

BRIG-GEN DICK LORD

FOREWORD BY COL JAN BREYTENBACH

**FROM FLEDGLING
TO EAGLE**

THE SOUTH AFRICAN AIRFORCE DURING THE BORDER WAR



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Foreword



I can think of nobody more qualified to write a book about the South African Air Force during the so-called bush war than Dick Lord. He contributed immensely towards turning the already professional air- and ground crews into the most operational-ready, air-combat arm in the world at that time. The operationally deployed SAAF elements may not have been the strongest because of their limited size and outdated equipment, but they were certainly the most effective in a combat zone where they were not only heavily outnumbered but also outclassed in the field of combat 'kit'. We ended the war with F1AZs and CZs; the enemy with MiG-21s and the formidable MiG-23s. Yet they lost several aircraft in air-to-air combat and thereafter avoided crossing swords with the SAAF. Their gunships literally bristled with guns and missiles, veritable flying fortresses, while we soldiered on with the venerable Alouette III armed only with a 20mm gun ... and so we can go on, comparing other types of aircraft on both sides. But the fact remains that our own SAAF brilliantly supported the army from the very beginning in 1966 right up to the final day when an armistice was signed in 1988—and beyond when a few gunships were hastily scrambled to sort out Sam Nujoma's swarm of terrorists which had crossed the Namibian–Angolan cut-line, arrogantly breaching the ceasefire conditions. Once again they got a bloody nose from the same gunships which had been the bane of Nujoma's ambitions while the bush war was raging.

Dick Lord contributed, on the ground, perhaps more than anybody else in forging a wide spectrum of SAAF elements, albeit sparsely manned and equipped, into a highly efficient combat force that became the envy of all air forces worldwide. He was successfully able to integrate the SAAF into the battle being waged on the ground by the 'pongos' (infantry, 'grunts'). The SAAF thus became a 'force multiplier' in the bush war operational area, out of all proportion with its size, manpower and equipment.

So who is this Dick Lord and what is his background?

Richard Lord trained as a pilot with the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm and, one way or another, elected to specialize in all-weather fighters, probably the 'hairiest' of all occupations in the Royal Navy. He flew Sea Venoms and Sea Vixens while serving in various frontline, 'night-fighter' squadrons, operating from aircraft carriers which remained depressingly small while the jets they launched became ever faster and bigger with time. Imagine, as a night-fighter pilot, landing at uncomfortably high speeds on small, pitching decks in total darkness when the weather had clamped in and when only a slight mistake could pitch plane and crew into the drink, alongside or ahead of the carrier, at speeds of 130 knots or more. And please spare a thought for the poor, twittering observer/navigator whose fate rested in the hands of his pilot at such moments. Well, Dick always made it without a hitch, at least in the Royal Navy, which underlines his superb airmanship.

Because of this superior airmanship he was cross-attached to the US Naval Air Force's fighter school near San Diego, in California, which featured in the famous movie *Top Gun* with the unconvincing Tom Cruise as the gung-ho pilot and hero. In fact, while there, Dick wrote a treatise about the intricate but 'instinctive' manoeuvres a fighter pilot had to execute to get on the tail of an opponent in order to shoot him down with his guns. This was at a time when guns had been discarded in favour of only air-to-air missiles—big mistake as the Americans soon found out over North Vietnam when Viet pilots came at the Yanks with both missiles and guns and when friendly missiles sometimes failed to lock on to an adversary. The concept of 'dog fighting' had been dismissed as frivolous exhibitionism. Dick had to re-introduce this to the high-tech pilots who had lost the art of jousting with an opponent in an aerial display of G-pulling ballet.

Dick came to the end of his 'trick' (a navy term) in the RN and returned to South Africa with June Rosalind, his English wife, sometime after I had returned (after my own service in the RN's Fleet Air Arm) with my own English wife, Rosalind June, in tow. He joined the SAAF as a fighter pilot while I had elected to jump out of aeroplanes, an occupation less hazardous than pushing the envelope with gung-ho, all-weather fighter pilots. Dick was, without any doubt, a prime catch for the SAAF having clocked up thousands of hours in frontline naval squadrons, mostly at sea from carriers deployed operationally all over the world. He was soon 'deployed' (as MK, the ANC's armed wing would grandly say) into positions where he could transfer his experience to the SAAF's own *vlamgatte* [SAAF slang for jet pilots—from the Afrikaans *vlamgat*, literally 'flaming hole', in reference to the tail-end of a Mirage F1].

