

# CHAPTER 1

## THE TERRITORIAL RESERVE AND ITS ROLE IN RURAL SAFETY

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### **A brief sketch of the Territorial Reserve before 1994**

The Commandos are almost as old as European settlement in southern Africa. The first record of their existence is in the Cape in 1715, which, at that stage, was still being run by the Dutch East India Company. "The commando," the historian Hermann Giliomee has written, "was the fighting arm of the burghers. It originated when the Company sent out soldiers and burghers on expeditions to recover stolen cattle." In one of its first instructions to an early Commando, which consisted entirely of volunteers, the Company gave it licence to "fire freely and take prisoners and act otherwise as they saw fit since the marauders cannot be considered as any other but enemies of the Hon. Company".<sup>2</sup>

Yet, if the Company at times gave Commandos licence to act with considerable discretion, there were other times when it regretted that its armed capacity on the frontier was in the hands of private citizens with private interests. On several occasions in the early eighteenth century, the Company threatened to withdraw the Commandos' supply of ammunition "if it was used for unnecessary aggression against the burghers' indigenous enemies." Indeed, Giliomee continues:

More than once insubordinate frontiersmen provoked clashes with the native peoples. Counter-attacks led to large-scale withdrawal of burghers from newly settled regions. Frontier lawlessness and insubordination drove the officials to despair and undermined the cohesion and the discipline of the commandos.<sup>3</sup>

The echoes from almost 300 years ago are quite remarkable. For many of the Commando members we spoke to in 2005 saw their primary function as protecting farmers, their livestock and their equipment from predators who come from across the hinterland's racial frontier. As a Commando member on the West Rand put it to us: "We are still fighting a border war. The fence of every white property is a border and everyone who wants to cross that fence is a military opponent." And the headaches the Commandos gave

the Company back in 1715 also echo: today, many of the Commandos' detractors view them as partisan forces which provoke social tension in rural South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

This is not the place to chronicle the history of the Commandos over the intervening three centuries, although such a project would indeed be fascinating. Instead, we pick up the story in the 1960s, for that is the period in which the Commandos took their current form.

When the South African Defence Force (SADF) was formed in the 1960s, the Territorial Reserve was given the primary function of rear area defence during wartime. Rear area defence consists in securing military communication and supply lines, guarding strategic civilian infrastructure such as power stations, national key points such airports and broadcasting infrastructure, and protecting civilian life from enemy hostility in rural South Africa. The assumption was a scenario of external invasion across South Africa's land borders, and the rationale for giving the Commandos this rear defence function was to free the SADF's conventional forces for deployment on the frontline.

In addition to this primary, wartime function, the Commandos of the 1960s were also given secondary, peacetime functions; given their capacity to mobilise in great numbers from the ranks of the civilian population across the country, they were allocated the function of assisting state departments in time of crisis, be the crisis drought or floods, civil disorder, or the outbreak of an epidemic.

During this period, the Commandos drew their manpower from the conscription system and thus, in theory, had available to them every white adult male under the age of 55 and resident of the countryside. All white men were required to serve short, periodic retraining courses throughout their adult lives, and the Territorial Reserve was responsible for their training. The Commandos in theory had a massive dormant capacity which could be mobilised in times of crisis or war.

The mid- and late-1970s marked a significant moment in the military and political history of apartheid South Africa, and the Commandos were somewhat reshaped by the exigencies of the time. 1975 saw the decolonisation of Angola and Mozambique, and South Africa's invasion of the former. White minority rule was moving inexorably towards its demise in Rhodesia, and the killing of student protesters in June 1976 in Soweto triggered a nationwide civil uprising in South Africa itself. Embroiled in

military conflict beyond its borders and facing an insurgency from within, the South African government had plenty of work for men in uniform.

