

## Book Review

### **Bush brothers: Life and death across the border**

*Steve de Witt*

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Cape Town: Tafelberg  
2023, 272 pages  
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In recent decades, advances in technology have allowed veterans to share their war experiences with a broader audience than ever before. Through emails, family newsletters, social media, blogs, and even affordable self-publication, contemporary soldiers can record and distribute their experiences far beyond the traditional channels once reserved for talented literary figures, such as Siegfried Sassoon.<sup>9</sup> The influence on historiography is profound, especially with ongoing concerns over the primary sources that will be available to future historians. This democratisation of war memoirs has inspired institutions worldwide to value these stories more than before. The Dutch Veterans Day Committee, for instance, created an annual Veterans' Books Day, and the British Imperial War Museum launched its War Story project. As Esmeralda Kleinreesink succinctly puts it, 'war stories are hot' (Kleinreesink, 2017:4).

While this level of appreciation may be less widespread in South Africa, there is enough interest to encourage veterans, such as Steve de Witt, to document their experiences, and for respected publishers, such as Tafelberg, to bring these stories to print. In recent years, numerous titles on the South African Border War, also known as the Bush War (1966–1989), have emerged. These memoirs come from a wide range of perspectives – from high-ranking officers to troops, different branches of service, and various personal backgrounds. Together, they provide a multi-faceted understanding of the conflict. Among these works is Steve de Witt's *Bush brothers: Life and death across the border*, a chronological recounting of his experiences as an infantryman in the South African Defence Force (SADF) beginning with his conscription in 1981.

In *Bush Brothers*, De Witt started his journey with basic training at the 6 South African Infantry Battalion in Grahamstown (now Makhanda), where he met those who would become his "Bush Brothers". To their disappointment, their unit was initially posted not to the operational area in South West Africa (SWA) (now Namibia) but to Beit Bridge on the South Africa–Zimbabwe border. Here, their task was patrolling and guarding against insurgents from uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) crossing the Limpopo River. Soon,

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<sup>9</sup> Siegfried Sassoon was a British soldier, poet, and writer acclaimed for his forceful anti-war poetry and memoirs, which drew from his experiences in the First World War. His work powerfully conveyed the grim realities of trench warfare, challenging romanticised perceptions of military heroism, and establishing him as one of the most influential war poets of his era.

however, his unit was transferred to Okatope near Ondangwa, closer to the main area of conflict, where De Witt and his fellow conscripts came face-to-face with “terrs” (short for “terrorists”, a term then used to describe armed insurgents), “gooks” (a derogatory term for guerrillas), and the infamous Koevoet counterinsurgency unit. The encounters, especially the harrowing experience of hitting a landmine en route to Cuvelai in Angola, reveal the intense and dangerous environment into which these young men were thrust. The group dynamic is compelling. De Witt portrays their journey from *rowers* (new conscripts) to experienced soldiers over six months spent in Ovamboland, marked by hardship, loss, and personal growth. He gives readers a glimpse of the moments that solidified these friendships, recounting not just the traumas of war but also the light-heartedness and humour that kept them sane in the harsh realities of bush life.

An unusual but valuable segment of the book describes a few weeks’ break “back to the States” (South Africa), offering a stark contrast to the war zone of Ovamboland. Here, he struggled to reconcile his war experiences with the relative normalcy of civilian life. This serves as a striking reminder of the psychological and emotional rift that had developed between those who had fought and those who had not. Upon returning to SWA in early 1983, De Witt and his comrades, now *Ou Manne* (seasoned troops), were assigned to Alpha Tower, a primitive base at Oshikango in sight of the *kaplyn*<sup>10</sup> with Angola, a post that marks a sombre change in the tone of the narrative. As De Witt warns readers, ‘I have two kinds of friends in life – those who fought with me at Alpha Tower and those who didn’t’ (De Witt, 2023:214). This statement underscores the enduring effect of these shared experiences on his identity and relationships.

