

CHAPTER 3

DE MIST COMMANDO, UITENHAGE, EASTERN CAPE

The De Mist Commando's Head Quarters is situated in Despatch, a few kilometres from the industrial town of Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape. Driving through its jurisdiction is a study in contrasts. Anyone who has done the half-hour trip between Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage will know that the area between the two cities consists of an uninterrupted sprawl of industrial development and peri-urban settlement. Yet 20 minutes north or west of Uitenhage one finds oneself in empty wilderness: the aloe-rich game and livestock farms to the north of town; the unblemished Groendal Wilderness Area and Van Staden's Wild Flower Reserve to the northwest and west of town. The Commando's jurisdiction thus encompasses both dense industrial areas, and sparsely inhabited rural districts.

Such sharp demographic contrasts make policing a difficult business. They also make this case study particularly useful. As we discuss in Chapter Six, a significant proportion of the police stations that will be taking over the Commandos' crime prevention work straddle urban and rural areas. How they use the capacity they inherit from the Commandos to manage the urban/rural interface, is, we will argue, the most critical question in this monograph. The De Mist case study, then, with its particularly sharp divide between urban and rural, serves to highlight a central theme.

The geography of the De Mist Commando area

The De Mist Commando area is home to little under half a million people.²⁰ With the exception of about three or four thousand, who are scattered across the Commando area's northern and western hinterland, the entire population lives in the southeastern corner of the Commando area. The centre of this agglomeration is Uitenhage, the hub of South Africa's motor industry, host to the Volkswagen plant and about three dozen other factories associated with the motor industry, ranging from tyre to axle manufacturers. The township adjacent to Uitenhage, KwaNobuhle, is home to about 250,000 people, half the population of the Commando area. As with all industrial metropolises in South Africa, several informal settlements, all of them less than a generation old, mark the periphery of the urban/industrial centre.

The Commando's concern is with the couple of thousand people in its jurisdiction who are not jammed into the urban/industrial complex. It has divided the rural areas of its jurisdiction into five zones. Kruisriver and Perseverance are both directly adjacent to the urban agglomeration of Uitenhage and Despatch. Kruisriver consists largely of smallholdings, but is also home to a number of vegetable farms. Perseverance also consists largely of smallholdings, and is home to a quarry and a large cattle farm. The zone to the north of Uitenhage – Addo/Amaanzi/Hillwacht – is both large and diverse. Hillwacht is close to town and consists largely of smallholdings, while Addo is a vast swathe of barely inhabited land, and consists of livestock and game farms. Elandsriver in the south and Adolphskraal in the north are both large, remote zones, dominated by livestock farming.

The largest agricultural crime problem in the area is stock and game theft. It was not possible to gather anything more than anecdotal information, but it appears that there is a large, informal, door-to-door meat market in the townships and informal settlements in the southeastern corner of the Commando's jurisdiction, and that a fair proportion of this informal industry's supply is taken illegally from the stock and game farms of the Commando's area. In general, those who farm closer to the densely populated southeastern corner are more vulnerable to stock theft, but the remoter parts of Addo and Eland River also report a steady stream of theft.

Recast in social terms, the crime tendencies that keep the Commando busiest are in essence a cat-and-mouse game between members of a struggling, peri-urban informal sector on the one hand, and livestock farmers on the other. Livestock farming is generally a fragile, low margin industry in which the fortunes of small family businesses are prone to waver. The stakes in the cat-and-mouse game are thus pretty high for both sides.

Naturally, these are by no means the only crimes committed in the area; they are the crimes that most concern the area's agricultural sector. We deal with the relationship between these and other crimes shortly.

The Commando and the SAPS

The De Mist Commando is reputed to be among the strongest in the country. This was certainly confirmed during our visit. At time of writing, June 2005, it has 237 active members. Across the agricultural zones of the Commando's jurisdiction, area bound units are formed along the natural boundaries of church congregations and agricultural associations. The Commando is

strongly represented and well organised in each. For instance, in the Eland River area in the south, the Commando has two area bound sections and 25 to 30 active members. In Adolphskraal in the north, it has three sections and about 35 active members. The Addo/Amaanzi/Hillwacht area has about 30 active members, and Kruisriver about 20. Only Perseverance, which has only one farm and otherwise consists of smallholdings, has just seven active members.