The role of the Commandos shifted both subtly and not so subtly. Their primary, if latent, function remained the wartime role of rear area defence. It was their secondary, but manifest, function that shifted most. Increasingly, they were employed in an auxiliary role in containing domestic political resistance. Commando units teamed up with the South African Police (SAP), under SAP leadership, in what were known as Internal Security Operations. In June 2005, a resident of Carletonville in the Gatsrand Commando area recalled his own deployment, as a Commando member, in Internal Security Operations in Khutsong, the township adjoining Carletonville. He told us that:

We literally used to close the entire township down. Hundreds of soldiers and riot police would cordon off the whole township and we would search every room of every house and every shack in every street. The operation would take maybe four or five hours. By the end of it, we had between us seen every article of underwear in the township, every Sunday dress, every kitchen ladle.

The role of the Territorial Reserve changed in other ways too. Increasing emphasis was placed on their capacity to gather local intelligence on a permanent basis. The rationale was that in a country facing a domestic insurgency, the eyes and ears of civilians on the ground was a vital source of information. The Commandos were thus encouraged to draw close to their constituencies – rural white families – and to lubricate channels of communication and chatter between civilians and soldiers.

The Territorial Reserve was thus involved both in the quelling of domestic protest and in the militarisation of civilian life in white communities. Through their mobilisation into the Commandos' intelligence and domestic protection functions, civilians were taught that anti-apartheid resistance was the local embodiment of an external military threat, and a global one at that, since it was a provincial manifestation of the Cold War. White civilians, in other words, were to be mobilised into what was understood as protracted warfare against both communism and black revolt.

These functions would appear to blur the line between ideological mobilisation on the one hand, and genuine defence strategies on the other. It would be fair to say that the Territorial Reserve was as much an organ of white nationalist mobilisation as a military organ. Indeed, in many areas the Territorial Reserve invested a great of energy in the visibility and symbolism

of its presence in rural South Africa. As a Ladybrand Commando member interviewed for this project recalled:

In the 1980s there would be special Saturday parades. The town would come to a standstill. Everybody would line the main street and watch out for dad, or uncle, or brother, and wave. It was part of life that family members would leave home every once in a while to wear a uniform and carry a gun. Partly, it was resented, because it was a disruption to daily life. But it was also a source of pride.

### **The Territorial Reserve and the New Dispensation**

When the African National Congress (ANC) government took office in 1994, it found that it had inherited a Territorial Reserve severely knocked by the transition and unsure of its purpose in the new order. The end of conscription had robbed the Commandos of a large slice of their personnel and resources. Many left because they had always resented compulsory military service, others because they objected politically to serving in the military of an ANC-led government.<sup>5</sup> Military spending was at the beginning of a precipitous decline, and the Territorial Reserve was losing resources.

As for the ANC, its attitude to some of the functions the Territorial Reserve had been playing had to have been ambivalent at best. The auxiliary internal security function the Commandos had played was a paramilitary one in which black South African residents were treated, not as citizens requiring a safety service, but as inhabitants of a terrain occupied by an enemy, and as a potentially rebellious population to be quelled. Among the tasks the new government set itself was the normalisation and civilianisation of policing.<sup>6</sup> The high density, paramilitary capacity contained in the Commandos was hardly a welcome resource.

Unsurprisingly, then, right from the start the new government's position was that the SANDF's role in domestic security, and crime fighting in particular, was inappropriate and ought to end. This position was formalised in the Department of Defence's White Paper drafted in 1995, and finally published in May 1996. The White Paper's authors argued that it was "a matter of urgency that plans are formulated to allow for the withdrawal of the SANDF from a policing role."<sup>7</sup> It is worthwhile citing the White Paper's reasoning in this regard at some length:

... [T]he history of South Africa and many other countries suggests that it is inappropriate to utilise armed forces in a policing role on a

permanent or semi-permanent basis. This perspective is based on the following considerations:

Armed forces are not trained, orientated or equipped for deployment against civilians. They are typically geared to employ maximum force against an external military aggressor.

On-going employment in a law and order function invariably leads to the defence force becoming increasingly involved in non-military activities.

