

CHAPTER 2

LADYBRAND COMMANDO, EASTERN FREE STATE

Ladybrand is a rural town on the border of the eastern Free State and Lesotho. The town centre is situated just a few kilometres from Maseru Bridge, the larger of the two commercial border posts between Lesotho and the Free State. (The other commercial border post is at Ficksburg, 70 km north of Ladybrand by road.) As the crow flies, Ladybrand is less than 20 km from the centre of Lesotho's capital city, Maseru.

The Ladybrand Commando area is physically large and made up of a host of social geographies. It stretches across approximately 60 km of the borderline between the cattle and sheep farming districts of Hobhouse in the south and the irrigation farming districts north of Ladybrand. The 60 km of borderline for which the Ladybrand Commando is responsible consists of the Caledon River, which is seasonal and is thus dry for part of the year. Aside from irrigation vegetables and livestock, wheat, grain and maize are also grown in the area.

In addition to the borderline, the Commando's jurisdiction stretches westwards into the interior of the Free State and includes the small town of Tweespruit, which is situated about 35 km from the borderline. Thus, in addition to border farms, the Commando's jurisdiction also includes two non-agricultural settlements – the towns of Ladybrand and Tweespruit.

The Commando

At the time our research was conducted, June 2005, the Ladybrand Commando had 73 active members. 25 of these were white, the majority of whom were both farmers and members of the Commando's area bound unit. In other words, the minimum requirements expected of them were to report for shooting practice four times a year, and to submit to an annual check on the workability and safekeeping of their firearm. Their primary responsibilities were to gather local-level intelligence and to participate in locally based rapid response plans to emergencies and crimes in progress.

Forty-eight of the Commando's 73 active members were black. Almost all were members of the Commando's non-area bound, or response unit. Forty-three of the 48 were unemployed, lived in the township adjacent to Ladybrand, rather than in rural areas, and did Commando work in order to earn a living. They were permitted to work 180 days per year, and the vast majority wanted to work as much as possible. Two black troops we interviewed during the course of our research had both been members of the Commando for five years. Both were entirely dependent on Commando work for their incomes, supported members of immediate and extended families, were unemployed before the SANDF recruited them, and expected to return to unemployment after the Ladybrand Commando ceases operations some time in 2006.

Nobody we interviewed was certain precisely how many commercial farms there were in the Commando's jurisdiction, but everyone agreed that there were probably in excess of 200. In this context, 25 area bound members is not much at all. Size is not necessarily a reflection of effectiveness, and we will return later to precisely what it is that area bound members do. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to dwell on this question for a moment.

According to the Commando's Second in Command (2IC), after 1994 membership immediately declined from more than 300 to about 125. The Commando has gradually been losing its members ever since. In the wake of President Mbeki's announcement that the Commandos were to be phased out, the rate of the exodus picked up again. We were informed that 12 people had resigned from the Commando in the previous 12 months.

The average age of area bound members has also gradually increased over time. A Commando member told us that "planning area bound rapid response is increasingly difficult. The young and able-bodied are the ones assigned to retrieve their weapons and move immediately to the scene of the crime. But there are fewer and fewer young, strong men to do this work."

As in all Commandos around the country, the question of why white membership levels are dwindling is a fairly loaded one. Some argue that people have left the Commandos in response to its incrementally depleting resources. As one member put it to us: "People aren't fools. When you cut their budget every year, they get the message. They vote with their feet." There is probably a measure of truth in this. Dwindling numbers may in part be a consequence of the policy ambiguity surrounding the SANDF's internal deployment in the mid and late 1990s. On the one hand, the SANDF's long term policy objective was to disengage from domestic policing; this objective was reflected in consistent annual cuts to the Territorial Reserve's budget. Yet at the precisely

the same time, the Territorial Reserve was instructed to conduct an aggressive recruitment drive in order to bolster its auxiliary role in policing.

