn't associate with whom you wanted to. A notion of any Immorality Act to me was absolutely unspeakable because I mean there were beautiful black people that you liked and enjoyed their company and all that kind of stuff, but you weren't allowed to associate with them, and I thought that was disgusting and quite frankly it was something that I went out of my way to do, simply because it wasn't allowed. But nonetheless I also felt that there was a reality in this Communist threat. That Iron Curtain, Berlin Wall, that was still there, the question of you know the Check Point Charlie and all of that was still very much topical and people used to talk about it. It was still reported. The papers, there were still incidents...</p>
Interviewer	<p>...the concept of the Cold War.</p>
John Keene	<p>Yes, so to me you couldn't divorce the Cold War from what was happening in this country, particularly the wealth of this country. So even up at that stage I was still feeling that despite the fact</p>

	<p>that I thought that apartheid was a lousy ideology that if it was so that the Communists had now persuaded the blacks to become Communists and to support the Eastern Bloc then we were in trouble as Europeans. So that was part of the thinking process. Then in 1975 there was news in the paper about South Africans being in Angola. Now all that we knew about that was what we read in the papers. There was no information that filtered down to the regiments about that. It certainly didn't reach people at my level. So at that stage our involvement in Angola was not even something that I thought about. And then the next thing that happened was that the regiment was called up to go to South West Africa. And we called up our regiment and we went off by train from Johannesburg station to Grootfontein.</p>
Interviewer	How many men was that?
John Keene	<p>At that stage we must have had about 650 men. So we went to Grootfontein and that was the first time I'd seen Grootfontein as well. And it was amazing because there in the middle of nowhere we saw this huge development taken place, and I was told by my OC that that place cost R147 million to build, which I thought at the time was a hell of a lot of money. So we arrived in Grootfontein and we went to transit camp there. Now that's transit camp gave me the willies. (<i>inaudible</i>) had been up there just before us when they'd actually gone into Angola, and Commandant Jim Findlay that day had been lying at Calueque (<i>Remainder of tape damaged.</i>)</p>
	TAPE 3 SIDE A
John Keene	<p>...my regiment, I don't know what the feeling was in other regiments. I presume...maybe it wasn't as bad in other regiments where they didn't have the same kind of people but what they couldn't bear was the way the police used to behave. The absolute sort of...undisciplined...the police used to just do what they liked.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So you've got these soldiers who've been trained that a corporal responds to a sergeant and a sergeant responds to an officer and so on and so forth. They felt that that was breaking down. Now they're working alongside these police units, who would have been in command? Would the military guys have their own commanders and the police their own commanders? Would have taken control of the area?</p>
John Keene	<p>What used to happen was that they used to have a thing called a JOC, a Joint Operations Centre, where the police and the military would get together and this is on an officer level and they would make decisions and then these would just pass down to the troops. They'd say there's a problem in this particular area and then your battalion must handle this area, or your company whatever it might be. And then you'd deploy the Buffels there and you'd go and do cordons and searches. Cordons and searches</p>

	were the basic things where you'd sort of ring an area and then the police would go in and do the searches. And sometimes you'd have the police coming on the Buffels with you. The police seemed to have more knowledge about the people and what was going on there than the army did. The army just basically provided protection for the police.
Interviewer	So it was support. You were bodyguards basically.
John Keene	Yes, basically bodyguards for the police. And then the police used to go and behave like lunatics and the troops would have to watch this and they didn't like it. In our regiment we wouldn't allow policemen to get onto a vehicle with a quirt for example.
Interviewer	A quirt being an old fashioned sjambok. Talking about the Joint Operation Centre, I'm sure that was more in the eighties than it was in the seventies...
John Keene	Yes.
Interviewer	Around about that time with the State Security Council, PW Botha and his guys instituted the Joint Management Centres, which they would have called in people from all sectors, as you know, the military, the police, and so on, school teachers to discuss situations in certain areas. Would an officer from Rand Light Infantry or yourself have been expected to go to the local one if you were operating in whether it was Zwide or Alexander or whatever? Would they have called in an officer from the unit to discuss issues...?
John Keene	Yes, there would be a order group. Or a planning session or something, and you'd sit there and listen to the police's presentation and whoever. That was all sort of organised in a pattern from a higher level.
Interviewer	And an order group would have been...if a unit had been posted to a particular area...the order group would have been the senior commanders from all the relevant people?
John Keene	Yes. You know the military would always work in that way. Wherever the planning headquarters was, whoever was in charge of your unit, would go there. Then he was the overall commander of your troops, he would go to the order group, and he would listen, he'd come back and give his orders. Yes, that's always the way the militaries operate.
Interviewer	Did military intelligence get involved at all? Would they come and talk to you and explain what they thought...
John Keene	They never talked to the troops. No, they would give a presentation at the JOC or...and then it was expected of the people that were present then to filter it down on a need to know basis. So generally speaking, on that level, when you're operating in the townships, there's nothing that's top secret or anything like that.

