THE SHAPING OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN SOLDIER, 1510-2008

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1. INTRODUCTION

The process which shaped the modern South African soldier can be traced back to a specific date – 29 February 1510 – when a short but bloody little action was fought on the shores of Table Bay between about 150 armed Portuguese sailors under the outgoing viceroy of Portuguese India, Dom Francisco d'Almeida, and a group of Khoina clansmen, about the same number, led by a kraal headman whose name has long since been lost, if it had ever been recorded in the first place.

The details of that ancient clash are fascinating but not relevant to this discussion. Suffice it to say that an early spirit of cordiality turned sour and the Portuguese landed a punitive expedition armed with swords, lances and crossbows to teach the headman a lesson.

What happened instead was that that unknown Khoina leader, whose men were equipped with the most primitive of weapons, inflicted a sanguinary defeat on the Portuguese.

They did not attack the Portuguese on the beach, where their crossbows could have been used to the best effect, but let them advance into the heavily bushed coastal area. Eventually they reached his kraal and found that it had been evacuated. They confiscated a few calves that remained there and set off back to the beach.

Then the Khoina headman made his move. His men burst out of the bush and flung themselves on the Portuguese. At first glance it might seem that the Khoina were unduly disadvantaged, but they were armed with fire-hardened spears and poisoned arrows, and they made use of a veritable "secret weapon" that surprised and disconcerted d'Almeida's men: trained fighting oxen that could be controlled by whistles or shouts.

The Portuguese were hit by a phalanx of oxen, the Khoina spearmen running behind and between them, effectively protected by the animals from any crossbow bolts that might be fired at them before they could close in to stabbing range.

The Portuguese, their lethal but slow-loading crossbows almost useless against this sudden and controlled close-quarters onslaught, set off in pell-mell retreat back to the beach. The Khoina kept up the pressure, harassing them with further co-ordinated attacks. In the end between a third and a half of the Portuguese died.

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This action was to have far-reaching consequences for southern Africa, but that is not relevant to this discussion either. What is relevant is that what is known about the incident indicates that the battle plan evolved by that forgotten headman, untutored though he was by the European military standards of the time, exhibited a sound grasp of what we would now call the principles of war.

He fought at a time and place of his own choosing (avoiding the beach, where the Portuguese distance weapons would have had an advantage); achieved complete surprise; made good use of the bushy terrain; attacked with maximum violence and speed; did not disengage at any stage but maintained the momentum of the attack; and skillfully deployed and co-ordinated his combat assets, namely his infantry (the spearmen) and his "armour" (the oxen).

The plain fact was that the Portuguese were outgeneralled, so that a weak local force was able to vanquish a stronger foreign one in spite of the theoretical advantages that should have resulted from the relative strengths of the numbers and weapons involved. It was a scenario that in later centuries was to be repeated again and again in southern Africa.

The second input into the shaping of the South African soldier originated a long way from the shores of Table Bay, in 1568, when the Low Countries (today's Netherlands and Belgium) rose in rebellion against their Spanish overlords under the leadership of Prince William I of Orange, the famed "William the Silent".

The Spaniards soon reconquered the southern provinces (today's Belgium) but the seven northern provinces, led by Holland, proved to be a tougher nut to crack. Eighty years of intermittent warfare followed that eventually turned the Low Countries into a battleground for virtually all the nations of Europe.

At first sight it must have seemed a laughably uneven struggle: the mighty Spanish Empire pitted against a hastily formed federation of seven small provinces. But the sprawling Spanish Empire was less formidable than it seemed, the rest of Europe was badly disorganised, so that concerted action against the upstart state was not easy, and the Dutch not only had a strong common purpose but a remarkably free and democratic system of governance which had helped them to accumulate vast wealth with which to finance a long war.

Just as importantly, they had the good fortune to produce a series of administrative, financial and military leaders of extremely high quality, and the good sense to select them for the right positions.

2. "STAATSE LEGER"

One of them was Prince Mauritz of Nassau, who had become stadholder or ruler of the United Provinces in succession to William the Silent when his father was assassinated in 1584. Mauritz was a child of the Renaissance, the intellectual renewal

that had started two centuries earlier, and his particular interest was the reformation of his armed forces.