Such employment may also undermine the image and legitimacy of the defence force amongst sections of the population.

Internal deployment places a substantial burden on the defence budget...

Efforts to apply military solutions to political problems are inherently limited and invariably lead to acts of repression.

In the light of these considerations, the policy goal of the government is to build the capacity of the police to deal with public violence on their own while political solutions are being sought or have failed. The SANDF would then only be deployed in the most exceptional circumstances, such as a complete breakdown of public order beyond the capacity of the SAPS, or a state of national defence.

In order to achieve this goal, financial resources for maintaining internal stability should be allocated to enhancing the capacity of the SAPS. Further, and as a matter of urgency, the Departments of Defence and Safety and Security will establish a work group to devise strategies for the withdrawal of the SANDF from an on-going policing role.<sup>8</sup>

Nothing in the White Paper suggested that the Territorial Reserve would be phased out. The extract cited above does not speak to the Commandos' primary wartime function. Nor does it object to the Commandos' non-policing peacetime functions. Indeed, the White Paper supports the principle that the SANDF should be available to support the SAPS in "exceptional circumstances" and for the "restoration of law and order" as well as provide services for "disaster relief" and the "maintenance of essential services". But it does state categorically and as a matter of principle that the involvement

of the military in policing is unacceptable and must end as a matter of urgency.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, given the “urgency” with which these matters were addressed in the 1996 White Paper, Mbeki’s February 2003 announcement was, if anything, a while in coming. When the White Paper was written, the SANDF was involved in three discrete spheres of domestic crime fighting: urban crime combating, rural safety, and borderline protection. SANDF forces were withdrawn from urban crime combating in 2001. Their role in rural safety and borderline protection respectively will have been handed over to the SAPS by the end of 2009. It will have taken more than 13 years for the policy vision expressed in the White Paper to reach fruition. Why so long?

### **The character of the Territorial Reserve now**

In the immediate period after its formation, the energy of the SAPS was ploughed into the monumental task of integrating apartheid’s myriad homeland police forces into a central police service, and into grooming a new police leadership. The SAPS accomplished these necessary tasks with aplomb, but they were nonetheless tasks of organisational consolidation rather than crime reduction. While the SAPS was getting its house in order, the crime rate remained high. Crime in rural areas took on inflammatory political meanings. Violent crimes against farmers were dubbed “farm attacks”, a heavily loaded term which suggested a blurring of the lines between criminal aggression and guerrilla activity, and between acquisitiveness and political revenge. Faced with high levels of violent crime which had been sharply politicised, and a police force distracted by the tasks of consolidation, the withdrawal of the crime fighting capacity from rural areas contained in the Commandos was deemed extremely unwise.

Thus, at the very time the authors of the Defence White Paper were talking of withdrawing the military from policing as a matter of urgency, plans were set in place for the Commandos to continue to play a crime combating role. Beginning in 1996, the Territorial Reserve was given budget to recruit aggressively in the black townships of rural South Africa. At least one of the Commandos we visited, De Mist in the Eastern Cape, recruited in excess of a hundred people in the townships of Uitenhage and Despatch in the space of a single week in 1996. The vast majority of the new recruits were unemployed and joined in order to earn a living. Following a period of basic training, an entry-level recruit earns R114.00 per man day (in 2005 prices) and can work for up to 180 days per year. An entry level Territorial Reserve member can thus earn

in the region of R20,000 per year, no mean sum in the context of a rural South African township. As far as recruitment criteria are concerned, recruits must be South African citizens, must not have a criminal record, and should have a matric. However, a large number of recruits with a Standard Eight education have also been accepted into the Territorial Reserve over the last decade.

