

Platoon

3

A National Serviceman's Story

Tim Ramsden



Published in 2018 by:

30° South Publishers (Pty)
Ltd 16 Ivy Road
Pinetown 3610
South Africa
website: www.30degreessouth.co.za

Copyright © Tim Ramsden

Cover design and concept by Anthony
Cuerden Email: ant@flyingant.co.za
Page layout by Blair Couper

Printed by Pinetown Printers (Pty) Ltd; Pinetown, KwaZulu-Natal

ISBN 978-1-928359-09-8 (Paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-928359-20-3 (e-Book)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, manipulated in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any mechanical, electronic form or by any other means, without the prior written authority of the publishers, except for short extracts in media reviews. Any person who engages in any unauthorized activity in relation to this publication shall be liable to criminal prosecution and claims for civil and criminal damages.

Warning - This book contains some graphic imagery and language that some might find offensive.

Dedicated to my son Shaun and to those who served with me.

Contents

Contents

Author's Note

Introduction

1

From Civvie to 'Roofie' (new recruit)

2

Our new company – Bravo Coy

3

De Brug: preparing for battle

4

A State of Emergency: in Tembisa Township

5

Bloemfontein: last days with 1-SAI

6

Middelburg – with 4-SAI

7

Our unknown history South-West African- Angolan border

8

Adjusting to a new setting

9

A long patrol and a dugout on the Yati

10

And the rains came

11

Etosha National Park Ambushing the enemy

12

Patrols between beacons on the Yati

13

Our very own base camp

14

Act of stupidity And more rain

15

An unforgettable scene

16

April fools

17

Going home at last

18

Guarding an ammo dump An overdue pass

19

Mischief in the barracks Life in the Intelligence house

20

Kostini Base Kruger National Park

21

Leaderless A dark shadow of doubt

22

Cause for celebration

23

Refugees 40 days left to serve

24

Farewell to the Kruger

25

Farewell to National Service

26

Mozambique A journey through hell

27

Soldiering on 1988

28

Operati Desert Fox

29

On the outside in Oshigambo

30

The frightening truth

31

After the war was over Revisited Namibia fifteen years on

Glossary

Bibliography

Credits

Author's Note

I have written this story in as much detail as I can truthfully and accurately remember. Painstakingly over three and a half years with patience, passion, and discipline I eventually unfolded my army life onto paper.

I want to thank all those who helped me in some way with this story, particularly Wayne who jogged my memory on certain details, and Grant, Dolf and Andrew who provided me with some photographs. I especially thank Laurence, who I know had to dig deep within himself as he reopened the door to his hellish capture in Mozambique. I have done my best to tell his side of the story, acquired through many long-distance telephone conversations, letters, as well as a journey with him into Mozambique, back to his prison, 20 years after the completion of our National Service. Last but not least, I want to say a big thank you to my mother who read my manuscript in all of about five days, catching the last mistakes before it went into print.

At the beginning of our National Service, we were merely young boys with our whole lives ahead of us – only to be conditioned with racial hatred through intense training, into a tight unit of soldiers with a hard, unwavering inner edge, ready to face whatever was thrown at us.

I apologise to any of those soldiers, especially from Platoon 3, whom I may have offended. It was certainly not my intention to do so, but to portray a true picture of life in 'browns' from one day to the next, I needed to express in detail how we actually lived – with actions, feelings, frustrations, and anger playing key roles. I apologise to the reader for the offensive language and racist slander, but unfortunately this is how we expressed ourselves at the time.

I am not proud of my racist thoughts, feelings and actions while living in a chaotic army world not of my choosing. I cannot change the past, but I can learn from it, move forward, and make myself a better person. I now live to embrace the diversity of cultures with an open mind, seeing people for who they are and what they represent, and I know my well-travelled life has helped me break down those barriers that divide. To see people as people, instead of just black and white, has been a miracle in itself.

Looking back, I am glad I served out my two years and faced the hardship head-on. It was a time I shall never forget, having

grown through the experience, and to this day I am extremely proud to call myself South African. The friends, the fears, the highs and the lows will always be in my memory, and I thought it very important that my son know my whole story.

Introduction

This is my story written from the perspective of a young naive 18-year-old conscripted into the South African Army under the ruling apartheid government, under which every white male had to serve and protect his country as the ‘call of duty.’