His approach was to resurrect the military lessons learnt by the ancient Greeks and particularly by the Romans, the first nation to fully grasp the fact that warfare was primarily a science and therefore should be scientifically prepared for. Cavalry as the world was later to know it was not a main decisive arm in Greek and Roman times; their wars were won mainly by their steady, well-disciplined, well-trained, well-handled infantry soldiers.

Prince Mauritz and his circle factored in the latest technological and other advances and worked out new drills, battlefield formations and tactics which were based on those used by the Greeks and Romans. The result was the "Staatse Leger", or State Army, undoubtedly the best military force in the world at the time.

His work was so important that in time it spread throughout Europe, with major powers like France, Great Britain, Russia and Germany absorbing his model. The Staatse Leger is largely forgotten nowadays, but if one traces its influence through the centuries one can scarcely find any country in the world whose armed forces do not show its imprint. That is why most of the world's armies have so much in common when superficial differences are stripped away.

The efficient Staatse Leger was the Dutch Republic's secret weapon. The Dutch soon began to win victories, culminating in the Battle of Nieuwpoort in 1600. Within a very short time there was no Spanish soldier left anywhere in the United Provinces. There were still evil times ahead, but in 1648 the Spaniards finally signed the Treaty of Westphalia, which recognised the independence of the Dutch Republic.

The Staatse Leger's doctrine arrived in South Africa in April 1652 in the shape of the 70 or 80 soldiers Jan van Roebeeck brought with him when he arrived at the Cape of Good Hope to set up a revictualling and ship-repair facility for Dutch East India Company ships undertaking the long haul to and from the Far East.

What happened then was that before long both the Staatse Leger doctrine and the fighting tactics of the Khoina began to fuse. Contrary to popular belief, warfare between the Dutch and the Khoina was a rare occurrence and always on a very small scale, but cattle-raiding was an ancient custom among the local population. So the Dutch and the Khoina fought one another occasionally, and at other times served side by side, since there was no Khoina nation as such, and various clans did not hesitate to align themselves with the Dutch against other clans, or even solicit their help.

Inevitably a symbiotic blend of Khoina mobility and Staatse Leger orthodoxy began to emerge. The Khoina contributed the concept of veld-craft, the use of terrain and ultramobile warfare, on foot or on oxen. The Company soldiers introduced better distance weapons – early flintlock muskets – and horses, and the virtues of structure, training and discipline.

So arose the prototype of that quintessential South African soldier of later times, the mobile, quick-thinking mounted rifleman, who was to exercise a fundamental influence on the evolution of the South African soldier, regardless of his race, creed or colour. This was the beginning of the later commando system, although that name did not emerge till the early 18th century.

As time went on, something even more interesting happened: Just as the Staatse Leger philosophy was exported to other nations, so the new Cape style of military organisation and the tactics partly derived from it spread to other parts of the subcontinent and were seized upon by various military thinkers. It is hardly surprising that the concept, with its emphasis on veld-craft, marksmanship and mobility, became a major influence throughout what is now known as South Africa.

As Captain R J Bouch puts it in his 1975 history of the infantry:

> "The early history of white South Africa was dominated by the figure of the armed horseman. Not a cavalryman in the accepted sense of the word, the South African horse-soldier was usually a mounted infantryman, for he fought on foot but used horses to secure that mobility which became essential in operations in South African conditions.
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> "Indeed, the structure and function of military forces in South Africa before 1899 did not generally correspond to the conceptions entertained by European military theorists. The various types of enemy forces and terrain encountered, a lack of manpower, the nature of warfare undertaken and the peculiarities of South African society were factors which often necessitated a considerable adaptation of European models to local conditions."

Three decades later, Bouch's remarks remain valid except in one respect: It was not just the early history of *white* South Africa that was dominated by the mounted soldier. Eventually the Cape concept reached everywhere, and in so doing changed the course of our communal history.

