

SPECIAL FORCES IN MODERN SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY

1. ORIGIN

The origin of the South African Special Forces are to be found in the accumulation and germination of certain ideas and insights during 1969 in the minds of the senior echelons of the SADF.

During 1966/67 a young Capt J.D. (Jan) Breytenbach of the Parachute Battalion tried to convince every senior officer that he could entice to listen about the need for a Special Forces unit in the SADF. When Genl W.P. Louw became Chief of the Army in 1967, Breytenbach convinced him to send a group of men to Rhodesia to undergo SAS training. Some of this group were:

Maj E. Webb, Sgt Pep Van Zyl, Sgt J. Kruger, Sgt Tillie Smit, Frank Bestbier, Maj SA. Ferreira, WAO 2 M.L. (Yogi) Potgieter, Capt J.D. Breytenbach and G.J. Viviers (42). Jan Breytenbach clearly saw the need for a group of specialist soldiers to search for and eliminate guerrilla elements who, at the close of the decade, were being tasked to infiltrate the Republic's borders with the aim of establishing covert cells. Still, authorization to start a Special Forces organisation eluded Capt Breytenbach, and for the following two years he presented a few Escape and Evasion courses to the army (42).

During 1968 four paratroopers, Jan Breytenbach, Trevor Floyd, F.C. Van Zyl and Yogi Potgieter set out to Biafra to assist in the civil war being fought there. They operated as a training team, as advisors and finally lead guerilla elements into battle behind enemy lines. The war effort was unsuccessful, but the idea was forcefully driven home that the SADF was in need of a Special Forces Organisation (7). One of the recommendations made by them was that the R1 rifle in current use be replaced with a shorter weapon that could be used on short distances in bush areas. An incident out of this deployment was that while the guerilla element were practising rifle shooting, one of the leaders was shooting his rifle on automatic into the air, and when Van Zyl asked him what he was doing, he said that the rifle is automatic and will find his own target. Van Zyl got very sick and was admitted to the local hospital, where a black doctor looked after him and even slept next to his bed. Why the doctor did this was later discovered, he had found out by accident that Van Zyl was a South African and he had a great admiration for Dr Chris Barnard for his heart transplant the previous year. A week before this team withdrew back to South Africa a Signal Staff Sergeant was attached to the team (42).

In May 1968 Cmdt (later Col) G. van Kerckhoven, the OC of the SA Irish Regiment, initiated a training programme that gave birth to the Hunter Group. The Hunter Group comprised of Citizen Force volunteers, trained in a counter-insurgency role to an exceptional high standard. The success of the Hunter Group training programme played a major role in preparing the ground for a Special Forces Unit.

The conception of a South African Special Forces unit can be traced to meetings held at GHQ in Pretoria and with the members of the Supreme Command in Cape Town during the latter months of 1969.

Present at the Supreme Command meeting in Cape Town were the (then) Minister of Defence (Mr P.W. Botha) and Gens Hiemstra, Louw, Fraser and other senior SADF officers. This meeting

received a briefing by Lt Gen Fraser concerning the Hunter Group concept in which he used a Hunter Group Film showing training methods. The meeting subsequently decided on the formation of a group of men proficient in performing Special Forces-like tasks (1,90).

2. THE BIRTH 1969 - 1972

The first Special Forces grouping in the SADF was initiated under various cover names as a sub structure of the School of Infantry in Oudtshoorn.

The initial purpose of this group was to give specialised infantry training and to evaluate the operational capability of the SA Army. This later evolved into doing specialised operational tasks for the SADF.

At one time the group was known under the name of the "Irregular Warfare Branch". This caused problems in that there already existed a real Irregular Warfare Branch at the School of Infantry.

Initially this group operated under the administrative command of the School of Infantry, but as Chief Army troops they later came under the direct command of Southern Cape Command. At this stage they went under the name of the "Special Research Section" (7). Later, as Alpha Group they came under the command of Chief Staff Intelligence (16) (65) and from June 1970 they were known as the Operational Experimental Group (OEG) (66).

This fledgling grouping consisted of eleven members under the command of Cmdt Jan Dirk Breytenbach. These men formed the first nucleus and became the founder members of the South African Special Forces. Inevitably they became known as the "Dirty Dozen".

They were:

- Cmdt J.D. (Jan) Breytenbach
- Maj D.P. (Dan) Lamprecht
- Capt P.J. (Fires) van Vuuren
- Capt J.R. (John) More
- WO 2 T.J. (Trevor) Floyd
- WO 2 F.C. (F.C.) van Zyl
- S Sgt M.J. (Yogi) (Pottie) Potgieter
- S Sgt J.L. (Kernaas) Conradie
- S Sgt J.J. (Koos) Moorcroft
- Sgt D.L. (Dewald) de Beer
- Sgt J.J.P. (J.P.) Fourie (Hoppie)

3. THE FOUNDING YEARS 1972 - 1975

1 RECONNAISSANCE COMMANDO

On 01 October 1972 the first official Special Forces Unit in the SADF was formally established at Oudtshoorn (34). The name, 1 Reconnaissance Commando, was initially chosen as a cover name, so as not to give a clear indication of the unit's purpose.

Cmdt Jan Breytenbach became the first Commanding Officer and served in this capacity until 31 December 1974. The first RSM of 1 Reconnaissance Commando was WO 1 Trevor Floyd (1968 - 31 December 1980) who had also served as the unofficial RSM of the Dirty Dozen.