Interviewer	The way I see it, and I think the way all of us saw it, as the eighties ground on, the manpower requirement in the townships got greater and greater and greater. Was there a sense within the Citizen Force that this was a battle that couldn't be won?
John Keene	Absolutely. Absolutely. Couldn't wait to get out. And it was just doing it day by day. See what will happen tomorrow. And then of course, not only that, there was still the problems on the border. After Cuito Canavale and all that, after we pulled out of Angola, there was still fun and games going on in South Africa. So we used to go and do patrols on the Botswana border in the Group 29 area. Group 29 was the commander headquarters. At the time it was run by Colonel Jan Jooste, he was a very crackerjack soldier. But it was a losing battle because again we had bases there like at Batavia and Rooibok Kraal and Swartwater and Ellis Rus. Virtually from Beit Bridge right down to Derdepoort. And when we called our battalion up...we took over from 8 SAI, 8 SAI being the National Service battalion, again one of those battalions where they had full control over the people for the 2 years. When we arrived that place was again like a Bedouin camp. And we had 52 people in total...all in one base. I think we had 150 odd in total.
Interviewer	Ok so that's a tiny percentage of what should have been necessary. So the guys simply said, no more of this.
John Keene	Yes, they just didn't come.
Interviewer	And what year was that?
John Keene	1991, '92.
Interviewer	So by then any reliance military may have had on Citizen Force was finished.
John Keene	Finished. Because in 1989 old De Klerk had made his statement. We were then in 1991, '92, scraping the bottom of the barrel trying to pretend that we were protecting the border from infiltration from Botswana. It was absolutely impossible. We used to ride up and down the roads in a Buffel and see what we could see. And we didn't see anything. And then I would go as a company commander then to the headquarters at Group 29 and you'd see this great big operations map here and there'd be incidents on this farm and incidents on that farm. And then you'd...it was just totally reactive. You'd just rush to the farm and say, well what did you see? And they'd say, well there were 3 blokes walking along near and one had a red hat and the other one had a pair of takkies and...we were just rushing around after, chasing your tail. Thus costing the State a hell of a lot of money. And then you had the Com Ops people...I've got the orders here...I got the full ops orders, it was called Ops Xenon or something. You can take it and read it if you'd like.
Interviewer	I'd love to read it, it will provide an interesting insight. So essentially there you are, you've got a unit that has got a long

