

Sven Kreher

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Missing Voices Project

Interviewed by Mike Cadman

	SIDE A
Sven	I grew up in Johannesburg, I was born in hospital in Hillbrow. I've lived my life in Parktown West where I spent my first ten years. Then moved across to Westcliff and spent the next ten years there roughly. I was schooled in Johannesburg, The Ridge and then St Stithians. My father came from Germany, from East Germany as it was then. My mother's parentage was from Russia, from Lithuania. And I grew up at those schools obviously with a Christian schooling background but with no religious input from home, and the importance of what I'm saying now will become clearer later in a story that I may or may not be telling you.
Interviewer	And your family is relatively small? You have a sister?
Sven	I have one sister and two parents, and yes, we are a very small family.
Interviewer	As a young person, a teenager, did your family discuss politics much or was that an issue that was of interest but nothing of exceptional value?
Sven	No, we discussed politics, I don't know that we discussed it a lot but I remember discussing politics, discussing the prospects of the country, and in fact I think right around the time that I went to the army I think we had quite a few heavy debates about whether to leave the country or not. My father had an opportunity to go join an ex friend and colleague of his in America and there was quite a lot of debate as to whether we should go as a family and join, which we didn't do.
Interviewer	And then like most young white South African males your call up papers arrived when you were at school, probably when you were about 16, did you discuss that with your folks?
Sven	Yes, very definitely, we discussed it and also discussed at the time that one had to do the army, it was very much a compulsory thing. I don't think I had reached the stage of conscientious objection. There was as all white South Africans went through at the time, there was a great level of...brainwashing maybe being the wrong word, but there was certainly a great deal about what's expected of you as a citizen of the country. And I remember the time that I did receive call up papers in matric to go and do the army, and at the time thought, I had an interest in flying already, although I hadn't become a pilot yet, of maybe applying for the airforce, maybe applying to go to the navy. I remember the time saying, you know what, for one year I'll just go and muck in with the guys in the army, get a bit of discipline, get a bit of experience and then go and do it. So, yes, the call-up papers did come and I

	think two or three weeks, maybe a month before, actually having to report for duty, got the shock announcement that the one year had been extended to two years.
Interviewer	Did you intend to study before you went to the army or were you prepared to go straight into the army?
Sven	That was also debated and also discussed amongst the family, as to whether to study first or to go to the army first. In hindsight, had I known it was going to be two years I might have chosen to study first. But on the basis that it was a year of ones life that one had to get over with and get it done with and get it in the past, it was very tempting to use that year after school to get that done and then to tackle life after that.
Interviewer	What year are we talking about, what year did you finish school?
Sven	I matriculated in 1977, so my intake year was '78 and I landed up '78, and '79.
Interviewer	And what unit were you called up to?
Sven	I was called up to the 10 Light Anti Aircraft Unit in Youngsfield in Cape Town.
Interviewer	So you took the decision that, well, you'd better go off to this army, the call up, can you explain a bit about what happened when you arrived at Youngsfield.
Sven	Again, having said this, I was now in the call up process so the two years was a shock. But, arrive at Youngsfield and mucked in with everyone obviously, and did our basics, as everyone does, and then either during basics or shortly after, I don't remember, they called for volunteers to do the officer's course. I actually can't remember if they called for...they must have called for that at some stage during basics. But in the course of basics we had quite a few experiences, obviously training in the camp, but we also spent some time, I think in Ceres, in the mountains, doing some of the basic training and doing some of the physical stuff, where some of the interesting aspects of army life came to light.
Interviewer	When you say interesting aspects, in what sense?
Sven	For me in the sense that we were still in basics, and as I say, I don't remember whether I'd signed up yet for officer's course or not and in hindsight it would have made a difference. But I remember the time, I think it was a Reverend Taylor, a Methodist minister...if he's called a reverend...but definitely his name was Taylor...lecturing us one Sunday morning – we had to sit on the ground and listen to a sermon – and him lecturing us about some aspect of the bible, and then also stating in his lecture that those of us who weren't Christians were traitors to the country and had no right to be there basically, and we were traitors to the country. And I challenged him after the sermon saying, I took exception to the fact that he called me a traitor. I wasn't a Christian, I considered myself agnostic. He then asked me which school I