An interesting though largely forgotten example of the evolutionary process is to be found in the military structures and tactics of Nama clans such as the Bondelswarts, Afrikaners and Witboois which crossed the Orange River into the future Namibia from the end of the 18th century onwards.

These so-called Oorlams clans soon became a powerful military factor in that territory, largely because they had more and better firearms but mainly because they brought with them the efficient and well-tried commando system, a fourth-generation local development of that original marrying-up of the tactics of the ox-riding Khoina and the teachings Prince Maurice had formulated for the Staatse Leger doctrines two centuries earlier.

The Staatse Leger's influence did not grind to a halt on the western bank of the Vaal River. The two Boer republics are remembered today for their commandos, which attained such renown that in 1940 Winston Churchill gave the name to his newly formed special forces, thereby placing "commando" in the world military lexicon (it is only in the South African military that the term retains its original meaning).

3. THE BOERS AND DE LA REY

But it should be remembered that both the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek and the Orange Free State also maintained small but efficient artillery regiments that were organised and trained *inter alia* by expatriate Prussians who were themselves the spiritual heirs of the Staatse Leger.

One has the impression that the commando system and the foreign-trained artillery corps did not always make easy bedfellows, at least in the eyes of the older and more conservative types of Boer; but when they did join hands the results spoke for themselves. Two examples are the Battles of Modder River and Magersfontein in late 1899. Both were exhaustively described, but the genesis of the tactics used and preparations made by General Koos de la Rey (who directed one battle and designed the other) have not always been highlighted.

Outwardly, the tall, dignified, heavily bearded De la Rey seemed to typify the Boer leader of his generation, but he was far more complex a man than his appearance indicated. He was not an enthusiastic soldier – he has even been described as having been a pacifist at heart - but when required to make war, he did so supremely well, because although he had not had a day's formal military training in his life, he was one of those natural generals that the subcontinent seems to throw up with such surprising prodigality when the need arises.

De la Rey's extensive bush-fighting experience and inquiring mind enabled him to spot a potentially fatal weakness in the Boers' tactics as the British forces ground slowly but inexorably towards Kimberley in the last quarter of 1899. The Boers were using their traditional tactics, which were simple enough: They occupied suitable high ground, mowed down the advancing British infantry and then, when the British reached the slopes of the high ground and were able to fight from cover, the Boers mounted their waiting horses and fell back to the next area of high ground.

De la Rey realised that although the British were losing great numbers of men, they were being allowed to dictate the tactics, and therefore they were winning, because at the end of each battle the Boers had been pushed further back, and he knew that the British would keep on doing so because they had the resources.

So De la Rey tried something new at Modder River. Somehow he persuaded the Boers to invert their customary tactics; they must entrench themselves on the open ground, and they must stay put even when the pressure became heavy. It was such radically new thinking that only a man of De la Rey's immense personality could have imposed it on his quarrelsome troops. But he did it, and emplaced his scanty inventory of artillery pieces and heavy machine-guns belonging to the Orange Free State's State Artillery on the northern bank.

In due course the British marched into the trap, it slammed shut, and the advance ground to a full stop amid scenes of dreadful slaughter. Then the trap sprang

open again when De la Rey's senior, the militarily backward General Piet Cronjé, summarily withdrew two of his artillery pieces midway through the battle. De la Rey had no option but to withdraw, having inflicted almost 500 dead on the British against a total loss of 50 Boers.

De la Rey did not command at Magersfontein, but he designed the battle area in the same way as he had done at Modder River, although only after overcoming Cronjé's mulish objections. Twelve miles of trenches linked Magersfontein's kopje and its nearby ridges, and the OFS artillerymen sited their guns with great skill. The result was an outright Boer victory, leaving them in possession of the battlefield with a loss of just 87 killed and a little over 200 wounded, whereas the British had to withdraw to the Modder River after suffering 200 killed and almost 700 wounded.

De la Rey's insight about the ultimate failure of the traditional Boer tactics undoubtedly sprang partly from his instinctive understanding of warfare, but a case can be made for saying that his efficient "marrying up" of trench warfare, artillery and Boer riflemen resulted at least in part from his friendship with Major Richard Albrecht, commander of the OFS State Artillery and a former warrant-officer in the Prussian Artillery, one of the most efficient descendants of the Staatse Leger.