	and proud history of military training going back into world wars and so on and so forth. You've been off to the Angolan border and stuff like that carrying assault rifles and machine guns, and now in the end you ended up just running around sticking plasters on issues but there was no way you could fix the major ailments.
John Keene	No. And then of course was the elections. When the elections came. Then we had to call up troops for the election. And we gathered together about 100 troops and then they went out as looking after the polling stations and all that, and that was quite a positive thing. That was the most positive thing that we'd done in 30 years.
Interviewer	But as you say by then the entire system had just simply broken down. When you guys were called up and told you're not going to the border anymore you're actually going to Kwanobuhle were they given...or were you as commanders given enough chance to retrain them to crowd control as opposed to counter insurgency or conventional warfare?
John Keene	Well basically you did a bit of basic training before you went. You called the troops up, they went down to Doornkop here, they were given their injections, their kit was replenished, they were given a briefing on what was happening there, and told what sort of work they would be doing. And that was, as I say, it was cordons and searches. That was basically it, cordons and searches. Stamp, putting out fires. All the training basically required there was they got a riot helmet, they did a few riot formation drills, and then they got in the Buffel, and then they drove around in the Buffel. And head up the side streets if somebody tried to run away or the kids would throw stones at them or something like that. But then on the other hand when they were in Alexandra township for example, the people in the township would actually feed them. They'd give them beers...you know a bloke in a taxi would drive past and hand them a 6 pack of beers and that sort of thing.
Interviewer	So there were many instances when they were considered to be less of a foe than say the police for example.
John Keene	Yes, oh absolutely. There was actually, amazingly enough, especially in the Transvaal townships, there was a sort of modus vivendi between the people and the troops. Because the troops didn't feel badly towards the people. In fact they felt a bit embarrassed. Watching a policeman walking through somebody's house. I mean that was embarrassing.
Interviewer	So essentially as much as the political masters were trying to maintain this united face against this uprising, the foe, on the ground actually exposure the soldiers were getting was that some of the people in the townships were actually just normal people?
John Keene	Yes.

Interviewer	So it was actually working counter to the propaganda.
John Keene	Absolutely. In fact right from the word go, the propaganda, after Savannah I think, the troops didn't trust the people at the top. I'm especially talking about the Citizen Force. You didn't know what they were talking about. You heard about the State Security Service and BOSS and the CCB...this is something that we heard about. Because (<i>inaudible</i>) was an OC at 7 Div at one stage.
Interviewer	7 Division being?
John Keene	That's the Citizen Force Division here at Kensington. They formed a 7 Division...Roland De Vries later became the OC of that Division. But they used to do these big exercises and one thing and another. They still did some conventional exercises and that.
Interviewer	(<i>Inaudible</i>) background was that he was a very serious soldier and he commanded 7 Div and then thereafter became involved in the CCB.
John Keene	And one of the problems, and I think you get it in any country, it doesn't matter where you are, although I don't profess to be an expert on what every other country does. But you always get these gung ho types. I mean that's what the world's made up of these sort of rabid red neck gung ho fellas that want to...the Rambo types. And these special units always attract those type of people. That's why, while I have a great admiration for what I understand as the Recces of D Squadron and the Special Forces of Rhodesia I've always been suspicious of Special Forces personally because I've read during my lifetime about people like Slim who were totally against Special Forces, like Ord Wingate's Chindits because he said that they tend to become a law unto themselves.
Interviewer	These are soldiers that served in Burma in the Second World War.
John Keene	Yes. But Slim believed that if you have Special Forces they become an imperium. And they undermine the integrity of the defence force. Because they answer only to themselves. And I must say that that's my experience as well because whenever I've encountered...and I'm not saying I've encountered Reconnaissance troops operating by themselves...and I've only got admiration for the ones that I know. I know that when I went to South West Africa, to Ruacana, the paratroopers came into my base there and I thought their behaviour was absolutely atrocious. And one expects that from a supposedly elite unit like the parachute battalion that there would be a standard of discipline and integrity that would surpass those of ordinary units. But they didn't. I thought they behaved abominably.
Interviewer	So you as a regimental sergeant major, which is in military terms, quite a serious rank, if you'd asked just a standard soldier to do