	<p>had gone to and I told him. And he said, is it a Christian school? I said it's a Methodist school to which he replied that my parents had a cheek to send me to a Christian school and that he considered me a traitor. And so I stood up for my rights at that stage...or not my rights, for my beliefs. I was 17 years old at the time, not yet 18, and basically left it at that. I was quite upset by it at the time. In hindsight as well, I could have called myself Jewish. My mother comes from Russia or her parents did and so from the female lineage I would be considered, and am considered by most Jewish people to be Jewish. Had I labelled myself Jewish instead of agnostic my career in the army would have been vastly different to what it turned out to be.</p>
Interviewer	And your food.
Sven	<p>And my food as well. <i>laughs</i> So yes...so that was an interesting aspect, and that (<i>inaudible</i>) and at the time, I remember it upset me a lot and I spoke to my parents about it, and we had a friend – and I'm sure he won't mind me mentioning it, by the name of Naas Steenkamp, who was involved with Gencor at the time – and he at the time said, did I feel badly enough about it that he would like me to mention it to Magnus Malan? And again, with hindsight and with experience today, I would have taken him up on the offer, but at the time I thought, there's no point in making a big issue of something here, when I've got two years to go to the army and involving higher people because I didn't know how it would turn out and what the response would be. So I asked him not to.</p>
Interviewer	And at the time Malan was head of the Defence Force?
Sven	Yes, he would have been. Chief of the Defence Force. I think he was.
Interviewer	And how long into your basics did this happen?
Sven	I'm guessing if basics is three months, probably in the second month.
Interviewer	So it's a period where you're physically tired because you've been woken up early, you're doing lots of physical exercise, they've taken you off to the mountains, I should imagine that was a fairly physical period as well?
Sven	<p>A very physical period...I somehow, even for that time of year though, seem to remember it being very cold, I don't know why. Unless that was a repeat, maybe the cold part came later when we went back there later for part of the officer's course. But, yes, sure, there was a lot of running, a lot of backpacks, a lot of greatcoats. a lot of marching, that is a time as you know, when you do get the physical brunt of army life.</p>
Interviewer	When this priest, reverend whatever he was, Taylor said these things to you, did he explain why he thought you were a traitor? Did he define what was traitorous about it?

Sven	Yes. The fact that you were not Christian.
Interviewer	So that in itself was an act of traitorism.
Sven	The fact that I was not a Christian was... anyone, he lectured to us, the whole lot of us, anyone who was not a Christian is a traitor to the country.
Interviewer	At that time at Youngsfield, did they give you lectures about who the enemy were, who you were fighting?
Sven	I don't remember that in particular. I don't remember being indoctrinated or... I don't remember that. I think, at the time we were part of the anti aircraft brigade, not that it would make a difference. They may have, I don't remember that clearly.
Interviewer	But there wasn't a constant ideological bend to lectures or anything like that?
Sven	No, I don't remember that at all.
Interviewer	And during your basics, was it as tough as you expected? Was it tougher than you expected? What were your instructors like?
Sven	I had no idea what to expect. You obviously knew you were going to go to the army and you were going to do physical stuff. The banality of it and some of the mindlessness and senseless of it, I suppose took me by surprise. I don't know whether that has affected my character for the good or bad, going into life and what I represent today and how that affected me. So was it tougher? Parts of it were very tough but I was expecting a lot of physical activity. From the mental side, the instructors, I remember particularly we had a bombardier... we didn't have corporals in the anti aircraft Bombadier Dobson, he had a very gruff voice and was an English guy, and he was in charge of a lot of our drilling and our training. And I remember specifically thinking that he was doing a job that he didn't particularly enjoy doing and put on a big show about what he was doing, but didn't really feel it, to answer your question about the instructors.
Interviewer	And then towards the end of your basics you volunteered for the officer's course. Were there any sort of restrictions? Did they check your educational sort of qualifications, your marks, did they put you through any particular test or did they simply say, well, you want to be an officer, that's cool, come along?
Sven	They did ask us if we wanted to volunteer for officer's course. They did tell us that the officer's course would last, I think it was six months. And I think it started within a week or two after basics, fairly quickly after basics. I can't remember if we had to write any aptitude tests or whether they judged us on our performance in basics. I don't actually remember what qualified one to enter the course. But I do know that I did volunteer for the course and I was accepted into the course.
Interviewer	And then over and aside the sort of physical stuff, what was the

	course about, what did they try and teach you during your officer's course?
Sven	Oh it was a lot about tactics, camouflage, anti aircraft, quite a lot about ballistics. I think quite a bit about machinery. And then in terms of the theory, I think that is...yes, tactics, camouflage, machinery, I can't remember all the things, but there was quite a lot of theory that went with it. And then obviously all the physical stuff that went in between, the mindless running the 2,4 with poles and rifles that we all did that went on obviously throughout the course. The drilling, the physical stuff, the early wake up calls in the morning, the long runs around Cape Town from three o'clock in the morning till whatever, all that stuff obviously was part of it.
Interviewer	So then you enter into this officer's course...did you complete the course and what happened at the end of the course?
Sven	I did complete the course. When we got to the half way stage of the officer's course and...I'm guessing it must have been somewhere around August, September, I know that out of 70 or 90 of us on course, I knew that based on the way I had been performing both physically and in terms of the intellectual component in terms of whatever theory we had to do, in terms of exams we had to write, I knew that I had coped well with all aspects of the course. And I was very surprised at the time of handing out at the halfway stage, they either give you one pip on your shoulder if you're going to be a candidate officer towards being a lieutenant, or else they give you one stripe as a lance bombardier, on your way to be getting two stripes as a bombardier. So the officer's course produced officers and bombardiers, the traditional distinction. And I expected to qualify and to get one pip. And what I don't remember was whether at the time I actually got nothing or whether I got one stripe, but I didn't get the officer candidature. Upon receipt of that information I suspected that there had to be some reason for that not coming through, because I couldn't believe that it was based on my performance within the course. And I challenged our captain, and I think his name was Swanepoel. An Afrikaans guy with a huge handlebar moustache. Very religious guy, but actually probably one of the more genuine people that I came across in the army. And I asked for an interview with him, or an appointment with him, which I got. And I went in and said to him that I suspected that maybe religion had something to do with what had happened. He assured me that that could never have been the case. But on me pressing him he said, I will look into it for you. And he did, he came back to me and he said, I'm afraid to say that you're right. That Reverend Taylor sits on the selection committee of who gets appointed and he said that there's no ways that we could have someone with your religious background or your religious beliefs being appointed as an officer in the army. I then, for whatever reason, I don't know why I decided to continue with the officer's course either in the hope