From the Boer point of view it was a tragedy that De la Rey, Louis Botha and others like them were not in supreme command in the critical first phase of the war, which was dominated by the inflexible thinking of older generals who could not or would not adapt their tactics and methods, and thus made the ultimate surrender of the two republics inevitable.

Much of what have been said above is not new, of course; the Second Anglo-Boer War has been thoroughly ploughed over. But one finds it difficult to understand why so little work has been done on the subject of how the organisation and tactics of the various tribal armies evolved during this same period, and why.

4. THE ZULU ARMY

Some sources indicate that such armies developed along two very visible lines from the beginning of the 19th century onwards. One of these developmental streams is to be seen in the case of nations such as the Xhosas, the Basothos, the Pedis and the Tswanas, whose 19th-century armies and tactics were clearly influenced to some extent by the Cape-style amalgam of Staatse Leger doctrine and Khoina influences. The other stream is represented by the Zulu military system established by King Shaka, which appears to have been a totally home-grown development.

The Zulu army, as organised by Shaka, was an astonishing illustration of how one brilliant thinker, working in total isolation, can evolve an organisation which is breath-taking in its breadth and innovative thinking; and it is one of history's ironies that in the end the Zulu system proved less durable in battle than the others - not

because of inherent faults but because, for various reasons, it had been so successful that for decades it had not been exposed to the evolutionary process resulting from constant operational deployments.

At the hands of Shaka and some of his successors the ferociously efficient Zulu impis terrorised all of what would now be described as central South Africa, totally wiping out at least 40 other tribes and setting in train a decades-long ripple effect that destabilised the entire region and substantially altered its future. One reason for the Voortrekkers' rapid advance into the South African midlands, for example, was that a huge area had been effectively depopulated by Shaka's ruthless empire-building.

In spite of that, however, this phenomenal military organisation remains curiously unexplored, in the sense that while the activities and effects of Shaka's impis were thoroughly documented, the system itself, not to mention the thinking of the man behind it, seems never to have been thoroughly analysed and its lessons highlighted.

It was claimed that Shaka incorporated some aspects of British practices when he set about developing the traditional Zulu regimental system into its final form; but this cannot be true, since Shaka perfected his system *before* he had any significant contact with the British or other outsiders. It is more likely that outside observers of the time simply could not believe that an isolated tribal king could have evolved such a sophisticated system; or it might be that few contemporary chroniclers of Shaka's life and times realised just how sophisticated his system was, and thus regarded it as no more than a slight improvement on its predecessors.

Shaka's genius lay in his recognition of the potential of an existing but underdeveloped regimental system, and his ability to turn it into a military machine more comprehensive than anything since the Roman times; by the time his increasing mental instability brought about his assassination he had created what was probably the finest heavy infantry force Africa has ever seen.

What is of particular fascination is the fact that in its final form his army's structure was remarkably similar to the network of territorially based multi-battalion regiments which the British developed during the 19th century - and which was probably the most important European military organisational innovation of that time – but incorporated features which did not receive any significant attention in Staatse Leger-derived armies till considerably later.

Even a cursory analysis of his army reveals basic organisational and managerial characteristics of which some were already well-tried at the time, while others were surprisingly innovative:

- Strict discipline.
- Good battle leadership.
- Innovative tactics (the "horns of the bull" is reminiscent of Hannibal's "*Cannae Manoeuvre*").

- A semi-active, rapidly mobilisable trained reserve that was an excellent force multiplier.
- Detailed, firmly instilled battlefield formation drills.
- Secure battlefield communications (i.e. the transmission of orders by whistling instead of voice commands).
- A well-developed intelligence-gathering system.
- An efficient field reconaissance organisation.
- Superior technology, specifically the very efficient stabbing spear with its short shaft and long, heavy blade, and the large bull-hide shield.
- A detailed system of distinctive uniform and insignia to denote the various regiments.
- A systematic nurturing of regimental pride and spirit, which caused some problems in peace-time (e.g. in some cases regiments had to be kept geographically separate because they tended to fight one another) but paid immense dividends in battle.
- Awards for gallant and distinguished service in action (ranging from an allocation of cattle to the award of brass armlets and carved necklaces).
- A medical corps of sorts.
- Efficient logistics to keep the "tail" short.
- A psychological "depressurising" process for his troops after battle.

