

Bat Out of Hell

by
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Also by Granger Korff

19 With a Bullet

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Dedication

*I dedicate this book to South African soldiers
who served in the Angolan bush war,
whose memories of a time
when we were soldiers
can seem just like yesterday.*

Acknowledgements

Writing the sequel to *19 with a Bullet* was not as simple and as straightforward as the story of being a combat paratrooper in Angola during the height of the Border War. The sequel, *Bat Out of Hell*, covers the longer aftermath of fighting on the Angolan border, is spread over a longer period of time, and is divided between two continents, illustrating the fact that no matter where you travel, you take your demons with you. As Virgil said in *The Aeneid*:

It is easy to go down into Hell;
Night and day, the gates of dark Death stand wide;
But to climb back again, to retrace one's steps to the upper air –
there's the rub, the task.

I would like to thank some of the people closest to me for their support and for encouraging me to sit down amongst the hustle and bustle of daily life and write this book, *Bat Out of Hell*.

Thank you to my talented brother, Murray Korff, for his endless ideas in form, setting and story and for providing the excellent drawings in the book; my daughter, Natalie Korff, a young writer herself, who has tirelessly listened to my ramblings and offered her inspiration; my long-time partner, Tina Marie Angelone, for listening and pushing me onwards; and especially to my father and my hero, Nicolaas Korff, for endlessly asking me, "How is the writing coming along son?"

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I am grateful also to Aulette Goliath and other staff associated with my publishers, 30 Degrees South. And, of course, all the readers of *19 with a Bullet* who kept asking, "So what happened next and when is the next book?"

- A belated thank you to Debbie Smith, a South African living in Los Angeles, for having re-ordered the rough format of my first book, *19 with a Bullet*, into an accomplished format.
- Some names have been changed in this book. Some of the time frames have been shortened or extended, to a limited degree, to include certain events within that period.
- This memoir is written as a non-fiction narrative style spread over two parts: the period immediately after my time in the army and then a jump forward to some 14 years later. I have described in detail some violent combat scenes that may be disturbing or which may be perceived as being over the top. After much thought about the matter I have decided to describe these scenes as they occurred, in real life.
- I have written my memories as a paratrooper. There were many other military units within the SADF (as it was then) and the police force, who were in the thick of it.

Sketches done by Murray Korff

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GLOSSARY



The might of the Airborne – Exercise Iron Eagle 1988.
Night drop of 600 paratroopers, 34 Tonnes of equipment and 16
vehicles into a rough drop zone

Prologue

Sometimes, sitting alone, I would try to imagine the number of SWAPO, FAPLA and Cuban enemy killed during the South African Bush War ... surely ten thousand or more. I would imagine them dressed in uniform on parade together, brigade after brigade of SWAPO men – we called them ‘terrorists’ – ten thousand souls standing at ease in open order formation on a huge parade ground somewhere in the African bush. On an opposing parade ground, facing them, the souls of the South African soldiers who had died in our small war, 2,700, black and white together, also in company strengths. On this same parade are our allies in the bush war, UNITA, also in large numbers, all on parade in Valhalla. Heroes to their own, enemies to the opposing armies; men who died fighting for what each one thought of as freedom.

Men who deserve to be remembered by everyone but, sadly, who are mostly remembered only by their comrades who participated in the conflict, and friends and families.

For many South Africans now past middle age, the Bush War of some 40 years ago often seems just like yesterday. Then, we young men, fresh out of high school, heard the shouts of battle and were unquestionably prepared to do our best for our country – steely-nerved and ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for a cause we possibly didn’t even fully understand. For this generation, and particularly those at the tip of the spear, there will always be a quiet part, deep within us, that few others will know or understand, other than a comrade or someone who was there, with a similar history.

How difficult it is to forget a time when we were at our finest, young men pushing ourselves so hard, past what we thought physically possible, bonding with strangers who, at home, you might not have given the time of day. Strangers with whom we grew into men, who became comrades and brothers, men to rely on, for whom in a split second you might give up your own life, to save his. Many today still walk with a limp, a bent or missing arm, some have suicided, years later, from living in constant pain. The lives of many other comrades were cut short at this point.

In some ways they may have been the lucky ones, never to grow old, shabby and weary, like the rest of us. They are buried in graves with epitaphs such as “Our ever-loving son and soldier” and “At thy call we will answer”, or similar. Many of these graves sit in the red sands of

Africa, while their families have moved on, emigrated overseas, leaving their brave young son buried alone in his native land, just another casualty of the country he had died for, in defence of freedom.

And our enemy, SWAPO, who put up a brave fight against such great odds. SWAPO, the great red threat who have been as quiet as mice since the cessation of the Border War. How many shallow SWAPO graves, how many scattered, uncovered bones of these fighters lie in the Angolan bush? And the SWAPO soldiers who survived, who are now the same age as SADF survivors, what aftermath and memories do they live with, from their time fighting against the South African war machine? Is it all also “just like yesterday” for them?

Trying to make sense these days, of our current, turbulent world, filled with terror, horrendous wars in the Middle East, crime in South Africa at an all-time high ... it took a lot of thinking on my part to assess whether it was relevant, or even worthwhile, to write about a subject such as the psychological aftermath of the South African Bush War. So what? Who cares?

But, as I chewed over it, it became clear that yes, it is relevant, it is just as pertinent as anything written on any past conflict, about big or small wars. This history is significant, even today. These memories of the Border War are just as real as the memories of any other person in any other war in the past.

I am certain that, to this very day, these legions of men, South Africans, Namibians, Angolans, friends and foes alike, retain deep and vivid memories, and a host of mental scars, with which they have wrestled for decades past, since our own ‘small war’.

It seems just like yesterday that we heard the birds erupting out of the trees, like bats out of hell, after the first, early morning, loud reports from a contact, or a bomb drop, when we hunted one another in a small, remote area of southern Africa, an area that most people on earth have never heard of.

It is in this spirit that I have written this book, *Bat Out of Hell*. It is the sequel to my earlier book, *19 with a Bullet*, which described my time in 1 Parachute Battalion in the Bush War. I am one of those young men who walked out of the gates of 1 Parachute Battalion as a civilian. Little did I know that I, as with many others, had just begun my own private battle, one that would last much longer than the time I spent in the dry bush of Angola.

From an aviary close by, the hauntingly shrill cry of the fish eagle, the emblem of 1 Parachute Battalion, shattered the silence of the