	that something different would happen or that I was halfway through anyway and I might as well carry on with my colleagues, so I completed the officer's course and finished the officer's course as far as I remember with one line on the shoulder, being a lance bombardier.
Interviewer	And then at the end of the course what happened?
Sven	Well the end of course came, must have been towards the end of the year, and I think early in January we were all required, or there was a role for us to play up north in Namibia. And they needed someone to lead a section. So in the absence of having enough people to lead sections they promoted me to bombardier and gave me a section to command.
Interviewer	A section is like a platoon?
Sven	No, a platoon is three sections and a platoon would be led by an officer, a lieutenant, and each section would have been typically led by a bombardier. And so I was appointed a bombardier and given a section and fell under a platoon and headed off for Namibia, not knowing where we were going to, not having received any...or at least not handed down to us, any clear idea of where we would land up. So we landed up, I think, in Grootfontein, and from there, I don't know how many days or weeks we might have spent there, we were given an assignment and I think it was only two sections that got that assignment, to go and patrol the western section of the Etosha Pans for two or three months. In open Unimogs, set up a camp in there, and that probably was the most interesting and intriguing time, and pleasant time of my army experience, being able to run around the western side of Etosha where there were no tourists, but having to conduct patrols in open Unimogs and there wasn't a lot of game but it was certainly an experience that I would happily do again.
Interviewer	It's a little bit out of the ordinary, not many people get posted into a game reserve or on the boundary of a game reserve. Just rewinding a little bit, did you ever see the Reverend Taylor again?
Sven	I don't recall ever seeing him again, no. And certainly not when...certainly I don't think I had an opportunity to interact with him even after that officer's course debacle. So no, I don't think I did see him again.
Interviewer	And then your deployment in Etosha, you were trained in anti aircraft and things like that, but at Etosha you were patrolling pretty much like motorised infantrymen.
Sven	We were, very much so, and I think what happened was that we were shipped off to the border, or to Namibia, because we had to get out of Youngsfield, and that my suspicion is that they sent us off there without having a clear task for us. And decided that someone had to do this task. But I did land up the last six months or 8 or 9 months of the year at Oshikati, Ondangwa, looking after

	the Bofors and being part of the team with the light anti aircraft, and I think the Bofors were 40mm cannons at the time, based on towers. Nothing very glamorous, we did walks on patrols into Angola, I remember two or three week patrols we did do quite a lot of, not patrols in but also walks along the border. And also spent a lot of time just standing guard duty in the towers.
Interviewer	And those were water towers?
Sven	No, those were lookout towers.
Interviewer	Observation towers.
Sven	Observation towers.
Interviewer	And those, if I remember were dotted along the cutline...
Sven	They also contained the...where the guns were situated on the towers.
Interviewer	Yes, the 40mm Bofors. And so, how long did you spend up there in your first sort of visit?
Sven	I think it was all one visit. I don't think I came back at all during the year.
Interviewer	So you didn't have a pass in between?
Sven	No, I didn't have a pass in between, I think I was up in Namibia for ten or 11 months.
Interviewer	And then when you did get your pass and go home did you discuss what you were doing with your folks? Were they surprised? Were you surprised about what you'd done?
Sven	Well, there's another story to get to just before going home and getting a pass out. I remember, and I don't know if I developed my feelings of anti authority because of what happened in the army, I don't know whether that influenced where I am in life today, whether that was what got me to where I was in the army. But I remember very much that having been on officer's course, and having had very good friends in the army that became officers, and me with the two lines having to report to them, specifically one of them, Townsend who was an officer at Oshikati, Ondangwa.
Interviewer	Was he a Citizen Force guy or a permanent Force guy or a National Serviceman?
Sven	A National Serviceman. One of my intake and one of my friends. I was sent off one day, my little section, to go to...I think from Ondangwa to Oshikati, or vice versa, to go and help do a floor for some mess, dining room or whatever, and I remember at the time that we were sent off to go and do it, the officers stayed behind. We were given a job to do when there were plenty other people within the camp that could have done the job. I remember the time I had some very rough characters in my section <i>laughs</i> who I quite enjoyed, but in terms of discipline and in terms of