The Territorial Reserve thus changed dramatically in a very short space of time. In 1990, it was the institution into which hundreds of thousands of white South African men were periodically mobilised for military service. Its manifest presence was that of an auxiliary force in the maintenance of public order and social and political control. By 1996, it was a very different beast. White membership had dwindled considerably – in some areas to little as a few dozen. Black membership grew exponentially as the Territorial Reserve became a *de facto* employment provider and skills developer in rural towns across the country. At present, between 12,000 and 15,000 people are solely dependent on Commando work for their income.<sup>10</sup>

The Commandos of today bear the hallmarks of this legacy. Each Commando hosts two types of structures: area bound units and non-area bound units. Generally – although there are obviously many exceptions – white members of the Commando are full participants in the civilian economy and thus give comparatively little of their time to Commando work. They are generally active in area bound units. These units have two functions: gathering of information and intelligence, which gets relayed to joint, interdepartmental security planning structures; and an area bound rapid response capacity, in essence a mutual assistance function for neighbours. Each area bound component of every Commando is divided into geographically determined cells and platoons, and each cell and platoon has a rapid response plan to emergencies, particularly violent crimes in progress. The primary responsibilities of rapid response are to come to the assistance of the victims and to seal off egress points and thoroughfares to facilitate in the apprehension of suspects. In theory, then, the area bound units are the eyes and ears of the commando, as well as mutual assistance structures for neighbours.

The demands on the time of a member of an area bound unit are small. To remain active and retain his entitlement to keep an army-issue assault rifle at his home, a member must report quarterly for weapons training and must submit to annual inspections which ensure that his weapon is properly stored and in good working order.

The second type of unit present in each Commando is the non-area bound unit, also known as the reaction unit. These are largely – again, not entirely

– staffed by black members recruited in the mid and late 1990s. Most wish to maximise the amount of time they spend on duty, for they are breadwinners whose primary or sole source of income is Commando work.

Non-area bound units are not permitted to work independently of the police. They are strictly an auxiliary force, assisting in intelligence-driven crime prevention SAPS operations. They are, in short, a force multiplier, one with limited powers and capacities. Below is a list of the types of operations non-area bound unit are permitted to join, and, where necessary, a brief description of their operation-specific role.

- Observation posts (Commando members do not have powers of apprehension or arrest. Observation posts should be led by SAPS members)
- Listening posts
- Roadblocks (Commando members' function is to secure the roadblock. They do not have powers to search vehicles or to approach members of the public. They are also not permitted to open fire on vehicles which fail to stop at roadblocks.)
- Vehicle check points
- Vehicle and foot patrols (again, SANDF soldiers do not have powers of apprehension or arrest. Patrols should be led by police officials.)
- Cordon-and-Search Operations (SANDF soldiers have the powers to cordon, but not to search.)

To give a sense of the scale of the Commandos and the operations in which they are involved: Total Commando strength at the end of March 2004 was 43,976, of which 17,957 was utilised and 26,019 was dormant. Between the beginning of April 2004 and the end of March 2005, Commando members were involved in 79,004 operations. The vast majority of these were farm visits (29,351) and vehicle patrols (24,242). Commando members were also present at more at 9,072 foot patrols, 4,207 roadblocks, 2,926 vehicle check points, 2,995 observation posts, 4,907 cordon-and-search operations, 16 air support operations, 46 motorcycle patrols and 49 equestrian patrols.<sup>11</sup>

That, then, is a summary of the Commandos as they currently exist. Essentially, they serve two functions. First, they have structures which collect and relay

grassroots crime intelligence and organise endeavours of local-level mutual security assistance. Second, they have a force multiplication capacity, and thus serve in an auxiliary role in certain types of police operations. It should be added that the operations they jointly conduct with the SAPS ought to be located in farming districts and not in town or residential centres.

Socially, and in the most general of terms, Commando membership consists of two very different categories of people. White members are in general (there are obviously exceptions) volunteer members who operate in the immediate environs of their own homes and districts, and are motivated to join the Commando to defend their families and their properties from crime. Black members, in contrast, seldom operate in their own neighbourhoods and are *de facto* professionals: they are mostly not motivated by the desire to defend their families and their properties from crime, but by the need to support their families and pay their bills.

In the following three chapters, we describe the work of three Commandos in different parts of South Africa.