The machinery of these local structures appears to be well oiled. Each is debriefed about crime trends by Headquarters on a weekly basis, and the following week's patrols are designed accordingly. Each local structure rehearses and refines its rapid response and emergency plans regularly. In contrast to Ladybrand, where the area bound structures of the Commando seemed to play a peripheral role in grassroots security initiatives, it appears that in the hinterland of the De Mist area, the Commando is the central grassroots security organ.

In a sense, then, the De Mist Commando is an idealised version of what one might expect a rural civilian force to be: a homogenous, close-knit community coming together in a collective endeavour of mutual assistance. Yet if the farming community is indeed close-knit, part of what binds it is collective disdain for the service provided by the SAPS. Farmers complained that stock theft is seldom reported because the local stock theft unit is overworked and is rarely successful. Others complained that in the remoter parts of the area, Eland River in particular, the SAPS usually takes between one and two hours to respond to a 10111 call. Others claimed that SAPS patrol officers simply did not know their way around the rural districts and would often get lost and fail to arrive at all. Yet despite the litany of complaints, farmers had nothing but praise for the station commissioner at Uitenhage and sympathised with his predicament. Most stressed that relations between the farming community and the SAPS in general, and the Commando and the Uitenhage SAPS in particular, were very good.

These ostensibly conflicting sentiments are not difficult to explain. For it does not take much sympathy to see why the SAPS finds it difficult to police its hinterland.

Four police stations fall into the Commando's area. The jurisdictions of KwaNobuhle and Kamaehs police stations are entirely urban; they are thus not responsible for policing farms (although they do police some of the areas where livestock stolen from farms is sold, a point we return to shortly). Despatch is responsible for policing only a single zone of the Commando's

area, Perseverance. The fourth SAPS station in the Commando's area is Wolwefontein. It polices the Adolphskraal and Cockscomb districts of the Commando's area. It is a remote rural police station in a sparsely populated area with a remarkably low crime rate. From April 2003 to March 2004, the highest incidence of recorded crime in its jurisdiction was in the category of stock theft and numbered 21 – fewer than two per month. It recorded no murders, three rapes, and not a single robbery.²¹ Farmers are thus naturally happy with the quality of service. Every patrol officer knows every farmer by name, has a working knowledge of his business, and his concerns about crime. And since on average a crime is recorded every three to four days, patrol officers have the time and resources to respond thoroughly and satisfactorily to calls.

It is in regard to the Commando's relationship to the fifth police station in its area, Uitenhage, that the mixed litany of complaints and praise arise. The problem, quite simply, is that the SAPS station is inadequately resourced to properly police both its urban and its rural districts. The northern reaches of the Addo district and the western reaches of the Eland River district are both within the Uitenhage police station's jurisdiction. Both are a considerable distance from town, and many addresses are situated on unmarked district roads. Given resource constraints, the station usually has two, occasionally three or four vehicles, patrolling its entire jurisdiction 24 hours a day. The station has divided into jurisdiction into a rural and an urban sector. The entire expanse of the jurisdiction's agricultural hinterland is thus on an average day patrolled by a single vehicle. This effectively means that the SAPS has next to no rapid response or visible policing capacity in the rural districts, except when operations are organised and extra personnel is drafted into the area.

Naturally, the bulk of the police station's crimes accumulate around its people – in the town of Uitenhage itself. The townships adjacent to Uitenhage, although not in the station's jurisdiction, have poorly developed service and retail industries, and township residents travel to Uitenhage to shop. There is thus a massive influx of cash-laden consumers into Uitenhage's central business district (CBD) after payday, pension day and at weekends. Taxi ranks, footpaths between town and township, and the streets of the CBD itself are thus high-risk spaces in regard to common and aggravated robbery. And the suburbs of Uitenhage are, like all suburbs, packed with motor vehicles and electronic household equipment, and thus record a steady stream of car theft and residential burglary.

In stark contrast to Wolwefontein, then, stock theft is not a priority crime in Uitenhage. As with any South African police station whose jurisdiction

straddles urban and rural areas, the bulk of crime, especially contact crime, accumulates around the urban areas. That is where people are robbed with greater frequency; assault one another when drunk with greater frequency, get embroiled in domestic violence with greater frequency; and have their cars, DVD players and personal computers stolen with greater frequency. So that is where the bulk of a police station's resources must be invested.