The founder members of the unit were:

01455500PE	Cmdt	J.D.	(Jan) Breytenbach
01252725PE	Maj	D.P.	(Dan) Lamprecht
01575794PE	Maj	P.J.	(Fires) van Vuuren
01509363PE	Maj	J.R.	(John) More
05454798PE	WO 2	T.I.	(Trevor) Floyd
05233796PE	WO 2	M.J.	(Yogi)(Pottie) Potgieter
05479985PE	WO 2	P.W.	(P.W.) van Heerden
05453576PE	WO 2	F.C.	(F.C.) van Zyl
05251004PE	S Sgt	J.L.	(Kernaas) Conradie
05460068PE	S Sgt	D.L.	(Dewald) de Beer
67730424PE	S Sgt	J.J.	(Koos) Moorcroft
66588591PE	Sgt	J.J.P.	(J.P.) Fourie
67283465PE	Cpl	J.D.	(Jimmy) Oberholzer
67413393PE	Cpl	D.B.	(Dave) Tippet
67437996PE	Cpl	F.B.	(Wannies) Wannenburg

The unit immediately started with the recruitment, selection and training of personnel out of the SADF. A training area, Fort Doppies, situated in the Eastern Caprivi was acquired during the latter part of 1972 (6). A very primitive camp was built which in 1974 was totally destroyed by a fire (17). From that day on the campsite was known as Fort Ashes, and a new location on the banks of the Kwando River was found for the rebuilding of Fort Doppies. This area was used as a training area and operational jump-off point until the Independence of Namibia in 1990.

The first Special Forces seaborne operation took place on the east coast during 1972. Kayaks were launched from a submarine and the operation was successfully concluded.

Handbooks were non-existent and drills had to be improvised. The book and film "The Cokleshell Heroes", had to be used to copy techniques for operational deployment. A major shortage in functional equipment hampered the operations. After one of the kayaks sank, the submarine Maria van Riebeeck recovered it to be repaired and used again. Two Clepper canoes were imported from Germany by the father of S Sgt Koos Moorcroft, so as not to breach the security of the unit. The first attack dive operation also took place during 1972 and although not altogether successful, the foundation of an amphibious capability was established.

During 1972 Cmdt Jan Breytenbach was awarded the Van Riebeeck Decoration. His citation in part reads: "Commandant Jan Breytenbach distinguished himself by his cool and calm actions in dangerous situations in special tasks he was responsible for during 1972. His personal example, tough perserverance and exeptional leadership inspired his men to calmly and successfully execute extremely difficult and dangerous tasks with equal perserverance" (43, 11).

During the same year Lt Cdr L.J. (Woody) Woodburne, the (then) commander of the submarine SAS Emily Hobhouse, received the Van Riebeeck Decoration for operations in support of the Recces (43, 9).

The design of 1 Reconnaissance Commando's unit badge was authorised on 7 June 1973 (80). The dagger denotes the international symbol of specialist troops. The three daggers on the top of the badge symbolise the ability to engage and eliminate the enemy by using specialised techniques. The three daggers also typify the three methods of infiltration used by the Recces namely land, air and sea. The compass rose symbolises the ability to engage the enemy from all directions and to carry out operational tasks anywhere, by day or night and under all circumstances (2).

On 23 June 1974 Lt F.J.(Fred) Zeelie, a member of 1 Reconnaissance Commando, was killed while persuing some terrorists in thick bush at Bwabatha on the Angolian side of the western Caprivi (68). Two enemy machine-guns opened fire on the patrol. Lt Zeelie stormed the enemy position and forced one machine-gun to withdraw, while overpowering the other. Regrettably he lost his life while attacking the enemy and was posthumously awarded the Louw Wepener Decoration. Lt Zeelie became the first South African soldier to be killed in action on the border (43, 15).

On 2 August 1974 four more members of 1 Reconnaissance Commando were decorated. WO2 Trevor Floyd, S Sgt Koos Moorcroft, S Sgt Dewald de Beer and S Sgt Kernaas Conradie received the Van Riebeeck Medal (42). The Van Riebeeck Medal was awarded for the same services as those which merited the Van Riebeeck Decoration - outstanding acts of resourcefulness, perseverance or personal courage, or outstanding leadership or sense of responsibility and personal example. However, this award was restricted to Warrant Officers, Non-Commisioned Officers and other ranks (49).

Sergeant Louis Klopper of 1 Reconnaissance Commando became the first Recce to win the Honoris Crux Decoration. On 2 January 1975, during a contact, he was responsible for many enemy losses before leading his team to safety. In another ambush he displayed a high degree of inisiative and gunned down three of the enemy, thereby breaking up the attack. Sgt Klopper took part in many such operations and his courage and leadership earned him the Honoris Crux (43, 17).

On 13 January 1975 Maj (T/Cmdt) J.C. (Jakes) Swart took over command of 1 Recce Commando from Cmdt Jan Breytenbach and served as OC until 31 December 1980 (48) (84).

The facilities at the School of Infantry Oudtshoorn became so crowded and inadequate that a decision was made to move the unit to the Bluff Military Area in Durban. On the 1st of January 1975 the unit was resituated in Durban at it's present location, with self accountability status (6).