In 1984 I began the daunting task of becoming a soldier as I entered into a new and very scary world of strict discipline, confined to an army camp behind wire fences with concrete guard towers. As a new recruit, I was beaten down daily by loud, tormenting, and intimidating shouts of demeaning abuse, along with being forced to run agonizing miles with full military gear willed on by the sheer terror of not keeping up, despite blistered feet, aching limbs, and shattered spirits. For a year I was broken down, and then slowly built up, through intense infantry training – until I was a confident and highly-skilled, mechanized soldier capable of performing practice attacks with live ammunition. After ten months I had meshed into a tightly knit unit of young men from all walks of life, with stamina and endurance second to none and a depth of camaraderie that only a soldier can truly know.

After entering a black township as a show of force to restore peace, we were transferred to another infantry base. And then in 1985 my company was flown to the operational area, where South Africa had been at war with SWAPO (the South-West African People’s Organization) since 1966. We served along the South-West African/Namibian border and into Angola, faced with real fears as we laid ambushes and patrolled the flat and arid land under scorching heat and heavy rainfall, adding to the daily torture of fatigue and thirst, while hating each suffering minute of being there.

Along this border-line our insanity set in, for we were plagued by the miseries of army life, surviving on dry rations, and pestered without end by mosquitoes and flies in a land ripe with malaria and far from home, with boredom and careless actions coming to the fore. It was in this land that one of our countless patrols led us into the aftermath of a bloodbath, wherein innocent women and children had been so brutally massacred.

The constant struggle through daily army life brought our platoon closer together, with drunken binges helping to suppress the raging anger and dreadful fear that came and went as we counted each day to the end of our mandatory two years of service.

Our platoon also served along the border of Swaziland and Mozambique, living in the Kruger National Park amongst the wildest of animals. There, in our last three months, three troops from my section were captured within shouting distance of our position. They were led away at gunpoint and imprisoned in Maputo, Mozambique, for three months – leaving them, and us, to suffer the anguish of the unknown.

Most of our time was spent in dirty clothes, sleeping on the ground, and cooking over an open fire. Our nerves were highly-strung and we always had a loaded rifle close at hand. One minute I would be scared out of my wits, and the next I could not care less – a make-believe shield of invincibility there to protect me. The infantry unit I served in was hardly ever granted leave home, and the money we were paid was a mere pittance for the hardship we endured’ for that was the price all young white boys had to pay to live in South Africa.

After the completion of my two years, my Citizen Force call-ups began. On my third and last call-up in 1988, I was again placed in the operational area, being part of the largest massing of troops and armoury on foreign soil since the Second World War. I lived in fear of the seemingly inevitable attack deep into Angola.

We had all entered into the army as carefree young boys and lived out a distorted adventure as we made the most of our unpleasant situation, until we returned to our hometowns as tough, disciplined men with minds forever changed. I will always remember the long and hard journey for the unbreakable friendships forged within Platoon 3, amidst the agonizing sweat and deeply hidden fears of two-and-a-half challenging years.

This story follows my account of the events that unfolded – the sense of adventure, intrigue and boyish fun underlined with anger, resentment, tension, frustration and the determination to survive mixed with constant thoughts of civilian life, all of which willed me on until the bittersweet end.

1

From Civvie to 'Roofie' (new recruit)

The afternoon was sunny and humid, no different from any other day at that time of year. A cool breeze drifted off the Indian Ocean, casting a familiar salty aroma across the bustling city of Durban, South Africa.

12 January 1984, had dawned, and I reported to the Natal Command army base in Durban with my call-up papers and a carry bag, set to begin my mandatory two years of military service.

The ruling South African government had made it compulsory for all white males to join the military, in order that they might continue white minority rule with an iron fist. Being white South Africans, we felt ourselves to be rightful owners of this magical land, so rich in natural beauty. We did not even think to question otherwise. In our view, our forefathers had arrived first and built the country. With our white National Party government in control, we felt we would be spared the turmoil that faced the rest of Africa, with greed and corruption steering tribes to war and spiralling once-rich economies into worthless ruin.

One only had to look at the likes of the Belgian Congo, Kenya, Rhodesia, Angola, and Mozambique to see what had happened to these countries after they gained independence. Rejoicing in their new found 'freedom,' they emerged from their European-colonial past into societies traumatized with civil unrest – lawlessness and poverty becoming increasingly evident as the years passed, their economies getting poorer and poorer by the day.

Standing still, I looked up, beyond the buildings, into the depths of the powder-blue sky. I took a few deep breaths, inhaling lungfuls of fresh, sticky sea air into my hungry and nervous body. I savoured the moment' not knowing how many scary months would pass by until I could return to my familiar surroundings.

I did not want to run and hide, or show cowardice in fleeing the land of my birth, never to return' or to return only to the jail sentence that I would face if I chose not to serve. I did not want to find myself in a position where I could not get a job because I had not served my country. To live in the confines of our borders and remain firmly South African, I – along with thousands of school-leavers – had to take up the call of duty, to