

Book Review

Honoris Crux: The Evolution of South Africa's Cross of Honour

Paul F Roos with JH Fouché

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There is currently an abundance of literature regarding the South African Defence Force (SADF). This literature includes a wide range of semi-official histories; autobiographies, biographies, and personal memoirs; thematic works; as well as academic publications. One aspect of the SADF not previously covered extensively is the medals and decorations that were awarded from 1957 to 1994. Military medals – whether they are awarded for campaign duty, for meritorious service, or for gallantry – are key to understanding and exploring the military history of a country, as well as to uncover the careers and exploits of individual recipients. Books on military medals can serve as a guide not only for collectors, but also for family members who want to find out how to use medals to learn about the history of military units and the experiences of the individuals who served in them. As is the global military custom, the SADF also bestowed medals on its members – regardless of race or colour – in recognition of specific acts of service, or for bravery and valour. It was especially medals awarded during the so-called “Border War” (1966–1989) that represented the sacrifice and heroism of each recipient.

At van Wyk’s *Honoris Crux: Ons Dapperes/Our Brave* appeared in 1982,⁴³⁶ followed by a second volume in 1985.⁴³⁷ In both volumes, Van Wyk relayed the accounts of the men who were awarded the Honoris Crux (HC) decoration, which was the highest SADF award for bravery at the time. In 1992, Ian Uys published a similar but updated book on the HC titled *Cross of Honour*.⁴³⁸ Van Wyk’s revised editions of his earlier books appeared in 2008. In these, he shared information that was regarded as too sensitive for publication in South Africa during the 1980s.⁴³⁹ Other publications on the subject of medals and decorations include *A Guide to South African Orders, Decorations and Medals and their Ribbons 1896–1985*⁴⁴⁰ by John Fforde and Stanley Monick, as well as *South African Orders, Decorations and Medals* by McGill Alexander, Gary Barron, and Anthony Bateman.⁴⁴¹ These latter publications were both launched in 1986. *A Guide to South African Military Awards*⁴⁴² by Paul Matthysen was published in 2009, and may be regarded as the most complete and detailed publication on South African military awards from the inception of the country as the Union of South Africa to the present-day democratic republic.

Honoris Crux: The Evolution of South Africa's Cross of Honour by Paul Roos appeared in 2023, and covers the period from 1973 (when the first HC of the 1952 series was awarded) to 2004 (when the last HC was awarded). Reference is also made of the new bravery awards of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), i.e. the Nkwe or Leopard series for bravery. Prior to *Honoris Crux*, Roos also published *Pro Patria Medal: Types, Variants, Ribbon Accoutrements and Selected Recipients of Interest*⁴⁴³ in 2021. This medal was part of the 1975 series and was awarded as a military campaign medal from 1974 until 1989. It was subsequently replaced, first by the General Service Medal as campaign medal, and then discontinued in 2003, to be replaced by the Tshumelo Ikatelaho medal for internal and external military service.

Honoris Crux is a book that will appeal to all serious medal collectors as well as military enthusiasts. The purpose of the book is not so much to highlight the deeds of heroism, which resulted in the award of the HC, but rather to fill the void in the reference material pertaining to the evolution of this decoration. The significance of the book lies in the extremely thorough archival research that was done in terms of all aspects of this decoration, as well as numerous interviews with recipients. Every detail of this specific decoration is discussed at length. The HC can be considered the South African equivalent of the British Victoria Cross, or the United States Congressional Medal of Honour. The 1975 series of the HC, which replaced the 1952 series, was graded into four classes: the HC Diamond (never awarded), the HC Gold (awarded six times), the HC Silver (awarded 28 times), and the standard HC (awarded 199 times).

Honoris Crux contains numerous colour as well as black and white photographs, which highlight the different variants of each class of the HC. Many tables are also found to indicate all the recipients. In some instances, short summaries are given of the citations for awards, indicating where, when, and for which actions an HC was awarded. A good balance is maintained throughout by the way the history and evolution of the award and the supporting photographs – many of which are published here for the first time – are presented. Roos narrates the history of the HC decoration from a third-person's perspective, however, lapses now and then into the first person. A number of technical errors occur throughout the book with regard to the naming of units and political parties. There is also repetition of some of the literature and photographs; however, this does not diminish the good work that has been done in terms of research.