Others, however, point out that voluntary structures which require a level of commitment from their members are inherently prone to losing personnel. Talking about the province as a whole, the commanding officer of the Free State Joint Tactical Headquarters (J TAC HQ) told us that:

In the mid-1990s we started a sifting process. We went round the province to see who is actually active. Those who were in practice dormant, we told must hand their weapons in and resign. There was a huge backlash. We were accused of leaving people vulnerable. But the reality is that they were not active. That is the nature of things. When there is a wave of violent crime in an area, there is a lot of interest in the Commando. When things have been quiet for a year, active involvement decreases.¹²

In this context, it is worth pointing out what is happening in the broader Free State environment. Before the beginning of the phasing out of the Territorial Reserve, there were 33 Commandos in the Free State. Two were closed in 2004, and a further nine in 2005, leaving 22 operative. On the 450 km borderline between the Free State and Lesotho, the number of operative Commandos has reduced from eight to five. The three borderline Commandos that have ceased operations are Wepener, immediately south of the Ladybrand Commando's jurisdiction, and Caledon and Ficksburg, both immediately north of Ladybrand.

A number of criteria were used to determine which Commandos to close first. According to J TAC HQ Free State, the two most important were levels of commando activity and the level of assistance the SAPS required in each area. The three borderline Commandos that were closed – Wepener, Caledon and Ficksburg – were chosen for closure because all were dormant. As a member of J TAC HQ bluntly put it, one of these three commandos consisted of "the OC, the *tannie*, and that's it." In other words, while these Commandos were ostensibly closed in 2005, they had to all intents and purposes ceased to function some time earlier.

So much for the issues surrounding dwindling numbers of white members. For obvious reasons, there are few problems of motivation or commitment among black members. On the contrary, given levels of rural unemployment, one can only imagine that the Commando could double or triple its black membership overnight were it given the budget to do so.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the non-area bound unit is active in operations jointly planned by security agencies and others at local, area and provincial level. The Ladybrand Commando's non-area bound unit is mandated to assist SAPS stations in its jurisdiction with rural crime prevention operations, and to play an auxiliary role in borderline operations. Indeed, all five Commandos still active on the 450 km borderline between the Free State and Lesotho are mandated to play an auxiliary role in borderline control. In order to discuss the role of the non-area bound unit in its proper context, we turn now to a discussion of the borderline and those tasked to control it.

The borderline and the SANDF

The nature of the border between Lesotho and the Free State can only be properly comprehended in the context of the deep shock which convulsed Lesotho's national economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and from which it has not yet recovered. Historically, Lesotho's economy has relied heavily on the employment on Basotho nationals in the South African gold mining industry. A decade and a half ago, migrant wage remittances from Lesotho nationals working on South Africa's gold mines comprised 65% of Lesotho's GDP.¹³ In the late 1980s, the South African gold mining industry began to rationalise heavily in the face of dwindling reserves and diminishing rand gold prices. Between 1987 and 1993, the industry shed 40% of its labour force.¹⁴ In the space of a few years, Lesotho's domestic economy lost its primary source of income. During the last decade, Lesotho's peasant households have been involved in a ceaseless quest to make up the deficit lost by the contraction of the gold mining labour market. Most of the traffic that crosses the border is best understood as an expression of this quest.

Maseru Bridge and Ficksburg Bridge, the two commercial border posts between the Free State and Lesotho, are, like all of South Africa's commercial border posts, jointly managed by the SAPS, Customs & Excise, and Immigration. There are also six non-commercial border posts between Lesotho and the Free State at which Customs & Excise is not present. Patrolling the 450 km borderline between these eight border posts is the responsibility of a single SANDF Fulltime Force Company with the assistance of about 85 members of a SAPS ACCU. Responsibility for borderline control on this border is scheduled to pass from the SANDF to the SAPS in the 2006/2007 financial year. It is necessary that we discuss the work of the SANDF Company responsible for borderline control in some detail, for it is this Company the non-area bound unit of the Ladybrand Commando assists when it is assigned to borderline work.

As the Officer Commanding (OC) of the SANDF Company that patrols the borderline put it to us, at any given time there is one borderline control official on duty for every 5 km of Free State/Lesotho borderline. As with all limited resources, the Company must prioritise carefully and deploy its staff wisely.

South African border control officials have long been aware that contraband moving across land borders tends to go through commercial border posts, rather than the borderline. Borderlines are often impassable, or remote, or devoid of adequate infrastructure. Commercial border posts, by contrast, are built to facilitate the movement of goods. The only task for a smuggler is to avoid detection.¹⁵ The Company OC agreed with this assessment. "In general," he told us, "more sophisticated and organised forms of contraband smuggling go through the border post. More informal, less organised smuggling crosses the river."