What is just as interesting - and of particular relevance to the modern SANDF - is the nature of Shaka's personnel. Contrary to what the uninformed observer might think, Shaka's mighty military machine was composed mainly of citizen-soldiers who spent most of their time on farming activities and were mobilised only as and when necessary. As a result, Shaka was able to field a battle-ready force of daunting size and efficiency at any given time, which did not, however, represent a continuing drain on the pastoral Zulu economy in between wars.

It is also interesting to note - and this is another lesson for the modern SANDF - that Shaka's reliance on citizen-soldiers exerted a strong influence on the way he made war; the same factor applied to other armies based on non-regular soldiers, ranging from the French Army in Napoleonic times to the Boer forces in 1899-1902 and the Israeli land forces of today.

It is incorrectly assumed, for example, that the Zulus' aggressive behaviour in battle, with the emphasis on the attack rather than the defence, resulted solely from their military ethos; in fact, Shaka also encouraged quick victories because the absence of large numbers of men on long campaigns would result in internal economic disruption.

Shaka's techniques for ensuring that his largely part-time army was of professional standard and almost instantly available were equally innovative and are as applicable today as they were in the 1820s. Basically they could be summed up as follows:

- Excellent training, starting well before military age (about 18) with a type of cadet system and exploiting existing cultural usages (e.g. dancing, developed into battle drills).
- A good organisational network, which ensured that regiments were evenly spread out among the communities and formed an integral part of those communities.
- Good public relations, to use a modern term, which made the profession of arms a respected one, and ensured tremendous peer pressure on young men to volunteer for service (there seems not to have been any form of conscription).
- A simple, effective and speedy mobilisation system.
- The strong regimental system mentioned above, which not only promoted unit spirit but also (through its multibattalion nature) made it possible to "marry up" unblooded troops with battle-hardened veterans, thus providing a fine combination of eagerness, fitness, steadiness and sagacity in war, all cemented together by a continuous trickle-down of invaluable operational experience.

Shaka's system persisted well into the 19th century and was still in existence (albeit in somewhat diluted form) when the British and Zulus clashed in 1879. Unfortunately for the Zulus, their traditional mindset regarding weapons and tactics did not evolve to any significant degree.

For example, the Zulus were no strangers to firearms; Shaka, like any good military thinker, acquainted himself with the potential of this new weapon, but concluded that the massed charge to contact was still the best tactic if his troops could withstand the losses incurred.

Given the firearms of the time, Shaka might well have been right, but his successors did not evolve more flexible contingency tactics after their encounters with the Voortrekkers, or appreciate the on-going progress in weapons technology. Thus, by 1879, the Zulus had accumulated some horses and considerable numbers of firearms, but their weapon of choice was still the well-proven stabbing spear and their preferred tactic was still the massed charge.

In situations such as Isandlwana, where the terrain allowed a close approach and a sudden charge, they were as unstoppable as ever - although they took heavy losses there because of the British troops' increased firepower - but their generals did not absorb the lessons of the successful defence of Rorke's Drift against Dabulamanzi's warriors.

"An assegai has been plunged into the belly of the Zulu nation", King Cetswayo is said to have remarked sorrowfully after Rorke's Drift, so soon after the heavy casualties suffered at Isandlwana, and he was right; the death-thrust came at Ulundi, where the impis attacked in the old style and broke themselves on the British square, just as Napoleon's lion-hearted veterans had ultimately recoiled from the Guardsmen at Waterloo. When the firing died away at least 1 000 had been killed, while the British losses were a mere ten dead and 69 wounded.

The lesson of Ulundi remains as valid now as it was then - it is not enough to be brave, disciplined and aggressive; an army must constantly adapt itself to its current tactical and technological milieu. Secure in their impis' awesome reputation, the Zulu generals had not done so, and so the greatest infantry army in the history of southern Africa died under the muzzles of the British guns.