	<p>them having their say they were also very outspoken. One guy was Achenbach (??) and the other was...something Burger...I'll get his name a bit later. And I remember them two in particular and it very much expressed my sentiment that we were working, doing manual labour in the camp when there were lots of other troops around who could have done the labour and we objected to the fact that we had been removed, taken to another place to do all this labour, when it was quite feasible for other people to look after their own mess and dining rooms, and so we objected to the fact. And I objected to the fact to my lieutenant, who happened to be a friend of me, and thought he would say, you're quite right, don't worry, come back. At which stage I was marched off at gunpoint, arrested basically for...they didn't land up charging me for mutiny, but they landed up taking me in on the basis that my behaviour was mutinous and didn't charge me formally but said that my behaviour was mutinous. Took me back, gave me several demeaning days of hard labour flipping tyres, and this and that and whatever. And I mean, this was like the end of November, December, it's like a week or two before discharge time, not going back on leave. When you referred to taking leave, this was time to get discharged. And the camp Commandant at the time had said that it was likely that we would probably break our service three weeks early in the beginning of December rather than waiting for our actual clear out time in the beginning of January, and that as a result of this behaviour I will probably have to see through until January. It so happened that they must have either taken pity and realised that it was bloody nonsense and they let me go with everyone else. So we did check out in December.</p>
Interviewer	When you say check out was that the end of your National Service?
Sven	That was the end of my National Service.
Interviewer	But you were on the border for 11 months and...
Sven	I was in Namibia. Etosha wasn't the border and we probably didn't go up exactly in the first week of January. I seem to remember the border itself as being a six month stint.
Interviewer	But your training then was Youngsfield, and then officer's course...
Sven	Officer's course at Youngsfield.
Interviewer	Which lasted how long?
Sven	Six months. So basically, and then bits and pieces in between took us to the year. So it was basically a year in Cape Town and then a year up in Namibia.
Interviewer	And then Etosha and then...
Sven	Yes.



Interviewer	During your time in Namibia did you encounter any of the Special Forces, the Recces or the Three Two Battalion, or did you encounter Koevoet at all?
Sven	Did we encounter them? We would have seen them but we never interacted with them.
Interviewer	With radio coms and things like that, did you ever listen in to their frequencies and hear what they were doing?
Sven	No. Not to my recollection.
Interviewer	So essentially, you're aware of them but they were completely separate and you had no idea what they were doing.
Sven	Quite right. I mean, we were and did go into Angola on a couple of patrols...funny stories. I remember going into patrols and they would drop for us by helicopter pre-designated places, our food consisted I think, entirely of peas and whole potatoes in tins. And that was what we got dropped off. And before three weeks were up...luckily it wasn't for me or not for me to say, but I do know that the temptation of the local goats became too great and some and the calf were shot, and at the time I was thinking, these belong to somebody but that obviously didn't matter. I wouldn't say we kind of came under fire but we were involved in skirmishes where there was fire although we never got to make actual contact. But that would probably be the closest I came to a really dangerous situation.
Interviewer	You didn't have anybody who stumbled across a landmine, anything like that?
Sven	No.
Interviewer	And did you encounter local population, people living there?
Sven	Oh yes.
Interviewer	How did they respond to you?
Sven	I remember part of our patrols based from the camps was to go into the villages amongst the local population mainly at night. I can't remember really interacting with the population too much. I don't remember giving them too much of a rough time, I don't remember...I don't remember too much of an interaction with them.
Interviewer	And at the time when you were wandering around these areas, Etosha as you say, quite pleasant because there's lots of wildlife and not too much going on...
Sven	I think the whole pleasure was that apart from the Unimog there was very little army involved. <i>Laughter</i>
Interviewer	But then when you were up there and you saw how the local population lived, you saw the extent of the military occupation of the region, did you wonder about this whole concept of this war

	and what it was all about?
Sven	I think I wondered about it before the time came to go to the army and through the army. I knew fairly well at the time that if one didn't want to go to the army there was a conscientious objection phase that one could go through. I don't think I felt that strongly about it...well I didn't, otherwise I would have been a conscientious objector. I did wonder about it and I suppose at the time I did believe that we were fighting a war of sorts. I didn't particularly enjoy my time in the army, I didn't particularly believe in the people that were in the army, I didn't necessarily believe that everything that was happening needed to be happening, and fairly clearly for me the day that I left the army I made a point that I would not go back and I would not attend a camp. And somehow I managed never to go back and never to attend a camp.
Interviewer	But that was a conscious decision, you knew that you didn't obey the law.
Sven	That was a very conscious...if someone arrived at my door and said, I'm taking you off, I probably would have had no...I wouldn't have gone to the conscientious objection stage again, but I made every effort for every call up to find a way not to go. I considered it that I had done my time, it was a waste of time, it was too much time I'd spent already and I didn't want to carry on going, either because of the time involved or because of what it stood for and I didn't particularly want to go and run camps in Soweto and go and do whatever they wanted to be done. In the beginning I was prepared to be kept a year. The fact that I had to do two years was bad enough. The thought of doing any camps was abhorrent.
Interviewer	While you were in the army often there was sometimes a language issue between English and Afrikaans. Did you find that there was a difference between the attitude of Afrikaans guys and the English guys as a general rule? I know that individuals might have different attitudes, but as a general rule, was there a difference between the Afrikaans guys and the English guys?
Sven	I don't really think there was a big difference. If I look back now on a couple of the guys that I can bring up in my memory now, including some of our officers that were leading us in either the course or with basics or war on the border, I don't think so. I think that characters stood out. If I look now at the reverend and what he stood for and what he meant to me, he was English speaking. Another officer and a good friend of mine who did the officer's course and the way he treated me in the last month of the army, actually astounded me. I was really absolutely blown away that he would send people to come and arrest me at bayonet point like I was going to do anything. It absolutely astounded me. And from the Afrikaans side there were, certainly the rougher diamonds were, I think, from that side, but by the same token I had very good interactions as I said with that one captain of the