	something or tell them to shut up and behave themselves, he would view you with a certain amount of contempt. Not all of them but some...the parachute officers...
John Keene	Yes, to them, they would only sort of take orders from a paratroop commander. So if you wanted to insist that he obeys you, you'd have a sulky face on the other hand.
Interviewer	So they thought they were superior to you?
John Keene	Yes. And that's one of the problems that developed.
Interviewer	So, if I understand you correctly, certainly I'm looking at the situation now in northern South West Africa and Angola, you had a military which a mercenary force like 32 Battalion, backed by Special Forces soldiers like the recces and to some degree the parachute battalion guys. They were doing the bulk of the fighting, but on big operations the Citizen Force, the National Servicemen would back them, so most of the time the National Servicemen and the Citizen Force were essentially back up soldiers, supply lines, insignias and so on. So you had a very disjointed operation going on. 32 Battalion, my understanding is, were a law unto themselves. Reconnaissance Commando had their own command structure and then you had the Citizen Force who were also separate and then the National Servicemen who were separate. So you had lots of conflicting command structure.
John Keene	Yes. On paper it seemed to be coherent, but in fact it wasn't. The type of thing to me that is an index of the competence of your military is...the standard of your administration and logistics. Because if your administration and logistics are not good then it shows that there's something wrong with the whole organisation. Like when I went to Grootfontein and I was walking around the base while the troops were busy getting organised with kit and all that sort of stuff, and I arrived at the ammunition dump where the artillery ammunition was. Now, artillery ammunition is expensive stuff, hey. And the driving bands on the projectiles are critical. And they have to be covered with grommets so that they don't get distorted in any way. There the troops were pushing the 55 shells around on their driving bands, where the grommets had fallen off. So you're talking about, at that stage, a R2500 worth of projectile that's absolutely useless. And for example when we had, at that stage we hadn't got Buffels yet, we were still using those Unimogs, those were expensive vehicles. They were made by Mercedes Benz. A side shaft would break, so there would be no side shafts available. The next thing they'd send up a whole front wheel assembly. There was no mechanism for fixing a side shaft. So you can imagine what it cost to write off the other side shaft and replace it with a whole front wheel assembly. And then when I went to 81 Technical Stores Depot...I went there in my position as a museum person to go and get some obsolete material that they were donating to the Museum, I went there and that is the sort of base depot where all the warlike material is kept, like engines and one thing or another for the vehicles, and

	like wire for the landlines and that sort of thing. You go there and they'd look up on a computer where say an engine was supposed to be. It would have a location. You'd go to that location the engine wasn't there. Meantime on the inventory they said they had 10 engines there. And they'd been put somewhere else by a National Serviceman but it hadn't been entered onto the computer.
Interviewer	Roughly what year would that have been?
John Keene	That was around the early eighties. So you saw the breakdown that had happened there. And what would happen is because the engines weren't there, they'd order another 10. Meantime there were 10...they'd write off the 10 that they couldn't find.
Interviewer	So you've got this army...and I'm using army directly as opposed to the air-force and the navy because I suspect that the situation there might have been slightly different because they were smaller...but this army that was viewed from the outside as the most powerful in Africa, and unstoppable army, but internally was not as well organised as perceived from outside and in fact at times downright inefficient.
John Keene	Mmm. But you see at the top I think the systems as they'd envisaged them at the top were great. I mean, for example, General Viljoen was the man that brought in this 5 staff component system that was the ops personnel, intelligence, finance...what was the other one? Anyway there were 5 staff components and the entire Defence Force was broken down into these 5 staff components, and it was a very efficient system. There was nothing wrong with the system, but it was the application of the system down the line where it started to break down. Because of the fact you had National Servicemen. The National Servicemen were the people that were running this army. They were the people that were actually running the army. And because of the fact that they were not always persuaded that this is what they wanted to do, they'd allow the system to break down. Not even deliberately, just by omission.
Interviewer	I think your National Serviceman, firstly you were compelled to do your National Service by law or you could have gone to jail, or leave the country, but most people opted to simply do it. But if you look at it, I think we discussed it last time, the backgrounds of the individuals would be vastly different. An English speaking chap who grew up in the northern suburbs of Joburg and was planning to go to Wits would have had a very different attitude to some guy growing up in Thabazimbi on a farm. So to expect the whole system of National Servicemen to work as a cohesive bunch was all cloud cuckoo land.
John Keene	You see that's the issue that I think was never addressed. If they did address it, or if they did think about it, they never did anything about it. The split between the English speaking person and the Afrikaans speaking person in the Defence Force was always there. And to the best of my knowledge that was never

