

### **Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa's Seaborne Raiders 1978-1988.**

By Douw Steyn & Arnè Söderlund. Solihull: Helion & Company, 2015.  
ISBN: 1909982288. ZAR 695.

The publication of *Iron Fist from the Sea. South Africa's Seaborne Raiders 1978-1988* by Douw Steyn en Arnè Söderlund capitalises on two important current trends in South African military literature. Firstly, most of the members of the so-called Border War generation, those who served in the South African military in various positions in the 1970s and 1980s, have retired. These men and women now have the time for reading, introspection and reflection and, more important, the will and time to write about their military experiences during a time of great turmoil in the history of South Africa. One of the interesting features of the South African armed forces at the time was the extent to which it could rely on the best that white society could offer for thinking, skills and leadership. The military, as a result, became a relative progressive institution in society in general. This reality is reflected in the nature and scope of this particular publication.

Secondly, there is within the military publication genre a specific and distinct interest in special and special operations forces. It is possible to link this interest to the mystique of these kinds of forces and to argue that what made them special is also the reason why the public in general is interested in reading about the adventures and exploits of these, usually small, groups of secretive, highly skilled, well-trained and specialised soldiers. The daring nature and cloud of 'we cannot talk about our operations' are precisely the reasons why the public are more interested in what these kind of soldiers have to say. Recently, a number of publications by special force operators have been published.<sup>9</sup> Most of these publications fall within the autobiographical and 'history from below' categories with special force soldiers writing about their own personal experiences as part of the South African Special Forces. The authors of *Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa's Seaborne Raiders 1978-1988* are very blunt in their view of these publications – "most of these books have only addressed the

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Stadler, K, *Recce: Small Team Missions Behind Enemy Lines*, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2015; Diedericks, A, *Journey Without Boundaries: The Operational Life & Experiences of a SA Special Forces Small Team Operator*, Just Done Productions, 2007; Greeff, J, *A Greater Share of Honour*, Just Done Productions, 2008.

sensational actions of a few radical operators and have failed to document what it was really like to be a ‘recee’ operator or commando”.<sup>10</sup> And with that the authors of *Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa’s Seaborne Raiders 1978-1988* are implying that their publication is in many ways unique amongst the publications on South African Special Forces.

The purpose of the book, the authors explain, is to documents the history of 4 ‘Rece’ Commando, later to be named 4 Reconnaissance Regiment, and the operations undertook between 1978 and 1989. Thus, the authors claim, they were able “... to produce [an] accurate history of seaward operations undertaken” during this period.<sup>11</sup> The book is, however, much more than a unit history. It traces the development of a unique seaborne capability by the South African Special Forces; it provides an outline of the creation of a specific military unit that housed these South African “SEALS”<sup>12</sup> and offers a detail outline of the history of and unique operations these small group of men conducted, in cooperation with the South African Navy, between 1972 and 1990. The uniqueness of the unit is highlighted by the fact that, of the 480 soldiers who qualified as special force operators between 1978 and 1989, only 45 served in 4 Reconnaissance regiment.<sup>13</sup>

In general, though, the book is an outstanding and important contribution on an area of which very little is known in South African society in general; even by those who served in the military at the time. It provides an excellent exposition of the highly secretive operations that the South African Special Forces conducted, in cooperation with the South African Navy, along the coastline of Southern Africa – as far as Cabinda on the west coast of Africa and Tanzania on the east coast.

There is always some danger that authors that are closely associated with their topic, such as Douw Steyn en Arnè Söderlund, may be subjective

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<sup>10</sup> Steyn, D and Söderlund, A, *Iron Fist from the Sea: South Africa’s Seaborne Raiders, 1978-1988*, Helion, West Midlands, 2014, p.ix.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> This specific military capability is normally associated with the well-known US Navy’s Sea, Air and Land Teams, generally known as SEALs that are responsible to conduct small-unit maritime military operations which originate from, and return to a river, ocean, swamp, delta, or coastline. See the history webpage of the US Navy SEALs at <<http://navyseals.com/nsw/navy-seal-history/>> Accessed 31 March 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Steyn, D and Söderlund, *op. cit.* p.ix.

in their analysis. However, the most outstanding feature of the book is the primary research that the authors rely on in the writing of the book. They succeeded in getting access to previously classified documentation and were able to interview many of the men that were involved in the creation and development of the unit and the seaward capability and the planning and conduct of these operations. This is reflected in the detail with which the planning and conduct of many of the operations are discussed.

The writing and the book in general is enthralling. Yet, at times it tends to be very factual. This may be the result of one of the motivational factors for the book that the authors outlined in the preface. Few journalist, the authors note, were able to find reliable sources or establish contacts within the Recce community, especially after the failed 1985 operation in Northern Cabinda. As a result, they resorted to publishing stories based on assumptions and unreliable sources – the Angolan news reports being specifically mentioned in this regard. Thus, the authors argue, “... the secretiveness and silence we had prided ourselves on previously now prevented us from defending our honour.”<sup>14</sup> This almost turn into a negative motivational factor for the writing of the book when the authors remark that “... we are doing every member of Special Forces – past and present – a great disservice if we continue to remain silent” and that “... it is time to document [the] history accurately using factual information rather than public versions – many of which are based on speculation or bravo – and to give a detail account of our clandestine operations whether successes and failures.”<sup>15</sup>

Of course, the factual nature of the book is also its most outstanding feature and one that many historians will thank the authors for in years to come. The thoroughness of the research is impressive. Of course, it is possible that some special force operators, past and present, will resent the lifting or piercing of the corporate vial and the pros and cons of such a detail discussion of the South African Special Force doctrine and standard operational procedures is probably up for debate. There is no doubt, though, that this particular publication contributes to a better understanding of special force operations within the larger military fraternity and the public in general during a time that many operations were conducted by

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xi.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

these forces and in which very little information was shared with the outside world about the nature of these forces and the employment.

The book definitely challenges the opinion of many that special force operators are the most fearless and deadly killers. Instead, the image of special forces – working in close cooperation with certain naval contingents – portrayed by the book is that disciplined professionalism and clinical military effectiveness is not always a guarantee for operational success. The Clausewitzian fog, friction and change, together with modern-day money, politics and gadgets, always have their say in these kinds of operations. And this is precisely why the book is highly recommend for military practitioners and the public alike – to provide an understanding of how military effectiveness is the result of both institutional professionalism *and* external factors over which armed forces seldom have any control.

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