One of the strengths of *Bush Brothers* is its unflinching honesty and casual style, which contrasts with many personal accounts that adopt a more solemn tone. De Witt explicitly aims to go beyond the ‘dry, sequential facts’ of traditional memoirs, seeking instead ‘to evoke the drama, humour, and complexity of ... [his] service’ (De Witt, 2023:9). From the opening chapters, De Witt succeeds in this objective. His writing is unapologetically candid, infusing the narrative with profanities and crude imagery, which lend realism and authenticity to the story. More significantly, De Witt captures the rough camaraderie and rawness of eighteen-year-olds isolated in the bush, where no topic is off limits and every day is lived in the present. His honesty about going AWOL (absent without leave), partying, girls, drinking, hangovers, and disobeying orders allows readers to feel as if they were on the ground alongside him, experiencing the highs and lows of his youth and army life.

A memorable episode during their first deployment after basic training illustrates this approach. One night, De Witt and three others were on duty at Beit Bridge, armed with a machine gun and a case of beer. In their inebriated state, a soldier accidentally discharged the weapon, firing across the Limpopo River towards the Zimbabwean side. The incident sparked a farcical chain of reprimands as it escalated, eventually reaching President PW

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<sup>10</sup> *Kaplyn* is an Afrikaans term that translates to “cutline” or “boundary line” in English. It specifically refers to a clearly demarcated strip of land, often cut through vegetation or bush, which served as a visible border or patrol route during the South African Border War. This line was usually cleared to enhance visibility and detect insurgent movement across border areas, particularly along the Angola–Namibia frontier.

Botha, who chastised his foreign affairs minister, Pik Botha. Pik, in turn, reprimanded General Constand Viljoen, who cascaded the blame down the chain of command until it reached the troops responsible who still claimed innocence. De Witt's retelling is both vivid and humorous, and anyone with military experience will relate to how military hierarchies respond to blame. This style of storytelling lends a sense of genuineness.

Aside from the humour, De Witt offers vividly detailed descriptions of the settings and people he encountered. The glossy photos from their war service add a layer of documentary realism, bridging the gap between memory and history. De Witt's descriptions are enriched by the journals he had kept during his service and corroborations from his former platoon and the Bush Brothers Reunited Veterans' organisation.<sup>11</sup> Recent photographs from reunions – some as recent as 2022 – further attest to the bonds forged during this shared wartime experience reflecting the title.

One area where *Bush Brothers* might attract criticism is in De Witt's reflection on the broader socio-political context of the war. While introspective reflections are not unusual in war memoirs, De Witt's occasional musings on his disdain for Apartheid and his criticism of Nationalist policies sometimes feel at odds with the youthful, somewhat reckless character he portrays in the rest of the narrative. His reflections on the political landscape might appear somewhat incongruous with the scenes of camaraderie and youthful bravado that dominate the book, pulling the reader out of the immediacy of the story. Some readers may feel that these contemplations would be more suitably placed in a dedicated conclusion or merged with the epilogue, where De Witt could address these more profound realisations from the perspective of his current, more mature self.

Nonetheless, *Bush Brothers* stands out as a fresh and valuable addition to Border War literature. De Witt's account reflects the qualities that make a memoir that truly echoes Luise White's observation of soldiers' writings. White, in her study on soldiers' memoirs, noted that readers often judge the authenticity of a story not only by its 'fighting' but by its 'pranks and jokes performed for an audience of like-minded young men' (White, 2021:29). *Bush Brothers* captures this sentiment perfectly, offering a "truthfulness" that extends beyond dates and battles to the very fabric of the soldiers' experience. While the book will undoubtedly resonate most strongly with those who experienced the war first-hand, it also holds significant appeal for general readers interested in war stories and military history. As a record of the South African Border War experience, *Bush brothers* is a significant contribution, not only opening a window into life as an infantryman during the war, but also depicting the camaraderie that shaped this generation of ex-soldiers during one of South Africa's most controversial conflicts. As De Witt concludes, 'For while it is my story, it is also theirs' (White, 2021:306).

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<sup>11</sup> A military veterans organisation founded by De Witt after being unexpectedly reunited with former friends from his army platoon.

## REFERENCES

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