It is fascinating to speculate about what might have happened in 1879 if, 50 years earlier, Shaka had started turning part of his army into mounted infantry, operating alongside his peerless foot-soldiers. Perhaps he would have done so had he lived another two decades or so, for it is inconceivable that a military thinker of his calibre would not have seen the shape of things to come, and taken the correct steps to prepare for it.

It is now largely forgotten, but in 1879 there actually was such a mounted infantry unit, the Natal Native Horse, fighting on the British side. Made up mainly of Mfengu and Zulus opposed to Cetswayo, it was armed, uniformed, trained and equipped as a standard regiment of light horse and acquitted itself very well, *inter alia* at Isandlwana, where it stood fast during the fighting and then shot its way out in good order when the British defence collapsed.

Generations of writers have devoted their attention (albeit mainly superficial) to the extremely colourful and terrifying Zulus, but the other southern African tribal armies who bought into the "Cape doctrine" and evolved - the Xhosas and the Basothos, to name but two - should be of equal interest to military historians.

If the Zulu army can be described as South Africa's quintessential heavy line troops, these armies can be seen as exponents of the light and mounted infantry style of warfare, and possessors of the fighting man's greatest asset: the inherent flexibility of mind which allowed a continuous evolutionary process to take place.

The Xhosas were never as militarised or politically centralised as the Zulus; although they also started off with a regimental system based on age groups and a battlefield formation similar to the "horns of the bull", their inherent mindset was different. Their warriors did not place the same emphasis on close-quarter combat as the Zulus. They made more use of distance weapons (i.e. the throwing spear), and there was a greater reliance on individual skirmishing when battle was joined, rather than closely bunched mass attacks aimed at achieving a maximum shock effect.

5. XHOSA WARRIORS

There is another factor which is important in any war: By the late 19th century the Xhosa warriors had had a greater deal of operational experience than the Zulus, thanks to the long series of Frontier Wars, in which they were thoroughly exposed to British tactics and more advanced technology (once again, firearms and horses).

To their credit they drew the right conclusions at an early stage, and kept on doing so, abandoning the traditional encirclement-and-rush tactic when they saw how suicidal it was in the face of steady, well-drilled musket fire, and working out a body of new tactics which efficiently incorporated the use of both guns and horses.

The new-style tactics consisted of avoiding set-piece battles. Instead they fought, whenever possible, on ground favourable to them, such as mountainous and thickly bushed terrain. Typically, they would launch lightning attacks on the enemy and then retreat to the killing grounds of their choice, where they would concentrate on ambushes and repeated small-scale attacks based on efficient surveillance of enemy movement.

The upshot of all this was that it took the British a series of wars over most of a century, involving an enormous expenditure in blood and treasure, before the Xhosas were finally conquered in 1878.

Although they had various generals whose memory is still revered today, no single Shaka-like military thinker stands out among them. No doubt several explanations could be given to account for this, but in my opinion it stems simply from the fact that the development of the Xhosa fighting forces did not derive from one man's grand vision of the future but from a continual evolutionary process which kept pace with ever-changing circumstances.

In other words, they did not need a visionary to look over at "the other side of the hill", in General Jan Smuts's words, and conceptualise as yet unheard-of battlefield challenges; they were actively scouting along the summit of that hill at all times, observing what was happening below and changing their *modus operandi* accordingly.

6. THE BASOTHOS

The Basothos under Moshoeshoe underwent an equally fascination evolutionary process. Although the Basothos' innovations also resulted from the press of war, their circumstances were considerably different, since they had to build up what modern-day military writers would describe as a "zero-base army".

Moshoeshoe started off with a traditional regimental system, but it was never developed to nearly the same extent as those of the Zulus or Xhosas, and Moshoeshoe obviously realised at an early stage that it was totally unsuited to their circumstances.

It appears that the Basothos' evolutionary process started early in the life of the new kingdom, when their warriors clashed (to their great detriment) with the Griquas, sharp-shooting horsemen of mixed race who were steeped into commando doctrine which had developed at the Cape. Moshoeshoe saw the shape of things to come and took enthusiastically to both guns and horses, and it is obvious that he absorbed elements of the Griqua tactics as well.

