Trauma in Transition: Representing Psychological Problems of South African War Veterans

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In spite of South Africa’s relatively peaceful political transition and notwithstanding the amnesty granted to them by the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC), many ex-combatants of the non-statutory forces reckon that they have been stigmatised and marginalised in the new dispensation.1 Somewhat less surprisingly, certain veterans of the statutory forces feel equally betrayed as they attempt to come to terms with the part they played in a needless war to uphold the apartheid regime. However, few former South African Defence Force (SADF) conscripts have acknowledged culpability for war crimes or professed remorse for their deeds, insisting that they were simply doing their duty. Still, there is little doubt that many feel a degree of guilt and shame.2 Some have addressed this by telling their own stories by way of memoirs or works of fiction. This paper interrogates one of these texts.

Clive Holt’s At Thy Call We Did Not Falter3 is a book about the “Border War” written from the perspectives of the SADF troops who were involved (189). The soldier-author fought in southern Angola between November 1987 and June 1988 in what were, arguably, the most significant engagements of the 23-year long conflict. The blurb on the back cover proclaims it “a classic account of war, as well as a window into the world of post-traumatic stress disorder”. It fails to live up to the first part of this claim for it is no literary masterpiece. But that is not my concern. For the purposes of this paper, I wish to examine the latter claim, specifically what Holt’s story reveals about how its author developed combat-related trauma, as well as the SADF’s neglect of PTSD and the psychological problems suffered by its veterans.

At Thy Call is partly based on a diary that Holt kept during the time that he was involved in the fighting in Angola. Occasional diary entries punctuate the early part of the narrative and provide the reader with a sense of proximity to the events described in greater detail in the text written some 15 years later. Diary material was supplemented by information gleaned from the extant military histories and communications from fellow veterans of the battle.4 Thus the book combines first-hand recollections, personal memories and a synthesis of secondary sources. It is by no means a seamless story but is more than a battlefield biography for it does not end with the war. Nor is it simply a bildungsroman or coming of age story. As with most soldier-authors, Holt reflects on how what he did and witnessed as a soldier affected him. And it is Holt’s frank disclosures of how repressed memories have come to haunt him that interests me.

1 Sasha Gear, ‘The Road Back: Psycho-social Strains of Transition for South Africa’s Ex-combatants’ in Gary Baines & Peter Vale (eds), Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa’s Late Cold War Conflicts (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008), pp. 245-266.
4 Telephone conversation with Clive Holt, 8 February 2006.
In 1987 the nineteen-year-old Holt underwent training at Bloemfontein and was then assigned to 61 Mechanised Infantry Battalion. His unit was involved in the pitched battle of Cuito Cuanavale between the SADF and its surrogate force UNITA on the one hand, and the Angolan army (Fapla) and its Cuban ally on the other. I have no wish to revisit the issue of who won the battle here (which the author does in chapter 6). Holt remains convinced that he was fighting a real communist threat although he acknowledges at one point that the SADF was “an aggressor in a foreign country” (150). He clearly has a lingering pride in the performance of his unit and shows an undying loyalty to his fellow soldiers. However, this is offset by a pervasive sense of the futility of war and an indictment of the SADF’s treatment of those who put their lives on the line for their country.

For the sake of providing sufficient contextualisation to appreciate Holt’s disclosures about how the fighting affected him, I will provide a brief synopsis of the campaigns in which he was involved. The first phase of the operation that went by the codename Modular was planned to stop the combined Cuban/FAPLA advance on UNITA’s stronghold of Mavinga and its Jamba headquarters. The SADF won a victory against enormous odds at the Lomba River where it halted the advance in its tracks. Operation Modular segued into Hooper (then Packer and finally Displace) as the SADF launched repeated assaults on well-fortified enemy positions in the Tumpo triangle. Its failure to secure a bridgehead proved a decisive setback in the SADF’s bid to capture Cuito Cuanavale. This protracted conflict veered between intense large-scale conventional engagements and standoffs. During the ensuing stalemate, the fortunes and objectives of the warring parties changed frequently. Ultimately, it was the loss of the SAAF’s air superiority that proved telling as the ground forces had to withdraw or possibly have their escape routes cut off. The likelihood of sustaining heavy losses of national servicemen (NSM) would have been politically disastrous for the apartheid government. Meanwhile, Cuban forces outflanked the SADF and advanced on the Namibian border while its MiG fighter planes bombed the Calueque dam killing 12 NSM. The SADF then counter-attacked and inflicted casualties on the Cuban/MPLA forces. However, the overall situation in southern Angola was now far more fluid and gave the Cuban/MPLA forces the edge. It was the SADF whose teeth had been broken. For the first time ever the Cubans threatened the Namibian border and the SADF appeared vulnerable. The announcement by the Chief of the SADF, General Jannie Geldenhuys, of a massive call up in mid-1988 attests to this. It was the South Africans who sued for peace and brokered the negotiations that culminated in their withdrawal from Namibia and of Cuban forces from Angola.