Although the book is not arranged in clear chapters, it can be roughly divided into eleven parts. The first part introduces the reader to the HC decoration, and describes the origins of the medal, which date back to 1894, when the president of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR), Paul Kruger, proposed the establishment of a system of honours for the Boer Republic.⁴⁴⁴ This is followed by the history of the institution of the 1952 series HC, of which only five were awarded between 1973 and 1974 in the SADF. The next four parts cover the different classes of the newly instituted 1975 series HC that replaced the 1952 series HC, and describe in detail the award criteria, technical details of the award, as well as selected recipients of the award. Of interest is the section dealing with the variants in certificates and the boxes or packets within which the HC was issued. There is also a photographic library of all the confirmed numbered HCs, as well as a

section on inconsistencies and anomalies in terms of the award. Three recipients were decorated twice with the HC, and seven recipients have been decorated with the HC and similar military awards for bravery. Being the recipient of a multiple bravery award is an outstanding achievement; hence, parts eight and nine list these recipients and the actions that resulted in them being decorated so. In part ten, the largest single action for which the HC was conferred, is described.⁴⁴⁵

The last part of the book provides interesting facts about the award, such as which units had received the most HCs, who received the wrong class of the HC, and that all the HCs awarded to members of the South African Navy were for deeds of heroism in non-combat roles. It also highlights the institution in 1987 of the Service Cross series⁴⁴⁶ and how the HC and the Service Cross series were discontinued by the SANDF in 2003 and replaced with the Nkwe or Leopard series for bravery. Photographs are favoured over the written word in all parts of the book, and this is where the strength of the book lies. *Honoris Crux* is not a book for reading in the traditional sense of the word, but rather for studying the vast number of photographs. Roos argues that the history of this prestigious decoration serves as an example of how symbols, such as medals and decorations, reflect the changing political and military circumstances of a country. This is clearly highlighted in the South African military history also, as described by Roos in the book.

Honoris Crux is an important contribution to the historiography of South African military medals and decorations, particularly the Honoris Crux, to which the book owes its name. The book further emphasises that bravery does not know colour, race, or politics, and that it is important that those who have been awarded the highest military award for valour, especially those who have made the ultimate sacrifice, should be remembered and their deeds celebrated, regardless of the political period in which the award was bestowed. One can only hope that Roos will see his way open to publish a similar book on the Service Cross and Leopard series in the future.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁴³⁶ A van Wyk, *Honoris Crux: Ons Dapperes/Our Brave* (Cape Town: Saayman & Weber, 1982).
- ⁴³⁷ A van Wyk, *Honoris Crux: Ons Dapperes II* (Cape Town: Saayman & Weber, 1985).
- ⁴³⁸ I Uys, *Cross of Honour* (Germiston: Uys Publishers, 1992).
- ⁴³⁹ A van Wyk, *Die Roem en die Rou: Stories agter Honoris Crux* (Pretoria: Litera, 2008).
- ⁴⁴⁰ JPI Fforde & S Monick, *A Guide to South African Orders, Decorations and Medals and their Ribbons 1896–1985* (Johannesburg: The South African National Museum of Military History, 1986).
- ⁴⁴¹ EGM Alexander, GKB Barron & AJ Bateman, *South African Orders, Decorations and Medals* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1986).
- ⁴⁴² P Matthysen, *A Guide to South African Military Awards* (Johannesburg: Marc Norman, 2009).
- ⁴⁴³ PF Roos, *Pro Patria Medal: Types, Variants, Ribbon Accoutrements and Selected Recipients of Interest* (Cape Town: New Voices Publication Services, 2023).
- ⁴⁴⁴ Although Kruger attempted to introduce a series of state orders intended for citizens of the ZAR and foreign dignitaries who had performed distinguished service for and on behalf of the Republic (these orders would have been known either as the Order of Merit of the South African Republic, or the Order of the Golden Eagle), his proposal was rejected by the Volksraad; this, despite the fact that the design was already in an advanced stage. The design of the 1952 and 1975 series HC was, however, inspired by the 1894 design.
- ⁴⁴⁵ This was Operation Coolidge, a Special Forces operation in Angola by 4 Reconnaissance Regiment in 1987, where 12 attack divers attempted to destroy the bridge over the Cuito River.
- ⁴⁴⁶ The Army Cross, Air Force Cross, Navy Cross and Medical Service Cross series was instituted in 1987. Any non-combat deeds of heroism were to be recognised by the award of this new Service Cross.