Moshoeshoe then combined his new acquisitions with what he already possessed and transformed all the various ingredients into something new and infinitely more formidable as he forged his multitribal mob of refugees from Shaka's devastating wars into a new nation and secured his mountain stronghold of Thaba Bosigo.

Generally speaking, the early Basotho warriors were not proficient marksmen, mainly because they did not possess musketry instructors, but they lost little time in turning themselves into such expert horsemen that one British officer compared them to Russia's famed Cossacks.

Their new tactical approach combined mobility, mounted charges from cover, expert use of terrain, a talent for deception and surprise, dogged tenacity in defence and a properly meshed system of light and mounted infantry employment; the result was a formidable citizen army which was in a constant state of evolution, as Moshoeshoe's successors proved on several occasions.

The Basothos fought the Boers to a standstill at Thaba Bosigo in the 1860s, something few others had succeeded in doing. Then there was the 1877 British campaign against Chief Moorosi, ruler of an Nguni clan called the Phuthi, which had settled at the borders of Basotholand and acquired both Moshoeshoe's protection and his military ethos.

A British expedition, consisting of 800 white troops and about 1 500 tribal auxiliaries, set off to discipline Moorosi, sanguine in the belief that the upstart would be dealt with in short order, since the Phuthi "Army" consisted of only about 300 men at most. But the Phuthi warriors were all equipped with firearms and horses, boasted some expert shots, had accumulated plenty of ammunition and were thoroughly conversant with Moshoeshoe-style tactics.

As a result Moorosi held off the attackers for eight months, right through a typical icy Lesotho winter and near-starvation conditions, and did not succumb till what became known as the Battle of Moorosi's Mountain, where he and 40 of his men were killed in a mass assault by the expeditionary force.

Just three years later, during the so-called "Gun War" of 1880, Moshoeshoe's son Masopha and grandson Lerothodi fought off a much larger British and colonial expeditionary force which aimed at confiscating the large number of firearms in the kingdom. Masopha and Lerothodi put up a stiff resistance and were still in the field when peace was made, and the Basothos were not disarmed.

7. THE MODERN SOUTH AFRICAN SOLDIER

One could go on virtually *ad infinitum.* The Anglo-Boer Wars, particularly the second and greatest, is replete with examples which are too well-known to need mentioning. Smuts's dash into the Cape Colony at its end is another classical example of the ever-evolving "Cape doctrine". The same applies to General Louis Botha's campaign

against the Germans in the then South West Africa during World War I, and the activities of General Sir Jaap van Deventer's mounted brigades in German East Africa (one thinks particularly of their gruelling dash to Kondoa Irangi in 1917).

At the beginning of World War II the same mindset inhabited Brigadier (later Major General) Dan Pienaar in Abyssinia, although there was less scope for innovative action in the Western Desert and Italy later on. But the mindset persisted, and showed itself again in the external operations into Angola that resulted from the counter-insurgency campaign in South West Africa/Namibia during the 1970s and 1980s.

It is currently rather politically incorrect to examine the fighting of the 1970s and 1980s, but if one does, the mobility, veld-craft and innovativeness is clearly to be seen, made even more formidable (as was the case in the two world wars) by thorough conventional training and leader-group selection.

A perfect illustration is Colonel Koos van Heerden's successful dash up the Angolan coast with a hastily assembled force of soldiers of whom many were very sketchily trained, and mostly mounted in a raggle-taggle assortment of civilian vehicles which consisted mainly of former vegetable lorries and (in one case) an abandoned tipper truck. The heavy conventional fighting in 1987 and 1988 provided further examples which have been thoroughly documented.

So the modern South African soldier has an interesting collection of spiritual ancestors which spans all the races and cultures of our subcontinent. If he is wise enough to heed those ancestral voices and the lessons they have to offer he will do well on the battlefields of tomorrow.