According to the OC, the four priority crimes associated with the borderline are drug smuggling, movement of stolen vehicles across the borderline, movement of undocumented people, and stock and grazing theft. By drug smuggling, the OC is referring primarily to cannabis that moves from Lesotho into the Free State. The Company estimates that 600 – 800 kg of cannabis crosses the borderline every year.

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that illicit cannabis cultivation is an important source of revenue for a significant number of peasant households in Lesotho's domestic economy. Beginning in the late 1980s, the very period in which Lesotho gold miners began to lose their jobs en masse, southern African cannabis grew in a remarkably short space of time from a minor player in world markets to the largest source of cannabis imported into Western Europe.¹⁶ While we are not aware of hard evidence, it is likely that many Lesotho households shifted into cannabis production in the early 1990s as income from mining remittances began to dry up.

The Company is embroiled in an endless cat-and-mouse game with those who smuggle cannabis across the Caledon River into South Africa. It has identified two forms of smuggling. In the first, dubbed the "dagga train," groups of smugglers cross the border in single file by foot with up to 40kg of cannabis strung across their shoulders. Moving by night and sleeping by day, they walk as far as Welkom to deliver their loads. In the second form of smuggling identified by the Company, smugglers cross the river late at night and are met by a vehicle on the South African side of the border.

The Company deploys nighttime foot and vehicle patrols and observation posts to combat cannabis smuggling. The OC readily acknowledges that

the Company loses the game hands down. It has been responsible for confiscating 60 kg of cannabis in the last three years. During that time, an estimated 1,800 kg to 2,400 kg has crossed the borderline.

In regard to vehicles, the Company believes that there is a thriving parts market across Lesotho and that it is fed by vehicles stolen in South Africa. According to its information, the majority of stolen vehicles are driven through the border posts, but some are pulled across the river by tractors late at night. The borderline between Wepener and Zastron in the southern Free State is fence rather than river; there, the fence is cut and vehicles driven across the borderline.

The third form of cross-border crime identified by the Company is the movement of undocumented people. Lesotho nationals have sought work in South African labour markets for generations. The collapse of gold mining labour markets in the late 1980s had a profound effect on the eastern Free State's agricultural labour market. We discuss the movement of labourers across the border, both legally and illegally, in greater detail in the next section. Suffice it to say here that the SANDF at times finds itself in conflict with farmers who rely on hiring labour from the other side of the border, and renting grazing land to Basotho herders.

The fourth form of cross-border crime identified by the Company is stock and grazing theft. The SANDF regards grazing theft as the more prolific and serious of the two. The land along the Caledon River is fertile and lends itself to irrigation farming. Irrigated vegetables are grown in several of the agricultural districts that border Lesotho. Ficksburg, for instance, has become a successful asparagus-growing district in the last two decades. The SANDF believes that grazing theft is the greatest risk faced by South African irrigation farmers along the borderline. Lesotho herdsman drive their cattle across the river to graze and destroy vegetable fields on the South African side of the border.

The OC told us that policing grazing theft is extremely difficult. Herdsman, he believes, are capable of controlling their herds from the other side of the river; they thus do not need to cross into South Africa to commit grazing theft. Herdsman have also developed elaborate early warning systems, the OC told us; it is very difficult to surprise them. "The only effective way to combat the problem," the OC told us, "is with helicopter operations. You swoop in quickly giving their early warning system no time to kick in, drop in troops and surround the cattle."

But even then, the OC complained, success breeds its own problems. The only cattle pound along the border is at Zastron, which is at the southern end

of the borderline. Transporting cattle there is seldom practicable. Often, the Company's troops are reduced to driving the cattle back across the border.

The OC told us that when he began his job on the borderline, he was shown SANDF statistics on cross-border crime. One particular figure stood out: of the 156 South African farms along the borderline, 104 had been abandoned, mostly as a result of cattle and grazing theft. These figures were so precise that we took them for granted as true. Yet none of the farmers we interviewed over the following days was aware of anyone who had abandoned a border farm because of crime. Almost all agreed that crime was a serious problem, but none knew of farms abandoned because of crime. Most knew somebody who had abandoned farming, but because of tough market conditions, not crime. Indeed, several farmers pointed out that the fertility of the land along the river means that some border farms have high market values. Two farmers we interviewed had put border farms on the market within the previous 12 months, attracted considerable interest, and sold land without much trouble.