	<p>officer's course. He was very much Afrikaans and as I say, probably one of the more genuine people and one of the people that I would have had more respect for in the army.</p>
Interviewer	<p>That incident with the officer who was a friend of yours who got you arrested, do you think he was just bored or do you think he had an axe to grind or do you think he was just being stupid?</p>
Sven	<p>I don't really know. I can't work it out. He wasn't with us, he didn't make the effort to come and talk to us. It would have been a three hour or two hour drive for him. I think it was done on radio contact and I think he was enjoying the life of an officer, leaning back and enjoying stuff and decided...I don't know what went through his head. To this day, I never spoke to him about it, I never asked him...when I went...I didn't go before him in terms of the disciplinary, it was higher up to the camp commander. I don't know what was in his head, I've got no idea. To this day it flummoxes me completely. I mean, he'd known me for longer than a year. He knew my character, he knew that there was no real physical danger imminent. It was more like being a trade union going on strike than creating any threat to anybody or anything.</p>
Interviewer	<p>In your time up there at the border when you were speaking with the guys with you, did you talk about what the war was about or was it more the case of the army just being the army and go out saying, gee, let's get this over and done with and go home and resume our lives again?</p>
Sven	<p>I think it was very much the latter. I don't think we spent too much time deliberating why we were there or what we were doing or fighting the ideology at the time. I would say the latter, I think it was more around the army issues and looking forward to getting out and also thinking of the waste of time. A lot of it and I keep harping back, the one year was bad enough that I'd accepted to do. Having got roped into that for two years I do consider for what services we provided or what we did in those two years, there was...I would rather not have spent the two years doing what I did.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Looking back now, it was a waste of time, you'd rather have not done it at all, do you regret ever having gone for army, has it had any impact on your...?</p>
Sven	<p>I was discussing it actually just recently and wondering whether part of who I am today was shaped by my experiences in the army, by the physicality or lack thereof, or the authority that I had to submit to or accept or not accept, and whether that has shaped me or the way I am? And I don't know the answer to that. Do I have any regrets? In hindsight, had I known it was going to be for two years I would have definitely applied to go to the airforce. I may also have applied to have found a post where I could have done studies at the same time closer to home if possible. But certainly I would have looked for something where I could have maybe been more productive and maybe had to</p>

	<p>spend more time doing something different other than the banality that we did there. In terms of...and I know I can hear a lot of your questions are, was it to do with ideology and do I look back and think well it was a wasted war and what was the ideology? I think at 17 years of age you're a young person, and most people are very subjected to peer pressure, peer review, just what's going on in the country, and so at the time of going to the army it was very much a matter of, do you want to become a conscientious objector? Was it around the ideology? Was it around not wanting to the go to the army, just because you didn't want to go to the army? And at the time it was very much, you're a citizen of this country, if you're going to live here, get the year over and done with, and that was the attitude that I went in. Had I known what was going to happen now, I would have applied to go to the airforce probably, given my interest in flying. And certainly with the experience that I've gained to date, and in hindsight, I would definitely have taken up Lars Steenkamp's offer to raise it with Magnus Malan and would definitely have gone back and said, well if you guys think I'm a traitor, certainly why have I got a role to play in here, and why do you keep me in the army, let me out. Set me free. If that is your view of me, why do you want to continue using me for two years? Why am I good enough not to do the officer's course but good enough to lead a section on the border? I mean, what is the logic here? So at the time I just thought I had to do this thing and just get through it, with the experience that I've got to date I could kick myself for not having said that morning, if that's the way you feel about me then let me go, because I don't need to fight this war and I don't need to be spending your time in fighting with you guys about this issue.</p>
Interviewer	But as you point out, you were very young at the time...
Sven	I was 17.
Interviewer	You're under massive peer pressure, you're under massive authoritarian pressure from the army.
Sven	<p>I think you're under authoritarian pressure, I think that there was no peer pressure involved with this religious issue at all. That was purely me at the time, and as I said, in hindsight, if that was an issue for me I could have gone into the army and claimed Jewish status because in terms of the Jewish faith I would have been entitled to that. But I just went in and presented myself who I was, which was agnostic. And I didn't claim to be an atheist, I claimed to be agnostic. I didn't claim to be, I stated I was. And in hindsight, I didn't really want to be in the army, I didn't necessarily want to go and fight the war, I wouldn't have gone, I wouldn't have volunteered for the army had I not been drafted into it. I saw it very much as an obligation that you had to do in the country if you didn't want to go to prison or sit down elsewhere or to flee the country, so I saw it very much as a year that one had to get over. And I just reiterate, in hindsight, if they felt that being agnostic and not being a Christian...in fact I never</p>