6 The then Minister of Defence, Magnus Malan, as well as the SADF generals claim that it was never the SADF’s intention to occupy Cuito but this is pure spin. See Ronnie Kasrils, ‘Historic Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale’, Address to Public Forum ‘Commemorating the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale’, Rhodes University, 28 May 2008.


8 This description borrows from Castro’s metaphor. See Dosman, ‘Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale’, pp. 219, 223. The boxing analogy suggests that the Cubans parried the SADF at Cuito with a left jab and then countered with a right thrust towards the Namibian border. Ironically, such a strategy amounts to a variation on a theme of Soviet conventional battle tactics of which Castro was highly critical.
61 Mechanised Battalion joined the fray in November 1987 and was soon involved in the thick of battle – what Holt calls (rather inappropriately) the “rumble in the jungle”. The unit participated in some of the fiercest fighting of the campaign. Holt pinpoints a specific day – 25 February 1988 when 32 Battalion followed by 61 Mech launched an assault on Tumpo – as the beginning of his nightmare. The columns of tanks and infantry assault vehicles (or Ratels) advanced on well-fortified and heavily-mined enemy positions through dense bush and undergrowth. They were subjected to artillery barrages and constant bombardment by MiGs. In the heat of battle, Holt experienced and witnessed some gruesome incidents, one of which particularly affected him. The driver of the command Ratel, by the name of ‘Langes’ Geldenhuys, collapsed as a consequence of heat exhaustion and dehydration. This was followed by hysteria in which he cried for his brother – whom Holt later learned had been recently killed in a motor vehicle accident. He had reached breaking point. Adrenalin stimulated by fear kept most of the soldiers functioning but the casualties mounted as they pursued an unrealistic objective of clearing the Tumpo area and destroying the bridge across the Cuito River. It was not exactly slaughter but the SADF lost 31 men and UNITA an unknown number. However, the attritional nature of the fighting took a heavy toll on the SADF forces, especially its morale. Confidence was shaken by the enemy’s tenacity and some of the troops had reached the end of their tether. Faced with life-threatening situations for an extended period, individual soldiers became susceptible to frayed nerves, fitful sleep and frequent bouts of nervous exhaustion – a sure fire recipe for the development of psychological disorders.

61 Mech was withdrawn (and replaced by fresh troops) after four months. The unit regrouped at a demobilisation camp where they were given a pep talk by Geldenhuys and Operation Hooper souvenir t-shirts (114). This was followed by group debriefing sessions in which psychologists were tasked to gauge whether the troops were fit for leave. These debriefings were supposedly designed to detect early warning signals of trauma so as identify and treat those likely to develop PTSD (120). The sessions were actually a farce as they lasted less than half an hour and Holt recollects that: “I felt that I had not even begun to get in touch with the emotional and traumatic impact of what I had been through” (121). However, at the time he was relieved that the psychologist had not bothered to provide more than a perfunctory interview. Neither he nor his comrades were interested in counseling by psychologists of whom they were suspicious. They were much more interested in going home. Holt believed that he would cope with the trauma and return to his life in civvie street without any need of therapy (122). In retrospect, he knows he was sorely mistaken.

Holt goes to considerable lengths to make the point that the approach of the psychologist was a far cry from the procedure set out in the SADF’s debriefing model specifically designed for Angolan War veterans. He cites extensive passages from the notes of a clinical psychologist who headed the Operation Hooper debriefing team to illustrate the gap between theory and practice. Holt calls the chapter in which he describes the process “Thirty Minutes to Clear the Minefield”. This is clearly an ironic take on the short-circuited process which amounted to going through the motions of the debriefing and evaluation session which he and his fellows were obliged to attend. And the analogy

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of the minefield suggests that the charges were not defused; that the primed mines might lie dormant beneath the soil only to be detonated sometime in the future.