We are not suggesting that grazing and livestock theft are spectres invented by professional soldiers. As the following section shows, the problem of theft is quite real. However, the story above does go to show that one's profession is a powerful factor in shaping how one understands the border. As we illustrate in the following section, farmers also have a range of perspectives on the border, and on how it should be policed.

The borderline and farmers

Those in the Ladybrand district who farm along the borderline either grow natural rainfall crops, irrigation vegetables, or farm livestock. The last of these, livestock farmers, probably have the greatest interest in a closed border between South Africa and Lesotho. For them, movement of Lesotho nationals across the border primarily represents a risk of stock theft.

For vegetable farmers, however, the situation is far more complicated. On the one hand, they too are vulnerable to cross-border crime – primarily in the form of grazing theft. Yet they are also dependent on the movement of people across the border, for many hire seasonal labourers from Lesotho. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that the contraction of the gold mining industry's labour market has benefited employers of seasonal labour in the eastern Free State. The drying up of gold mining remittances in Lesotho households has led to growing numbers of Basotho women seeking seasonal

work on the South African side of the border. Between 1992 and 1998, the number of seasonal Basotho labourers working legally on Free State farms grew from less than 1,500 to more than 7,000.¹⁷

In other words, the crisis in the gold-mining labour market appears to have increased the supply of cheap seasonal labour to the eastern Free State's vegetable farmers. For some farmers, the time consuming, expensive and bureaucratic path to hiring Basotho nationals legally is an impediment to business. Some of the farmers we spoke pointed out that both sides of the border participate in a single regional economy, and advocated to an open border and a free labour market.

Indeed, at several points along the border, employment relationships have evolved over the generations which simply do not respect the border. A fruit and vegetable farmer in the Ladybrand district told researchers in 1998 that:

We have a very complicated [employment] arrangement. We don't really distinguish between Basotho and our local people because the village they come from – Ha Fusi – basically grew up with the farm. Its existence is to do with our existence and a lot of families are intermarried with villages across the way. We've had maybe three or four generations working here.¹⁸

Farmers' differing positions on border policy obviously manifest themselves in their attitudes to the presence of the SANDF along the border. We interviewed the proprietor of a large fruit and vegetable farm north of Ladybrand who was a strong advocate of an open border and a single labour market. He argued that the presence of the SANDF on the border was counterproductive and had damaged cross-border relations. "Patrolling the border has broken down relationships," he argued. "The Caledon was negotiated as the border 150 years ago; Basothos have been crossing it ever since. They always have and they always will. Having a Company of armed men on the border doesn't stop people from crossing it. It just sours relationships and makes co-existence more difficult."

The proprietor told us he was involved in an initiative to develop commercial co-operative farms on the Lesotho side of the border. Emerging Basotho farmers, he argued, could use his access to international fresh-food markets, rendering agricultural development in Lesotho mutually beneficial.

Asked about grazing theft, he replied that in the half century his family had farmed in the district, they found that investing in consistent communication

with communal leaders across the border paid dividends. "It's a question of how you respond to grazing theft," he told us. "Some people respond by shooting cattle that trespass. For a Basotho, a cattle is his all. He will retaliate. He will burn your crops."

Yet, other farmers we spoke to, particularly those who did not recruit Basotho labour, were adamant that the border be sealed and heavily patrolled. A dairy and sheep farmer from the Hobhouse district put it to us thus: "On one side of the border, people have no work, no food and no decent land. On the other side, there is rich grazing and healthy livestock. A hungry man will do what he must do to feed himself. I do not blame them, but they are the biggest threat to my business. If I am to make a living, they must be kept on their side of the river."

It is often said that in a rural district characterised by divisions between black and white, rich and poor, farmers and labourers, forging a Commando that is representative of the rural community as a whole is not an easy task. On the border between the eastern Free State and Lesotho, shaping a security policy representative of the interests of farmers alone is not easy. The auxiliary role the Commando plays in patrolling the borderline is thus inherently controversial.

Local problems, local solutions

We visited an area on the borderline between Ladybrand and Hobhouse which primarily farms livestock. The farms in the area employed few Basothos. Most were fairly consistent victims of livestock theft. The area thus appeared to have a common interest in keeping the border closed. We set out to discover the strategies and resources farmers use, collectively and individually, to combat stock theft.