A last question and a last answer, both of which I have left to the last because I wanted to sketch the greater context first, is: "Where do movements like UmKhonto we Sizwe and APLA fit into your picture?" It is a good question, and there is a good answer: Both MK and APLA travelled the same road as all the other South African forces sketched above.

On the one hand they are heirs of the mainstream because many of their members received conventional training in Staatse Leger-derived foreign forces, while others served in the old SADF or the former homelands armies. On the other hand, they also developed in their own way in response to their specific needs, circumstances and general background.

All of the above has a great lesson – not just a military one - which not many people take notice of. South Africans have a great fondness for cherishing only those parts of their history that they like, but the only viable road ahead is for us to accept that in fact we have a "common" history. The much-vaunted concept of the "rainbow nation" will remain just that – a concept – till we understand the need for accepting such a common history … both military and social, because one cannot be separated from the other.

8. FINAL REMARKS

With the foregoing in mind one is forced to four main conclusions:

The first is that the crucial element in any armed force is still, and always will be, an innovative style of generalship and command. The Emperor Napoleon exaggerated when he said that there were no bad soldiers, only bad officers – but he exaggerated for effect. Any hierarchical organisation invariably takes on the ethos of its commander, and so a timid, hidebound or unimaginative general will end up with a timid, hidebound or unimaginative army.

The second is that an essential success factor is the creation of a system in which issues of race, ethnicity and gender – which will always be with us – are subsumed in a greater military culture which is flexible enough to accommodate such things and turn them to strength factors rather than weaknesses. We should be looking at the Indian Army in this regard. Our cultural, racial and demographic diversity is simple by comparison with India's, yet the Indians have evolved a system that has worked well for more than 50 years because it makes allowances for two things:

- An overall military system that is based on the universal military values, to which all members are expected to conform, regardless of their personal culture.
- A large variety of teeth arms regiments, each firmly rooted in its traditional recruiting area and possessed of a very distinct "family" character.

Thirdly, innovative generalship and command are not enough unless the general concerned has a force with the inherent means and resources – men, money and materials - to allow him to put his talents and its capabilities to proper use. The Allies very nearly lost World War II because in 1940 they were fielding armies trained and equipped for 1930. We need to look at ourselves and ask whether we are still training to fight in a Cold War context with weapons and equipment designed for an era that no longer exists.

Fourthly, an armed force should be shaped not just by evolving military doctrine and weaponry but also by its own geographical circumstances, its politico-strategic environment and a clear understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. That means "looking on the other side of the hill" to determine the shape of things to come and what one is likely to need to deal with them.

And so finally the author poses the question to which this discussion has been devoted: "Is there a South African way of war? If so, what is this and how does it compare to Western/African/Eastern ways of war?"

The answer is "yes". South Africans are the best exponents of what can be called "African Bush Warfare". By this I do not mean counter-insurgency campaigns (this is another subject altogether) but highly mobile and sometimes fairly unorthodox conventional or semiconventional operations in typical African conditions.

Yet we do not seem to understand this because we are still seduced by the remnants of Cold War thinking, bedazzled by advanced technology we cannot afford or do not need, and handicapped by our wilful ignorance of our military history, both recent and distant.

To take just the 20th century, it would profit us to study the Bondelswart and Witbooi Rebellions of the early 20th century in what was then German South West Africa (who now remembers the remarkable Jakob Morenga and Hendrik Witbooi, or Maherero, for that matter?), the conquest of South West Africa in 1915, the East African Campaign of 1916-1918, the Abyssinian Campaign of 1940-1941 and Operation Savannah and the later external operations between 1978 and 1988.

At various times each of these campaigns has been politically unpopular – as Operation Savannah in 1975-1976 and the later Bush War are at present – but it is our duty to put personal feelings aside and study each as objectively as possible in order to extract whatever lessons they have to offer.

What all of them tell us is that surprisingly successful bush campaigns can be fought by a small but well-trained, well-motivated and versatile army which fosters innovative tactical "make a plan" – thinking at all levels, is accustomed to operating under rough conditions and knows how to make use of the terrain.

It would be a worthwhile exercise. After all, the lives of our sons and grandsons might depend on it during some future conflict.

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