	asked him why Jewish people could become officers in the army or not...but very clearly his statement was, if you're not Christian you are traitors to the company and a traitor to whoever else. I should have just asked him and asked Magnus to say if that's how you feel about me, please release me.
Interviewer	Given that this guy decided that you're a traitor because you're not a Christian, did they have a means of dealing with you on a Sunday at church parade?
Sven	You know, I've forgotten what I used to do on church parade. I can't remember whether I just used to go and do my own thing, whether I used to go to church...I don't remember going to much to church. I think I was fairly much given the liberty to either attend church or not...I can't actually remember what I did on those Sundays.
Interviewer	Where did you get coffee and cake?
Sven	Not from going to church. I don't remember going and sitting and singing hymns and doing...I think on Sundays I went with ( <b>Les de Bruin?</b> ) who was my good friend, who was Jewish, and my closest friend and cohort from the army, he now lives in Australia. I think we used to go and do whatever we used to do now that you ask. I think I used to hive off with the Jewish guys and do whatever they were doing.
Interviewer	Thinking about the option of leaving the country you went to a fairly good school. Of the guys who you finished...and when I say good school, it was also in a relatively affluent area...of the guys you went to school with, did any leave the country to avoid military service that you know of?
Sven	Not that I know of, no.
Interviewer	But now these days many of the guys do live overseas?
Sven	I'm in touch, out of my class...I haven't been to a school reunion for 15 years...I don't know how many have gone over. Those that I did keep in touch with, none have gone over. So I'd say from my circle of friends from school, most are still around. But I can't speak...there were 80-100 in the class and I'm talking about a circle of friends of ten.
Interviewer	When you did your officer's course and your basics, which altogether with the odds and ends took about a year, how many passes did you get during that period and did you go home during those passes?
Sven	I did go home on one or two of those passes. I remember specifically going on AWOL over an Easter weekend when half the camp got leave and the other half didn't, and I decided there was no ways that I should be sitting around in camp. So I did go on leave. We got...oh yes, interesting experience, in the first year, I don't want to say I spent a lot of time out of camp but in terms of nights and days and away from camp, but we did get out

	<p>into Cape Town on a fairly regular basis through days. Not always legally. We did often sneak out. We were fortunate enough to have access to a car, often 7 of us in a Volkswagen Beetle and we would park the vehicle around by the officer's building around at the back and somehow managed to drive our way out and go and enjoy Cape Town city life. And I would say in that time I probably made it up to Johannesburg two or three times. The first time I think was the Easter weekend, which was a disastrous time because we were on AWOL, we were in a kombi, the driver fell asleep, we had an accident just outside Bloemfontein on the way home. It was early morning, the dilemma whether to go back or not or whether to complete the weekend, which I decided to come and do, hitched up to Joburg and got back in time to resume whatever we had to do, and luckily wasn't caught out. So yes, in the first year I probably made it back to Johannesburg two times, I'm guessing. Maybe three. But we did either with or without permission on, I don't know what regular would be, a weekly basis, make it out of camp for at least a couple of hours or an evening or whatever.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And then when you went up to Namibia, did you get much chance to come home from there?</p>
Sven	<p>I don't think I came home once from there.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Not once in a year.</p>
Sven	<p>Not once. I don't...no, I don't think I came home once in a year. And it may not have been a full year, it may have been ten months, because I think we only left in January but I think in that whole stint I can't remember coming back. In fact if we had come back I doubt whether I would have gone back. <i>laughs</i></p>
Interviewer	<p>And when you were up there and your commanders were giving you briefings where they would tell you where you're going to patrol and what to look out for and so on, was there any talk of who the enemy was, were you on the lookout for SWAPO, were you on the lookout for Russians, who were you looking for?</p>
Sven	<p>Not the Russians. It would have been SWAPO.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And was it the sort of understanding at the time that SWAPO were the equivalent of Communists or they were Communists?</p>
Sven	<p>Oh yes, I think very much that, yes, very much that there was a threat to the country and that they were infiltrating from the north and that there was a Communist threat. There's no doubt that that was very much not a daily threat at all, or weekly, but that was what we were there for. That was why we were there.</p>
Interviewer	<p>And at the time, in all of your military training did anybody talk about the ANC, Mandela, or anything like that?</p>
Sven	<p>No. I don't remember debating the ANC, I don't remember debating Mandela at all. At all.</p>