Interestingly, it appears that the state security institution farmers valued most was the SAPS stock theft unit. The unit has jurisdiction to cross into Lesotho in pursuit of suspects and to arrest them there, although suspects apprehended in Lesotho are tried in Lesotho. Farmers valued the unit's detectives because they were fast and efficient trackers and thus often retrieved sheep and cattle alive. Farmers were dismissive of Lesotho's criminal justice process. They were motivated to turn to the stock theft unit, not to bring livestock thieves to justice, but to get their livestock back. Through the work of stock theft unit, farmers commonly traced their livestock to butcheries, either in Lesotho villages or in Maseru itself. In a sign of the state of economic desperation on

the Lesotho side of the border, one farmer told us that the butcher on whose premises his livestock were found had paid R600 for 12 sheep from the thieves who had stolen them.

Farmers were also involved in individual and private crime prevention initiatives, some of them creative and eccentric. Three farmers in the area employed former 31 Battalion Khoi-San trackers to guard their livestock. The former soldiers live in tents on their employers' grazing land. They are armed, and guard their employers' livestock 24 hours a day. Other farmers in the area have turned to technology. For instance, some attach harnesses to their cattle which trigger their cell phones to ring whenever the harness's bearer begins to move at a speed of more than 5km an hour. Farmers in the district also conducted voluntary patrols during high risk periods, but these, we were told, were sporadic.

Interestingly, while several farmers in the area were active in the Commando's area-bound unit, the Commando itself appeared to play little role in these local security arrangements. Commando membership appeared to be a source of pride and tradition as much as anything else. We were told that for the last seven years, the Commando members in the area went hunting in the Karoo together every July.

Thus, even at this local level, where farmers share a common interest in regard to the border, and are extremely active in crime prevention initiatives, the role of the Commando's area bound component appears to be somewhat marginal.

The Commando and the SAPS

Much of the area covered by the Ladybrand Commando is situated in the jurisdiction of the Ladybrand police station. The National Commissioner of the SAPS did not permit us to make contact with the organisation's personnel at local and area level, and so we can only talk about the SAPS in Ladybrand in broad and generic terms. Nonetheless, the remarks that follow are both uncontroversial and easy to surmise.

Like many rural police stations in SA, the Ladybrand police jurisdiction consists of a dense population centre – the town of Ladybrand – surrounded by a sparsely populated hinterland. Again, as with most rural SAPS stations, crimes are concentrated where people are concentrated, and contact crimes, committed primarily on the weekend and at night, predominate over other crimes. A brief glance at the station's crime stats tells one immediately that

the most frequently reported crimes in the area in the last decade have been assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm (assault GBH) and common assault.¹⁹

The SAPS is a national organisation, and a highly centralised one at that. Crime reduction priorities are set nationally, and local police managers are evaluated by the success with which they respond to nationally determined priorities. At Ladybrand, the station commissioner's most urgent task is to reduce levels of reported contact crimes. The majority of these happen on weekend nights and in town, rather than on the borderline. From the vantage point of the police station and the organisational pressures it faces, the force multiplication represented by the non-area bound unit of the Commando is not being optimally deployed if its work is confined to the borderline. As a senior officer at OPS J TAC Free State told us: "Ladybrand SAPS want us as a force multiplier in the township. But we are interested in the borderline. Compromises have to be made."

Conclusion

The field of security service provision on the border between the Free State and Lesotho is by no means clean or simple. As we have shown, the Ladybrand Commando, and presumably others on the same borderline, is deployed in the context of several perspectives, interests and objectives, some of which clash. Farmers are divided according to how they wish the border to be policed; the interests of some clash with others. Adding to this complexity, the SAPS has an interest in deploying the force multiplication contained in the Commando away from the borderline.

If things go according to plan, and the SAPS begins to pay its reservists for the time they spend on duty, the majority of personnel currently deployed in the Commando's non-area bound unit will be recruited to join the SAPS Reserve. Once this capacity finds a new institutional home in the SAPS, its alignment to the various security perspectives described above will shift. Perhaps the most crucial policy question surrounding the closure of the Commandos, not only in Ladybrand but throughout the country, is how this shift will be engineered. Given the multiplicity and complexity of security needs in rural South Africa, which needs, precisely, will the capacity contained in the Commandos serve once it moves into the SAPS? We raise this issue briefly again in chapters three and four, and then tackle it more methodically in chapter six.