	<p>addressed as being a reality. I believe that the powers that be just wished it away. The fact was that it was always said that when you came into the army it was 50/50. You know one day English, one day Afrikaans. And the attitude of the Permanent Force was for the first 50 years it was English, now for the next 50 years it's going to be Afrikaans. And whether you like it or don't that's what it is. So the English speaking person was actually forcibly inculcated with this ethos, which I think he accepted with a degree of jocularly, but in the same time with a resistance that the Permanent Force didn't understand.</p>
Interviewer	<p>That's interesting because essentially I mean here we are, we're talking about a period 70-80 years after the Anglo Boer War. It was almost like some of that enmity still remained.</p>
John Keene	<p>Absolutely. Absolutely. When I was on the officer's course on the Army Gymnasium, we were 8 in the tent and there were 2 English speaking blokes, one chap called John Gannon who was from the DLI. And we used to lie in bed at night listening to these Afrikaans guys talking and they'd come from places like Kenhardt and Worcester and they were talking about perde and all that kind of stuff. And we used to listen to their conversation and couldn't believe the level of conversation that they would have. And they always brought up the Anglo Boer War. You know for example when I was there in 1965, I didn't know who people like Muller were. I mean, I'm sorry to say, I subsequently learned who he was. But these guys knew everybody that was against them in the Anglo Boer War. When they talked about the concentration camps I frankly didn't know what they were talking about. And I didn't believe what they were talking about. That shows you the ignorance of a young person.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Sure, but nevertheless it had become part of their absolute vision of the war or their understanding of the world, and it was driven by what their families had taught them about the Boer War.</p>
John Keene	<p>Yes, this was their country, and they were going to keep it. And everybody else was their enemy, particularly the Englishman. And all Englishmen were untrustworthy and all Englishmen were inherently inclined towards Communism and so on.</p>
Interviewer	<p>To a degree I think that was encapsulated in that fairly derogatory comment that you're a Soutpiel. You had your feet in England, your nether regions were dangling in the ocean and your hands were in South Africa. So you were a temporary resident. In their minds. And that, to my knowledge, that expression carried on well into the late eighties and probably the nineties.</p>
John Keene	<p>It probably still exists. But on the other hand there was this inherent arrogance of the English speaking person that the Dutchman was born thick.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Yes, he was a stupid farmhand.</p>
John Keene	<p>Yes, that he actually had no grasp on reality at all and that he</p>

	was totally controlled by the dominee, and what the dominee said went.
Interviewer	Dealing with your soldiers at Rand Light Infantry, when they'd be called up and sent off, whether it was to the Caprivi strip or Ovambo Land, or whether they were going to the townships, what sort of contact would you have had with wives, mothers, daughters, families, would have you have ...did you ever have any contact and say, listen this is why you're doing it, don't worry it's all going to be ok, and explain the situation. Or were the families just left in the dark?
John Keene	Well, towards the end the Com Ops people...these were supposedly the sort of propaganda branch of the army...when you arrived at camp they'd send your parents a letter to say, you're doing this great job for your country and all that kind of stuff. But everybody thought it was a load of bullshit anyway. And they used to communicate with their families usually by telephone and letters and all that and say I've got enough to eat and basically that's as far as it went. Excepting for the gung ho blokes that used to write a lot of nonsense to their...and then of course you had the censors that would read these letters and cross out all the stuff that they didn't want to see and all that sort of stuff...
Interviewer	Like place names and...
John Keene	Yes, and also if the bloke was talking too much nonsense. And that also irritated the troops so they used to deliberately write the biggest nonsense that you've ever read. <i>Laughs</i>
Interviewer	With regards to...I don't know if you have regimental get togethers and things like that, but if you do and you talk about...I'm thinking now this is the pre 1990 period or even pre '94 period, do the guys say, oh hell that was a waste of time and I actually resent having done that or is there a sense of, well, there were elements of good fun but it was actually a futile exercise?
John Keene	That's a very interesting question, I tell you...you know, after the Second World War...in fact after the First World War you had the MOTH organisation starting. And you had the South African Legion as well that was started by Earl Haig. The Legion's job was to look after the welfare of returned soldiers and so forth, and the MOTH's, that was the Memorable Order of Tin Hats, which was motivated by the 3 ideas of sound memory, troop comradeship and something else... (<i>counter at 361</i>)
	SIDE B (<i>counter at 39</i>)
John Keene	...and in fact, the regimental associations were also very strong, when they had the Second World War veterans. But they're dying out now. The Legions dying, the MOTHs are dying, there's a couple of blokes that join up, mainly to drink, but they don't belong anymore. But that's a social phenomenon because you used to have these old boy's clubs, school old boy's clubs, they also died out. So there's some kind of sociological change that's