However, his ability and experience soon led to postings to the operational area, the so-called bush-war theatre, where he set about integrating the air force combat power with the army's, to form a combined offensive capability that

made short shrift of any enemy attempts at forcing the South African Defence Force (SADF) to quit a theatre of war that was of prime importance, not only to South Africa but also to the West. Further postings followed, via TF101, SWA Territorial Force and Air Force HQ, which kept him at the cutting edge in developing tactics and procedures for SAAF squadrons to support the ground war in a hostile environment where the enemy had a distinct advantage in superior equipment—and a tactical air-defence system considered, at the time, to be the best in the world. The enemy, nevertheless, still had to face the best air crews in the world, placed at Dick's disposal, which he could mould and use to even the odds and clear the skies of any air threats aimed at the bundu-bashing 'pongo' forces below.

Being an AWF pilot himself he very successfully introduced night-flying operations for Impalas, known as 'moonlight sorties' to intercept enemy convoys under cover of darkness to move logistics and troops by road. Air transport support for UNITA allies and own forces required C-130s and choppers to fly at night to satisfy their demands. Thus C-130s were used at night, as just one example, to urgently shift a UNITA brigade from the Cazombo Bight in the far north to Mavinga in the south to face off a FAPLA attack from Cuito Cuanavale. They flew into old Portuguese bush strips, barely lit by paraffin lamps improvised from empty bully beef tins with home-made wicks, each crew flying several sorties every night for almost a week to get the job done.

Dick, with Deon Ferreira, commander of 32 Battalion, successfully developed a technique called 'butterfly ops' that flushed SWAPO guerrillas from their bases inside Angola by using speculative fire from gunships followed by the rapid deployment of ground forces by Puma helicopters, already standing by, to hem them in and destroy them. During daylight hours Dick used low-flying Impalas to deliver all sorts of ordnance (rockets, gunfire and bombs) deep into Angola, to support ground forces locked in battle with FAPLA/Cuban adversaries. At one time a couple of Impalas were used to shoot a string of MI-24 helicopters out of the sky in broad daylight while they were clattering along on a mission in support of their own troops. This required quick reaction but Dick's system allowed for the rapid scrambling of Impalas or gunships to exploit any opportunistic targets. I suspect that he also introduced toss-bombing techniques for the Mirage F1AZs to enable them to fly in at tree-top level, to avoid the MiGs and AA fire, to attack FAPLA/Cuban supply columns on the move between Menongue and Cuito Cuanavale.

He used Pumas to infiltrate Recce teams deep into Angola at night and to extract them after mission was accomplished, or in any emergency, both day and night. At one stage a small, two-man Recce team kept the railway between Namibe and Lubango cut for three months only because Pumas could clandestinely resupply them with water, rations and explosives. Of course, the favourite capability of

Pumas, usually accompanied by Alouette gunships and Impalas, in the minds of paratroopers, Recces and 32 Battalion troops, was the dicey evolution called a hot extraction. Some Pumas and air crews were lost carrying out this very dangerous function, as were some paratroopers, but they never flinched from coming to the aid of the 'pongos' who might be facing almost certain annihilation.

As a grand finale Dick was heavily involved during 1987/88 in launching Mirage and Buccaneer air strikes against FAPLA supply columns along the Menongue–Cuito Cuanavale supply line and against FAPLA/Cuban brigade formations on the Lomba River. These air strikes contributed significantly to the destruction of three brigades' worth of tanks (94 in all) and huge personnel losses (approximately 4,700 enemy troops), forcing the survivors to withdraw and skulk behind a belt of mines on the east bank of the Cuito River. This, together with the battle at Calueque, led to an end of the bush war.

The SAAF and the army came out of this twenty-year conflict with a reputation unequalled anywhere by any other armed force, largely due to men like Dick Lord who, at the sharp end, forged the two arms of the SAAF and the army into a formidable strike weapon that defeated, even wiped out, numerically far superior enemy forces.

During his service on the border Dick was made an honorary member of 32 Battalion, a unit I had formed, by Eddie Viljoen because we considered him to be one of us, a soldier to the core while also having proved himself an airman of impeccable credentials. It gave me great joy, as a former AWF naval observer/navigator to see a former AWF naval pilot being accepted into my own unit as just another beetle-crushing 'pongo'.

Jan Breytenbach

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Author's notes



Presently, those of us living in South Africa enjoy the benefits of peace and prosperity brought about by a democratic system that governs the well-being of the country. Unfortunately, it was not always so.