While on his three-week pass Holt became aware of his jitteriness and hyper-sensitivity or ‘arousal’ to aural stimuli. Conversely, he displayed a lack of emotion in relating to death, including that of his own father who had died recently. His inability to relate to his mother and younger brother brought home to him his alienation from his family. This extended to friends and acquaintances as well. His brief period of leave was not unlike that of Paul Baumer, the protagonist in Erich Remarque’s Great War novel All Quiet on the Western Front.¹⁰ Like Baumer, Holt was not keen to tell his war stories to people he now regarded as ‘outsiders’ inasmuch as they had not shared his experiences. He was affronted by people who asked whether he had killed anyone (132). Nor did he wish to have people think he was embellishing stories so as to impress listeners. On the rare occasions that he did relate something about his experiences, he admits to feeling a sense of guilt (129). Otherwise he chose to remain silent. This was partly due to the fact that the South African public was purposefully kept uninformed about the course of the undeclared war on foreign soil. Government disinformation and censorship bred demoralisation and suspicion. Holt likens himself to a used and discarded prostitute (131). If trauma involves a betrayal of trust and the abuse of relations of power,¹¹ then it is not surprising that many veterans embraced silence and victimhood.

Following 61 Mech’s redeployment near the Calueque Dam in June 1998, an engagement with Cuban and Fapla columns resulted in the death of a respected friend Lieutenant Muller Meiring. Although this incident was recounted to him, it still caused Holt to reflect anew on his ability to cope with traumatic events. He notes that the standard way of dealing with such doubts was to “shut up, keep your feelings inside, and carry on with life” (150). In short, to vasbyt (persevere). This was in keeping with a military training that emphasized that quitting was a sign of weakness and that soldiers never showed emotions. So he “put on the proverbial brave face, even though he felt sick to the core” (152). Although ill-equipped to deal with such situations, Holt feared above all that he might ‘crack’ under the strain and go bossies. He defines bossies as a “colloquial term for ‘bush madness’, a condition associated with strange/abnormal behaviour as a result of spending prolonged periods of time in the bush under combat conditions” (191). Anecdotal evidence suggests that such soldiers were stigmatised and ostracised and they invariably became loners and outsiders. For its part, the army often turned a blind eye to the problem but on occasion sent the afflicted troop for psychological evaluation and treatment. This was not so much out of concern for their wellbeing but rather because they were deemed to be unfit for combat. As Holt has it, “[m]ental health was not high on the agenda, and as long as you could perform your assigned function and not succumb to any physical illness or injury, it was assumed that you were okay and fighting fit” (150). In short, the SADF had little regard for the mental health of its soldiers.

If the SADF hierarchy did not take the mental health of its troops seriously, the troops themselves were equally inclined to be blasé about the need for professional intervention. It was common to use disparaging names such as koptiffies (head or mental mechanics) to describe psychologists (111). The term implied that the psychologists would mess with one’s mind. When Holt notes after his survival of the strike by Cuban MiGs on the Calueque Dam in late June 1998, that he was “starting to

¹⁰ Erich Maria Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front (London: Vintage, 1976 [1929]).
¹¹ Jenny Edkins, Trauma and the Memory of Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 4.
show classic warning signs of something [PTSD] I would not recognize for several more years” (164), he does so with the benefit of hindsight. When he returned home three months later, he experienced nightmares consisting of battle scenes that were repeatedly replayed in his mind. He speaks of sleep disorders and drinking problems as telltale signs of his condition. And having acquired a working knowledge of the discourse of PTSD, he is able to recognize that his inability to process his traumatic experiences amounted to a “state of cognitive dissonance” (166). Holt also admits that he resorted to blocking out the memories of those events he was unable to process. He reckons that he even contemplated joining the permanent force as he felt totally alienated from civilian life (167). But he decided against such a course of action and klaared out (demobilized) of the army in December 1998 soon after his 20th birthday.

Holt’s penultimate chapter “Cowboys Do Cry” deals with his readjustment to civilian life. He describes himself as anxious, aggressive and ill-tempered, looking for fights and indulging in binge drinking. He also admits to embracing a ‘victim mentality’ in order to attract the attention and sympathy of his peers (175). Following an incident on New Year’s eve 1989 when he ‘snapped’, he rejected the suggestion of seeking psychiatric help and, instead, sought solitude in order to reflect on his course of life. Holt subsequently learned martial arts in order to channel his aggression creatively, and personal motivation so as to regain control of his life by setting himself manageable goals. But his inability to hold down a steady job resulted in his blaming everyone but himself for his (re)lapses; even wallowing in self pity. But when his then girlfriend lost her brother in a car accident, he was forced once again to confront his inability to deal with loss and pain. However, with his marriage to Alison, Holt found a companion with whom he could share the reliving of his traumas. The birth of a son and the family’s migration to Australia are recorded as life-transforming events. Holt reckons that emigration was like “leaving a haunted house, along with all its ghosts” (183). However, he has since discovered that his ghosts tend to accompany him because they live in his subconscious.