	<p>taken place amongst the youth, that they don't join organisations like that. And you do still have the regimental organisations that struggle to keep themselves going. They have a handful of people and generally speaking those that join up are the ex NCOs who worked more or less together in the office, but as far as the troops are concerned, no interest at all. None whatsoever. You can have a, for example, on the 11th of November they have the Armistice Day Parade. Or, you can have a Battle of El Alamein commemoration parade. They used to be quite strongly represented when the Second World War veterans were still alive and then there were still blokes in the regiment that were required to do service. You could persuade them to come along and join in sort of thing. But once the call up system disintegrated that just died, and I can assure you that in ten years time they won't exist. But as far as the troops are concerned, I don't think there's any interest whatsoever.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So if they have memories they keep it to themselves or a couple of their own mates when they get together around the braai or wherever it might be.</p>
John Keene	<p>Yes. And of course the guys that did the most things will talk about it. And the chaps that were actually in on those ops like Protea and Reindeer and those kind of things, they'd probably have more to speak about than the chaps that were just there. But a strong organisation is the Special Forces, the paratroopers and so forth.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Yes, they are, I've been speaking to them. And they are, they were quite well organised, they do get together and so on. Along the lines of what we've been talking about, the English Afrikaans split, the final breakdown of the call up system amongst the Citizen Force unit, is there anything you want to add? You touched on when you were at base in Namibia and you had 32 battalion working in southern Angola and the Special Forces and so on and so forth, a lot of these sort of counter insurgency actual fighting was left to Koevoet. Now Koevoet seemed to be a law unto itself.</p>
John Keene	<p>Absolutely, yes.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And to a degree I'm sure their reputation reflected badly on all the South African forces out there.</p>
John Keene	<p>Mmm.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Did you have any direct dealings with Koevoet or...?</p>
John Keene	<p>Never. No, I had nothing to do with Koevoet. Quite frankly if I had I would never have had anything to do with them. I just thought...what I heard and one heard a lot about what was going on and it just sounded disgusting to me.</p>
Interviewer	<p>But they would never have contacted you and said, listen you've got vehicles patrolling such and such an area, we're operating</p>

	here as well.
John Keene	No.
Interviewer	Nothing. So they didn't even bother to let you know.
John Keene	No.
Interviewer	Alright along the lines of what we've discussed is there anything you want to add or anything else that paints a picture of this organisation in the time that we're talking about?
John Keene	Just to...when you're saying that the South Africans had a reputation of being a really powerful army, I think that was true. I mean, firepower we had. I don't think any African force could have done anything with us because firepower we certainly had. And technical expertise we certainly had. And we had well trained troops. Not in general but there were well trained units. And I believe that even in Savannah it was quite obvious that with whatever drawbacks the SADF was labouring under, it was still able to put up a pretty good offensive against what was then opposed to them. But the fact is that because of National Service, and because that they had to call up every single white male citizen of this country, just that fact had the same negative result as the issue in Vietnam had. A man that doesn't want to be there is a cancer to the morale of the rest of the people. And when you've got people that are standing side by side who are not of the same view, who are not motivated by the same ideology, and who don't have the same world view, it's just bound to fail. And I read somewhere, or I was told by somebody that Jannie Geldenhuys, when it came to Cuito Canavale, said that to the politicians that they'd better find a solution to this because if they don't South Africans are going to bleed and South Africa can't afford that. It doesn't have the political will to bleed.
Interviewer	Wasn't the point that, at Cuito the political masters weren't willing to commit large forces. They tried to fight that battle with relatively limited forces built around Unita, there were 32 battalions, Special Forces and then 61 MAG. But they needed more air power, they needed more supplies and that, they couldn't get it from the politicians.
John Keene	Well you see the politicians knew that if you started to get big casualties there, you know like if you lost 2000 men or something like that, of 18 year olds, that they weren't going to stay in power for very much longer.
Interviewer	So in a way, this was a funny war that they fought going back to...I mean starting with the first incident in '66, but it was a very funny war that they fought it with a National Service component, a Citizen Force component, a small Special Forces component, but they were tiptoeing all the time. They didn't want to commit as many troops that they could have at times, a lot of it was secret, I mean we all know of troops who were in southern Angola but the government was denying it. So it was a very odd war because of