Interviewer	And would it be right to say that the sort of the general thrust of any ideological discussion was that you were there to stop SWAPO trying to take over South West Africa and that this was a bulwark because after South West Africa fell South Africa could be next?
Sven	Yes, yes. That would be fair. It would be fair that there was a Communist threat that was descending from the north and that we should attack it further away than closer.
Interviewer	You went into the army in '78.
Sven	January '78.
Interviewer	And you finished...?
Sven	December '79.
Interviewer	In May of '78 there was the big raid on Cassinga in Angola which there was massive international opposition to that, did you even know about that at the time?
Sven	I don't recall it. I don't recall it. I don't remember it being an issue, I don't remember anyone talking to us about it in the camp. I don't remember reading about it...I mean, obviously we didn't have access to television or daily newspapers for that matter. And it would have been right between...to answer your question, it obviously wasn't a big enough issue for me to recall.
Interviewer	And then you finish, you klaar out and you go home, did they give you any debriefing, did they explain to you that being a soldier had certain requirements of you as an individual but civilian life would put different pressures on you?
Sven	Nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Not a word.
Interviewer	So one day you're a soldier and the next day you're a citizen again, a civilian.
Sven	Yes, sure, but I knew how to be a citizen, that was no problem. <i>Laughter</i> I didn't need the army to tell me what to do.
Interviewer	Yes, but they made no attempt to...?
Sven	There was no induction, there was no debriefing, there was no 'let's prepare you', there was no effort that I recall at all.
Interviewer	And when you got back, did you discuss with your family some of the stuff that you'd experienced, what you'd seen, things like that?
Sven	I did probably discuss some of it, but it probably would have happened over two or three evenings over the dinner table. From memory, it wasn't an ongoing discussion point. And I've never been very good at remembering things or discussing things or having a need to discuss them, so they would have probably had to drag all the information out of me rather than me volunteer it. and I would have told them little bits about what happened and

	obviously they knew the story I've told you now, and I would have told them maybe with more detail what happened at Etosha. I might have told them about the bloody cold nights standing on the gun towers guarding nothing. Nothing was happening, but there we sat, or stood, freezing for the whole bloody night. So I would have given some of those experiences. But, I can't remember dwelling on the army or dwelling on issues. I think that on the day I came out of the army was really for me a good day, and fairly quickly put behind me. other than the yearly request to do camps, which I did avoid.
Interviewer	Did you simply tell them that you were studying?
Sven	Oh, I had to use every ruse I could. I was studying at one stage and I used that reason. Exams. I was working at articles. I needed to complete my articles, I couldn't afford, in view of my career, to spend time doing a camp when I needed to get this experience.
Interviewer	You were doing your articles as an accountant?
Sven	As an accountant. Yes, that was between '84 and '86. And studies were between '80-'84 full time and then I finished off my course at UNISA. So yes, so I used whatever employer I could get to write whatever letter I could get written, with whatever motivation might count, I used to get out of camps, and managed somehow to always avoid the camp.
Interviewer	And that was from more of a practical point of view. You simply didn't want to waste your time.
Sven	I just didn't want to waste my time. I didn't want to go there, I didn't want to go into townships, I didn't want to put on a uniform. I'd had it with the army, I'd done my two years, as far as I was concerned it was...I had been prepared to do the year, the extra year was...and the way that life had gone for me in the army, I wanted to get on with other life other...I had no ideological need to continue fighting for the country, no need to go and do what they wanted from me from a camp. But again it was because I just didn't want to be in the army, I can't claim that it was motivated because I was pro ANC or because I was pro national, whatever. It wasn't politically motivated decision. Maybe it was to the extent in terms of camps based in Joburg and going around here. It might have had a role to play in it. But a large part of it was, I'd done my army time.
Interviewer	And you studied at Wits.
Sven	Wits and then UNISA.
Interviewer	But Wits in the '80-'84 period would have been starting to get quite political. Did you involve yourself in politics in any way?
Sven	No. Not at all. I didn't go into the student council, I didn't involve myself in politics. I have very strong thoughts and feelings these days but I never was a political creature. I'm still not an active



	political creature but my university days were not...politics was not a central theme in my university days.
Interviewer	So essentially your military...your conscription, you've packed into a box and just locked it up as it were.
Sven	Absolutely. Absolutely. As quickly as possible. If it hadn't been for the camps I would have thrown the keys away long ago.
Interviewer	Did you ever worry about getting arrested and dragged off yet again?
Sven	Yes. The thought of going to spend three weeks or three months in a camp probably concerned me more than the initial year that I had to go and do. I had developed, I don't know what it was, I just had developed such a...hatred is the wrong word...resistance is probably closer to the point. I just didn't want to go back into that system, there was no attraction for me whatsoever to go back into the army.
Interviewer	Looking back on it now, do you think you could sort of look at your life and say you're a whatever age you are minus two.
Sven	Laughs
Interviewer	Was there any value in the military?
Sven	As I said to you earlier in the interview, it was a debate that came up just the other day. I don't know... <i>tape turned off</i> I don't know whether the army taught me to put up with more or put up with less. I don't know whether it's influenced me to the extent...I know that I'm...and I perceive, I enjoy working with people but I don't enjoy working in a big corporate where I'm subjected to authority that I don't agree with. I don't know whether that was my upbringing, my schooling, whether the army had a big influence on there or not. I don't know how to judge what influence the army had on my character today. I do know that I never think about it. I never blame it. I don't go back and say, it's made me into this person or hasn't. And I don't know whether it has exacerbated or enhanced or taken away from some of the traits that are my character today.
	END OF SIDE A ( <i>counter at 515</i> )
	SIDE B ( <i>counter at 20</i> )
Interviewer	You work with a lot of black people, has anybody ever said to you, and black person said to you, did you serve in the South African Defence Force and what did you do, what did you see?
Sven	Never.
Interviewer	No black person has ever asked you about your background and whether or not you served in the military. Have other people asked you about what you did in the army?
Sven	I don't think so. If I think back now on CVs, or on interviews, it was that's what I did. I don't think...of the people I know