In 2002 Holt commenced researching and writing At Thy Call. The text attests to the fact that he read literature in the field of PTSD and incorporated certain insights in trying to understand what he had been through. In other words, the project had a therapeutic effect in that afforded him an opportunity to revisit and engage with his memories, as well as thoughts recorded in his diary. As my précis of key episodes in his story suggest, these events are retold with a fair degree of candour and honesty. Thus, At Thy Call seems to fit into the category/genre of confessional or cathartic literature. Holt, however, sees the book as serving another purpose: to impart his knowledge to others suffering from PTSD. He wishes to illuminate their darkness and to project a path to follow in order to obtain healing. Somewhat blithely, he offers readers a new beginning (187). It is, at least, preferable to promising closure.

Holt’s story is probably not typical of NSM but, then, neither is it extraordinary. For those veterans that did develop the symptoms of PTSD, there was little help at hand. They were seldom aware that PTSD had been declared a diagnostic category by the US medical/psychiatric fraternity in 1980 and was recognized by the SADF, nor appraised of the symptoms of the syndrome. One ex-soldier, John Deegan, related in a documentary programme entitled “The War Within” how his life became a litany of ills after his tour of duty on the border. His experiences included admission to psychiatric hospitals, the abuse of drugs, run-ins with the law, and broken marriages. He reckoned that he could only begin to deal with his demons once he became aware that others suffered from similar
symptoms and that his condition had a name – PTSD.12 This is confirmed by the stories of some SADF veterans posted on the internet. In the absence of a national programme of therapy for those manifesting symptoms of combat-related PTSD, a few ex-soldiers established their own self-help groups. There are also other sites established for the express purpose of allowing those seeking advice or searching for a (cyber)space to tell their stories to do so. For instance, the South African Veterans’ Association (SAVA) set up a website that dubs itself: “A Non-Governmental, Non-Profitmaking Veteran Service for Survivors of the 1970’s-90’s conflicts”. Its co-ordinator, Marius van Niekerk, appears to have a special mission to facilitate atonement and healing for veterans of Cuito Cuanavale and has launched a few projects designed to achieve this. These include the co-writing of a book called Behind the Lines of the Mind: Healing the Mental Scars of War (2007) and the co-production of a film My Heart of Darkness that touts the byline: “The victims of war are not just those that die, but also those that kill”. 13

This statement suggests that the language of psychological trauma has been co-opted by the perpetrators of violence. Indeed, war veterans have been only too willing to embrace victimhood. This practice is not unique to South Africa. Kali Tal has highlighted the tendency to collapse the distinction between victims and perpetrators amongst US Vietnam veterans. He notes that they were:

...exposed to combat or other life-threatening events, and ...exposed to the carnage resulting from combat were traumatized. But combat soldiers, though subordinate to their military superiors and frequently at the mercy of their enemies, still possess a life-or-death power over other people... These soldiers carry guns, they point them at people and shoot to kill... Much recent literature – popular, clinical and academic – places the combat soldier simply in the victim’s role, helpless in the face of war, and then helpless to readjust from the war experience upon his return home... The soldier in combat is both victim and victimizer; dealing death as well as risking it.14

Gillian Eagle, too, has expressed concern about this trend. She noted that the “[o]pening [of] the door to the employment of PTSD as a diagnostic justification for the enactment of violence conceivably provides the basis for blurring the boundaries between victims and victimisers”. 15 This makes for an undifferentiated ‘victim culture’.

Some South African medical health practitioners invoked PTSD in mitigation of the reprehensible deeds of apartheid’s security forces, while others justified gross human rights violations committed in the name of the liberation struggle. In both cases, trauma discourse was employed to minimise individual agency and abdicate political responsibility for acts committed in the name of the ‘greater good’. It seems to me that the TRC made it far too easy to lay claim to victimhood and abdicate responsibility for politically-motivated violence with its amnesty process. Rather than seeking

absolution, we should be prepared to acknowledge our agency and accept that we made choices even when we do so under certain constraints such as conscription. Even though conscripts were subjected to a military patriarchal system that projected a macho masculinity and indoctrinated in its values, they did not make ‘choiceless choices’. For if one has the choice to act, react or resist then one cannot claim (complete) innocence or (absolute) victimhood.