For 23 years, between 1966 and 1989, a bitter struggle between proponents of opposing ideologies took place in the remote far north of Namibia and in the southern portion of Angola. The rights and wrongs of the struggle have been documented by those more able than I, and will remain subjects for debate for many years to come.

In this historical account of that military conflict I have tried to avoid being judgemental and apportioning blame to any one faction. It was a war that the soldiers of both sides fought to the best of their abilities. Only those who have experienced the terror of a live fire fight understand the courage it takes to stand up and be counted, when all reason is telling you to dive for the nearest cover. Political propagandists, on both sides, should take cognizance of the guts it takes to enter into combat day after day and, when tributes are paid to those who died during conflict, suitable acknowledgements should be made to the combatants of both sides.

Although names have changed since those days I have employed the jargon in common use in the Defence Force at the time. For instance, I refer to Namibia as South West Africa and refer to the SWAPO cadres as 'terrorists' or 'terrs'. 'Politically incorrect' by today's standards—that is how it was then.

I have followed the course of the war, from the first clash at Ongulumbashe, Owamboland, to the eventual signing of the peace agreement that ended the struggle. I have concentrated on the actions of the South African Air Force, as that was my field of expertise. All the operations the SAAF were involved in are recorded in this book as accurately as I was able to achieve.

I thank the many air force and army personnel who supplied me with

contributions detailing their own personal involvement. They are great stories that tell of tremendous courage, determination and outstanding professionalism. Detailed aircrew logbooks have enabled me to be extremely confident regarding the authenticity of this book. I insisted on accurate dates and times from all the contributors, to ensure fading memories had not altered or embroidered their stories. I am proud to have served in the SAAF and enjoyed every minute of it.

I have concentrated on operations and, therefore, on the aircrew who flew the missions. I realize by doing this I am doing a disservice to the vast majority of SAAF personnel. The ratio of aircrew to supporting staff is of the order 1:20. For every pilot or navigator I mention there were 20 other servicemen or women who were required to ensure that one crew member was able to fly. Like all aviators I too relied on aircraft fitters, electricians, radio technicians, engine mechanics, electronics boffins, flight-safety personnel, parachute packers, radar technicians, GCI and ATC controllers, aircraft handlers, pay clerks, aviation doctors and medics, intelligence teams, armourers, dog-handlers, security guards, map-makers, photographic interpreters, oxygen handlers, caterers—the list is never-ending. Every one of you deserves the acknowledgement for a duty well and truly done. I hope I have done you justice.

'At her call you did not falter,
Oh! South Africa, dear land'

The compilation of a history like this relies heavily on the contributions of many different people and it is my duty to acknowledge each and every one. I single out Rynier Keet because it was he who, unknowingly, is responsible for this book—I was initially on another track completely. Manuel Ferreira, also a historian, allowed me to use his photographs of Angolan military equipment. Riem Mouton was my gopher offering welcome assistance when I found myself up against a brick wall. He kindly spent many hours finding and assembling the maps which were readily available during the war but are now as rare as hen's teeth.

I have also included stories and photographs from the following people, in random order:

Charlie Wroth, George Snyman, Anton Kriegler, Cobus Toerien, Adrian Woodley, Hobart Haughton, Richard Cornelius, Steve Ferreira, Gert Havenga, Bart Hauptfleish, Daantjie Beneke, Mario Vergottini, Martin Louw for his contribution and allowing me to use photographs from his book, Lee le Crerar, Vlooi van Rooyen, Thinus du Toit, Rassie Erasmus, Daan Nel, Steyn Venter, Peter Kirkpatrick, Derek Lord, Johan 'Oppies' Opperman, Paul Dubois, Ollie Holmes, Neil Napier, Lappies Labuschagne, Koos Botha, Herman du Plessis, Eddie Viljoen, Eddie Brown, Derek Kirkland, Paddy Carolan, Graham Rochat, Marius

From Fledgling to Eagle

Whittle, Elmarie Dreyer and David Goodhead. Any errors are theirs!

It was a pleasure and a privilege to have served alongside people like this.

Chris and Kerrin Cocks of 30° South Publishers have been terrific to work with as publishers and as good friends.

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I am privileged and honoured to have had my old shipmate, Jan Breytenbach, write the foreword to this book. We both served in the Fleet Air Arm and in the SADF together—he as a Brown and I as a Blue. As well as being a most respected soldier, he is a conservationist and military historian. Thanks for the kind words, Jan.

In the two years it has taken to write this book I have been wonderfully supported by Richard, Michael, Keegan and a team of lovely ladies, Heather, Courtney and Tayla.

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