	internationally and the friends I have overseas...they might have asked me if I served in the army but it never developed into a discussion about anything, about the ideology or how I felt or...I think for a lot of other people it's such a foreign concept that it doesn't bear discussion. And I don't think...it's never been a big factor in my life.
Interviewer	Bearing in mind that it was an era, if you look at that sort of 1973 to 1990 era when nearly all white men were compelled by the law to serve in the military, it affected a generation of white men but also their girlfriends, their wives, their mothers, their sisters, do you think it's become something of a forgotten history?
Sven	Yes, I do. I think it has become very much a forgotten history and certainly from my perspective, I don't think my army experience affected my parents or my sister. I wasn't involved in a relationship at the time so I can't claim it affected that relationship at all. Or it didn't exist. So it has become a forgotten era. In the family we might refer to it every now and again or discuss aspects of it, but never from a point of view of how it affected them or how I turned out, my behaviour, consequences of it. It was very much as you said earlier, from the time that I finished it and given the correspondence of camps, it went into a tin box. Anyone is welcome to talk about it but it basically stays in a trunk and that's where it lives.
Interviewer	Do you ever bump into any of the guys you served with?
Sven	I do, in particular a guy by the name of Jonathan in Cape Town. I don't bump into...we do the odd bit of work together. But it was many years after the army that we made contact and realised that we'd served at the same time. Apart from that I have bumped into maybe three or four people over 20 years. I would say probably that the incidents of meeting people that I was involved with in the army in terms of an influence or in terms of a factor of my life is zero. I very seldom have come across people. The one guy ( <b>Les de Bruin?</b> ) in Australia I said was a good friend of mine, if he wasn't that far away I'd probably be in more contact with him. Apart from that there are a couple of people I would recognise in the street. Jonathon I'd recognise in the street and when we do meet, we do say yes we know...and we introduce ourselves to other people as yes, we met in the army. But...no, there's not a circle of friends and there's not a big reference circle that I can go back to or say that those are people in my life.
Interviewer	I've covered most of the questions I want to ask you, is there any other aspect of this era, this military training and its aftermath that you want to raise, that you think is useful to try and describe what it was like to be in the SADF to any sort of researcher in the future?
Sven	I don't know. I think my story is probably quite a lot different to what most people experienced in the army. Having said that, the day to day life and what you eat and what you do, is very similar to what everyone else experienced in the army. <i>Laughs</i> We ate

	<p>the same food, we did the same exercise, we had the same beds, we walked a lot of the same patrols, we did a lot of the same guard duty. So really what I suppose what I've been telling you today is more my take on it and some of the aspects of it that affected me and how they affected me. But I would imagine that most people that have gone through it, some may have been involved in more contact situations, some might have been in different units where they had different agendas. But in fact not 'may', that was the case. But I think, I would suspect that a lot of people, and if I think about it some of the people that I was with in the army, I very much wonder whether they wouldn't give you very much the feedback that I've been giving you today of those people that I served with. I don't know. I don't know what effect it might have had on them but I don't remember being part of a group that were...that had a very strong political viewpoint. I remember it as...you grew up in this country, this is what was involved, we've got a Communist threat, we've got to defend our borders and this is your National Service. That's what it was, it was National Service. And I think for most of the people I was with in the army that's what we saw it...it was a period of time that one wanted to get over and done with as soon as possible and the ideological side of it I've said...you know, I think at the time we questioned whether to emigrate at the time, based on where the country was going and what was happening. But having accepted that if you didn't want to go to jail for being a conscientious objector, and with the indoctrination that (<i>inaudible</i>) but with the picture presenting that we're under threat and the situation as it was, it was an acceptance almost that one had to do it and one went and did it. Subsequent to that one can look back and obviously...but that's again, hindsight is 20/20 vision.</p>
Interviewer	<p>Can you recall, at that time, this threat, this Communist threat, can you recall what you thought that meant? What did it mean in real terms?</p>
Sven	<p>You know I don't know whether I ever really thought that Communism would ever take over South Africa or that Russians would arrive here en masse and infiltrate our cities. I think what it meant more to me was, that we'd be subject to terrorist attack, and that our lives would be in danger and that it was far more, I think, that side of it that there was an infiltration coming into the country wanting to change the regime, but not so much from a political point of view as opposed to a Communist point of view. So in other words, I think what we were fighting and what we were told we were fighting, and what one went to the army for, was because that's where there are Communists in Angola and SWAPO, it wasn't so much, you know, if you want the ANC to come into power or not.</p>
Interviewer	<p>If there's anything you want to add just shout.</p>
Sven	<p>I don't think so at the moment, and I don't know, as you say and as you've told me what this will be used for, just to say that if anyone does pick up this tape and does want to come and chat</p>

	further about it – I'm not offering to do this full time, but I'll be happy to interact with anyone if they wanted to investigate more or discuss more, but I'm also not looking to make issues or to open old stuff. So, I hope it's been of some use.
	END OF INTERVIEW ( <i>counter at 85</i> )

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