	a whole bunch of political considerations. At times it was a secret war almost.
John Keene	Yes. The way I think about it is that, you know...after the Second World War, when the new government came into power, a lot of attention was concentrated on the Defence Force. In other words killing the association with Britain, creating a completely new Defence Force which had an ideology that conformed with the government's policy. In other words their senior officers, and particularly in the army...as I mentioned to you before the navy and the air-force are slightly different because there the officers are inculcated with the technical aspects of their arm. Sailing ships and fighting at sea and pilot training and using an aircraft. That's what they're interested in. How does an aircraft perform, how does the ship perform? In the army you're holding the ground, and the SADF became, as it was openly stated by most thinking English speaking boys, the military wing of the Nationalist Party. And to be of any standing in the Defence Force you had to subscribe to the values of the Nationalist Party. I mean, I don't know if it had a manifesto like the Communists but it was Christian Nationalist and white supremacy. And if you didn't fit into that you weren't good enough to be a senior officer. So your training if you were going to be a senior officer, you had to take that into account. If you went on a senior staff course for example you had to make sure that you were saying the right things. If you held a contrary view well that was the end of your career. I mean, if you had to say, well look I think the ANC has got a pretty good point in wanting to resort to armed resistance, that was the end of you.
Interviewer	Do you think that coloured their decisions when they were actually fighting, making battle decisions, be it in Angola or elsewhere? Do you think that they were driven by this religious backing that they had to be right? That everything else was conflict to their religion, over and above contrary to their political beliefs?
John Keene	I think they went hand in hand quite honestly. I mean, this notion of die Volk...you might have had the State president was leading die Volk, but the guy that was in charge of die Volk was die man bo.
Interviewer	And almost that takes us back to our discussion about the Anglo Boer War and the guys in the tent that you were listening to talking about who did what in the Boer War because that was considered to be...that that war was also led by their belief in their god.
John Keene	Yes, they saw themselves very much the same as the Israelis. They were the <i>gekiese nasie</i> . And, I mean, I remember when I was at the last camp in 1991, I had a young dominee there, and he said to me one night at supper time did I know that the blood that flows in a black man's veins is not the same as that that flows in a white man's veins. So I said, no I didn't know that. And

	<p>he went on to tell me, in all seriousness, that in the bible it says that the black man hasn't got a crown on his head. That, have I noticed that they don't have a kroen. I didn't know what he was talking about. But, you know like, you've got a kind of thing...well you don't have one anymore because you haven't got any hair, but at the back of your head there's a kind of a hole. And a black man doesn't have that and that shows how different he is from a white man.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And that was his justification.</p>
John Keene	<p>Yes. And he fervently believed this. And he wasn't a stupid man. So if you're dealing with people like that, and it's the same...I mean the thing that used to embarrass me terribly and as it did most of the NCOs in my regiment. You know, wherever you went, whether you had a shooting competition or a tea party or a dinner or whatever it might have been, everything was always open with gebied. And then you'd have these long drawn out monologues and discussions with the Lord about how good he is to the people and...protect us and give us this wonderful fellowship. It used to be embarrassing.</p>
Interviewer	<p>But as you say when hand in glove was their belief of why they were doing these things. It provided the spiritual background for their political beliefs.</p>
John Keene	<p>The other thing that really...there's one thing that you need to mention now, they opened this battle school at Lohatla. And that...I don't know when exactly it started...but was it in the beginning of the eighties or...?</p>
Interviewer	<p>No, it was opened in the seventies. Because I remember there was an operation called Ops Caterpillar which was just after Kasinga, which was '78, and that was the training exercise for ?</p>
John Keene	<p>Ok, so they opened this training school, and then they had near the headquarters a place where the a <i>klip</i> parade. Everybody that went down there had to...you'd have a parade. And then you had to make this stone cairn. The English guys used to call it stone stapeling. And it was like a seriously religious parade where you'd solemnly walk forward and put another <i>klip</i> on this great big bloody pile of stones, like they did here at Pardekraal. And so they'd have the dominee there and the OC and they would kind of dedicate this process to building this pyramid or tone of stones. And that was to me shocking.</p>
Interviewer	<p>So again a kind of religious affirmation of all the training that you'd just been through.</p>
John Keene	<p>Yes, yes. So this...I don't know what you call it, whether it's esoteric or spiritual dimension that they tried to inculcate into everybody that went in, no matter whether their beliefs were that or not. It was offensive. I don't know if everybody found it offensive but I know a lot of people that found it terribly offensive. But of course that was never taken into account, because if you</p>

