

PROPOSAL FOR A BOOK ON THE EXPERIENCES OF SOUTH AFRICAN SOLDIERS  
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This is a proposal for a book that recounts the experiences of South African soldiers through the words of the soldiers themselves. The book will consist mainly of interviews (or extracts from interviews) with soldiers and former soldiers in the South African Defence Force (SADF) and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK).

The book has two main features: unlike most other books on war, including those with an anti-war theme, it focusses on both sides of the conflict; and its 'dramatic appeal' lies in the personal testimonies of individual soldiers rather than in any fictional dramatisation of military experience and war.

The book will be completed by the end of 1990 and be published in mid-1991.

Aims  
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The key question at this stage concerns the aim of the book. This will determine its focus, who is interviewed, what they are asked, how the material is arranged and how the book as a whole is presented.

The original idea, conceived 18 months ago, was to interview only SADF soldiers. The aim was to build the argument against conscription and the SADF's role through the words of the conscript. In the current political climate this aim is no longer appropriate or constructive.

Alternative aims now include the following:

- 1) To provide an oral history of the military conflict in South Africa from the perspective of the soldiers involved in it.
- 2) To provide a comparison of the nature and operation of the SADF and MK and the attitudes of their respective soldiers.
- 3) To break down the stereotype of soldiers as 'hero's' and 'villains' by giving 'the soldier' a name and a voice.

This would be a way of acknowledging the sacrifice made by thousands of young men (albeit willingly or unwillingly and for a range of reasons).

Could it also highlight the responsibility that society has to provide support, particularly psychological support, to soldiers and ex-soldiers from both sides?

Could it contribute in any way to breaking down the polarisation between white and black communities that is reinforced by perceptions and depictions of the 'enemy'?

Could it contribute in any way to the process of integrating the two armies in the post-apartheid society?

- 4) To contribute to the process of reconciliation.

This is an interesting possibility but I'm not sure how the book and the interviews could be shaped to achieve it. One idea would be to present the interviews as a form of indirect dialogue; another would be to have one or more group inter-

views with soldiers from both sides.

- 5) To contribute to the universal argument against war.

In all wars the experience of military service and combat is romanticised by politicians and the popular media to the point of completely obscuring the harsh reality and the damage that is wrought on both soldiers and victims. There seems no better way to debunk the myths and highlight the human costs of war than by giving soldiers an opportunity to tell the story as it really is.

- 6) To explore the dynamic of combat.

This would involve a more narrow but concentrated focus on the 'heart of the matter'. It would involve looking at the physical, psychological, political and philosophical dimensions of the different aspects of combat - training, fighting and the after-effects.

Key questions would include: how soldiers are trained to kill; how they deal with the fear of, and later come to terms with, death and killing; how the enemy is depicted; how atrocities occur; etc.

Many of these aims overlap. The book could incorporate more than one of them so long as they, and the overall focus, are defined clearly and tightly.

Form  
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The book could take at least three different forms:

- 1) A collection of short extracts from interviews with soldiers, grouped around different themes. The soldier's name, age and service details would be attached to the interview.

About 40-50 soldiers/ex-soldiers from each side would be interviewed. The interviewees would be 'ordinary' troops and junior officers rather than senior officers who would give the 'official line'. The emphasis would be on the 'typical' soldier (ie black men in MK and white men in the SADF), although the 'exceptions' would also be covered (eg women in both armies, whites in MK and blacks in the SADF).

The interviews could be accompanied by other personal statements made by soldiers (eg letters home, poetry, statements in the dock etc) and by already published material.

The ANC and SADF soldiers would be asked similar questions to allow for comparison. The questions would cover three broad areas: the different aspects of military service; the psychological effects on the soldier; and the soldier's political attitudes on a range of issues.

- 2) Chapter length profiles of 5\6 soldiers from each side that trace the interviewee's attitudes and history prior to, during and after military service.

The profiles would appear in the first person and could include other material relating to the interviewee.

- 3) A more varied, non-uniform format that includes a few long interviews, short extracts from interviews, group interviews,

extracts from plays written by conscripts about their experiences, interviews with wives and families, etc.

Whichever of these or any other form is chosen, as well as which questions are asked and how the material is arranged, depends largely on the way in which the aims of the book are defined.

The book will begin with an Introduction that outlines the nature and roles of the SADF and MK, the aims and focus of the book, the political perspective of the author, and the methodology employed (ie the basis on which the interviewees were chosen and the questions asked).

The Introduction could also be an opportunity for the author to develop some of the arguments contained in the aims outlined above.

The book is intended to be 'popular' rather than academic in any respect. This means that however ambitious and complex its aim, the book itself must be accessible and uncomplicated.

Just how accessible the book should be - the question of who it is aimed at - requires further discussion. 'Popular' could range, by way of metaphor, from Scope to Reader's Digest to Cosmopolitan to Frontline to Die Suid Afrikaan.

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