

STAND AT EASE

Gary Green

Wandsbeck: Reach Publishers 2009 (reach@webstorm.co.za)

ISBN: 9781920261900

R143,00

Books by ex-conscripts detailing their experiences were few and far between in the era of the Border War while more than 500 000 white males were called up for what was described as "national service". While books like these are not exactly flooding the shelves of bookstores, they roll off the presses more regularly now. These works mostly deal with ex-conscript's that actively experienced the war in Namibia and Angola.

Stand at ease is different: there is no "cordite and conflict".

Green describes himself as a reluctant conscript (one wonders how many of the erstwhile national servicemen were of the same view). He was a product of one of the country's first multi-racial schools - in this case a school that did not subscribe to the former government's apartheid policies.

Hence, his period of national service was seen as a necessary evil, something that had to be done - to get it behind one. But he and a few friends were determined to have as easy a time as possible. Their most important aim was to avoid the "dreaded" call-up to the Border. Green was helped in this endeavour when he was medically classified as G3K3. He was called up to 5 South African Infantry Battalion in Ladysmith where he spent a few days before going to Kimberley. He did guard duty at 93 Ammunition Depot in Jan Kempdorp in the Northern Cape before being deployed to the Army Battle School in Lohatla where he spent the rest of his days as a national serviceman.

He says his time in the military "could hardly be described as constructive or enjoyable", but it was also "a period of unprecedented personal growth and self-discovery". "There is little doubt that during the two years of my conscription, I stopped being a boy and at some point became a man." Green unfortunately does not elaborate too much on this rite of passage.

Maybe that is understandable as his book is merely intended as "a satirical account of selected humorous moments" in his conscript career - a military Spud, one is tempted to add. There are indeed some hilarious moments in *Stand at ease*.

Any ex-conscript will be able to identify with the experiences of Green and his buddies: the absolute mayhem, the tasteless food, the "sadistic" instructors, the people they were forced to share a bungalow and a life with, and the Permanent Force members that were intent on making their lives difficult.

They took every chance to buck the system, and where there was no such chance, they created one. They took each and every opportunity to carve out an easy life in the army, skipping off to Durban to surf and to Postmasburg for a *jol*.

Green may have been a reluctant conscript, but was promoted through the ranks anyway. As logistics clerk at Lohatla he was promoted to lance corporal and later to corporal. (When he became a member of the Citizen Force after his initial national service, he was even promoted to lieutenant and transport officer of 1 Engineer Squadron in Durban. The sole vehicle he found at this unit was a bicycle with flat tires. To assist with the running of the transport challenge he was assigned a transport non-commissioned officer!)

Looking back on it all, Green says his two years in the military was an experience he would not have wished on his worst enemy. But he "had a trunk full of memories and some amazing new friends to be thankful for". In relating these experiences to his readers, Green touches on some points that may be of interest to students of the militarization of South African society, for example the description of the Afrikaner couple who once gave him a lift - "It did not take long for us to understand just how patriotic the folk in this part of the world were and how appreciative they were for the sacrifices we were making in defending the nation" - and Gen. Constand Viljoen's warning on the evils of rock music, although Green does not elaborate on this.

He also points to the "stark social divide" between Afrikaner and English conscripts in the former South African Defence Force (SADF). But those looking for the blood and gore of battle and details of repression, will be disappointed.

Stand at ease, after all, was not meant as that kind of a book. Green's army was not a monolith of strict disciplinarians running bloodthirsty troops straining at the leash to mow down the hapless enemy. Rather it was an army of reluctant conscripts doing their utmost to survive two years of enforced military regime as far away from the battlefield as possible.

Stand at ease is of value to the social historian in that it holds a lively description of the life of non-fighting men in the SADF. These men made up a large proportion of conscripts - it was once said that only about 5% of conscripts used their guns in anger. These are the men, one may add, who today may feel that they wasted valuable years of their lives in the SADF. Men who have memories about a time in the SADF only, men like Gary Green who at long last, is allowed to stand completely at ease.

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