	did find it offensive then there was something wrong with your psychological makeup.
Interviewer	So once again then you'd have been viewed as either an English speaking enemy or an enemy of sorts within the Defence Force again.
John Keene	Yes. It was difficult that. So that to me is the major issue that's never ever been looked at and to me it would be a subject of interesting study to explore that division between English and Afrikaans speaker and their belief systems and their ethical systems. And the effect that it's had on people today.
Interviewer	I think that's a very good point because as we've discussed we can trace it back to the Anglo Boer War, then to a degree there was some resistance at the time of the Second World War although that was primarily the Ossewa Brandwag and there were a lots of Afrikaans speakers who fought like...who dedicated their lives to fighting against it. So it's not a general Afrikaans thing. But then you had Erasmus who tried to purge the English guys out of the military and then when it came time for the modern National Service system you had these people whit different values being told that they were going to fight for the same cause in the same army. I think it would make a fascinating study.
John Keene	And you see the other big thing is the independence of Mozambique and Angola. I mean, that I think gave rise to the necessity for having this National Service system, obviously as the things sort of wound down while the Portuguese were there, the SADF must have reckoned, well, what's going to fill the vacuum.
Interviewer	Well I think you're right because if you look at Mozambique, the Portuguese withdrew in, I think it was '74. And then Angola the first part of '75. And then by 1977 the SADF increased the call up to 2 years with 720 days worth of camps. So I think it was a direct response to that. And also by '77 they could see that the war in what was then Rhodesia was very, very serious.
John Keene	Mmm. I remember speaking to a chap called Colonel Torlage he was the 2 IC of Wit Command here, and he told me that at some OC's conference that they had in Pretoria in the late sixties, they'd made the decision that they had to increase the strength of the army to a hundred thousand men. They had to have a hundred thousand men under arms.
Interviewer	I think that's quite possible because I've been looking at question and answers in parliament in those years and there was a lot of emphasis on how big that they felt the army needed to be, or the SADF. And it was clearly in response to all of these conflicts we're talking about. And then compounded by Soweto '76, and then in the eighties it was widespread as you know.
John Keene	The amazing thing to me is that how ten years seemed to me sort

	<p>of telescoped into a small space of time. From 1965 when I joined up to 1975, how this whole thing in ten years escalated to the situation that it did. And then in the next ten years how it just grew and grew.</p>
Interviewer	<p>It's very interesting. I suspect there were a whole number of reasons. One was the way the world was...the Cold War by the end of the eighties was winding down. South Africa's economic position changed dramatically from the sixties when the rand was stronger than the US dollar, to the Rubicon speech in '86. Then the bottom fell out of the rand and then they were faced with economic sanctions. The SADF couldn't get everything they wanted and things changed dramatically quickly. Not to mention the internal uprising which they couldn't control with soldiers. That was far deeper than that.</p>
	<p>END OF INTERVIEW (<i>counter at 272</i>)</p>

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