

Book Review

20 Battles: Searching for a South African Way of War, 1913–2013

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This is a timely and important volume in the growing literature on modern warfare. While the book focuses on military developments and campaigns relating to South African forces, there is material in this volume that is relevant to all modern armies. The authors have taken a series of key actions, all involving South African forces, over the course of a period spanning 1913 to 2023. In the development of this book, we see the evolution of military forces within South Africa and the gradual move from a contingent that was largely composed of the volunteer forces of a dominion within the wider British Empire, to the development of a modern, national standing army.

The 20 battles that have been chosen for this volume are reflective of the wide range of South African military experience. Chapters on the industrial unrest of 1913–1914 and the Rand Revolt of 1922 demonstrate that, from an early phase, the focus of military service in the South African context could be internal and directed to “aiding the civil powers”-type duties. The outbreak of the First World War (WW1) (1914–1918), forced a major rethink in terms of the expansion of South African forces and their training, equipping, and deployment. While there would be phases in which the force was reduced after 1918, it could be argued that many central principles were laid down. During the WW1, South African forces were initially based on volunteer units, which grew in professionalism as the war progressed.

Chapters 2 to 4 of *20 Battles* focus on deployments against German forces in Africa, while Chapter 5 discusses the deployment of the South African Brigade on the Western Front, particularly at Delville Wood in 1916. It is safe to say that, during the course of that war, South African forces established an enviable reputation as a formidable fighting force.

This was a reputation that was carried forward into the Second World War (WW2) (1939–1945), and Chapters 8 to 13 reflect the considerable service South Africa rendered in the war, which was concentrated initially in Ethiopia and North Africa, before moving to Italy to take part in that difficult campaign. Chapter 10 focuses on the action at Sidi Rezegh in 1941, which in many ways established the reputation of South African troops in WW2. The chapter on Tobruk (1942) is particularly revealing, as this is an action that

we usually associate with ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) forces. The reader is offered an impression of South African soldiers as adaptable and resilient fighters. In the chapters on both world wars, there is some discussion of the domestic debate in South Africa at the time, and its growing importance in the Empire. There are some significant figures within this wider discussion. Obviously, Field-Marshal Jan Smuts is a prominent figure, particularly in the context of WW2.

For the final chapters of this book, the focus is once again on Africa. At the time of the Cold War, the African continent became an increasingly volatile place, and there are detailed discussions of actions in Angola, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and the Border War (1966–1989), among others. We are presented an army faced with challenging decisions as it tries to maintain effectiveness as a modern, mechanised army while also developing competencies in counter-insurgency warfare and, more recently, peacekeeping operations. These processes also affected procurement processes in the 1970s and 80s. Taking the long view of South African military service, across various regimes between 1913 and 2013, we can see an army that gained experience of conventional land warfare within the Western paradigm, but also an army that developed counter-terrorist and counter-insurgency skills. Using South Africa as a case study, we can follow the development of modern warfare, and the military reaction to significant developments in terms of tactics, equipment, and the wider operating environment. Throughout the period 1913–2013, South African forces showed a remarkable ability to adapt to new operational scenarios. They displayed a high level of effectiveness in dealing with a range of opposition forces, which included the German army in both world wars, the Italian army in WW2, but also less conventional forces in more recent campaigns, such as SWAPO (South West Africa People’s Organisation). Overall, it can be argued that, within the lessons learned by the South African military, there are lessons for modern armies across the globe.

The volume under review includes some fascinating photographs and a series of very clear battle maps. For those with personal or family connections to the South African forces during the period covered by the book, this is surely a “must-have” volume. There is also much in this volume that would be useful to a wider readership.

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