Moreover, post-apartheid policing happens to have settled on a style of crime combating that demands large concentrations of personnel. The classic SAPS crime combating tactic is a variant of "hotspot policing": crime patterns are analysed according to where and what time they happen; hotspots are thus identified and are saturated with visible police presence; officers police aggressively for risk factors such as concealed weapons. All of which requires feet on the ground. South African policing is thus highly "operations driven". Large numbers of uniforms are assembled and deployed at crime-prone times and in crime-prone areas.

Any South African station commissioner is thus desperate for numbers. In Uitenhage, some of these numbers are provided by the local government, which recruits and trains unemployed people. For R40 per day, these "volunteers" stand as visibly as possible in the CBD's hotspots all day every day wearing bright green bibs.

A station commissioner in a town like Uitenhage is thus delighted and relieved to have a strong Commando working in his hinterland. De Mist Commando has a 145-member non-area bound reaction force; about sixty of these are unemployed people recruited from KwaNobuhle, breadwinners keen to work their full annual quota of 180 days. In a place like Uitenhage, the Commando is thus a lifesaving resource for the police station; the SAPS can throw what numbers it has at urban crime, because the Commando is in a position to invest its numbers in policing rural crime.

Indeed, in the Uitenhage area the Commando is in effect the lead agency in rural crime prevention. Operations are planned jointly with the SAPS at a weekly meeting, but in most cases, it is the SANDF that effectively designs operational plans, since it is they who have been gathering rural crime intelligence during the course of the previous week, via their grassroots area bound structures throughout the rural districts. And despite the fact that Commando members are not meant to conduct operations in the absence of the SAPS, the scarcity of SAPS personnel means that Commandos do in fact perform patrols and observations alone. The proviso is that they carry police radios, and wait for a police presence before suspects are apprehended.

What does the presence of the Commando accomplish? The effects of their presence are modest and simple; they have sufficient numbers to be visible, and their knowledge of the area is good enough to deploy in the right places. Their visibility is thus a deterrent; stealing livestock from their jurisdiction carries an element of risk.

How representative is the Commando?

At the briefing given to us at J TAC HQ Eastern Cape, we were told that Commandos used to represent the security interests of white farmers only, but that the aim now was for them to reflect the needs of the entire rural community. Indeed, one of the resolutions adopted by government and organised agriculture at the Summit on Rural Safety and Security in October 1998 was that the Rural Protection Plan “be more inclusive of all people in the farming and rural communities by inter alia strengthening and expanding the commandos and reservists so that they can become more accessible to the whole rural community”.²²

The officers briefing us at J TAC HQ told us that making rural security more inclusive was not that easy. Local Operational Co-ordinating Committee (Lococ) meetings, at which joint security operations are planned, were in principle open to all civil society stakeholders. But the truth, one officer told us, is that “the only civilians who believe their presence is permanently required in regard to security matters are farmers”. Even farmers, as the discussion on the eastern Free State in the previous chapter shows, can be extremely difficult to mobilise.

Is the De Mist Commando representative of the area’s rural community as a whole? While the Commando employs black part-time soldiers, it is indisputable that the constituency it serves is the predominantly white farming and smallholding community. Its area bound membership is drawn from the heart of the white property-owning rural community. And the non-area bound unit’s operations are generally aimed at preventing crimes against the people, property and businesses of the rural middle class.

Does this make the Commando a problematic structure? Political orthodoxy tells us that all public security structures must represent everybody’s interests, that the Commandos, for instance, must include everybody. But is that goal possible? Rural South African communities are deeply divided – by race, by inequality, and by a great deal of history. Asking a public security structure – whether a Commando or the SAPS – to bridge these

divides, is perhaps asking too much of it. It is asking a structure tasked with defending people and property to mend souls; a structure with limited means and blunt instruments to conduct social engineering. Public security organs must, of course, be given mandates which are fair. And everybody must be given the policing service they require. But that is a very different point.

A brief example to illustrate the argument: The Commandos’ intelligence system is known as Explor. In the De Mist Commando, it works like this: Each sector has an Explor leader who is chosen by the farmers in the area. The leader is not necessarily a Commando member; the only stipulation is that she be a woman, since farmers’ wives spend far more of their time at home than their husbands, and are thus in principle more aware of movements and events. Every sector is divided into five sub-sectors, and each sub-sector appoints a leader, and so on, until every farm in the Commando’s jurisdiction is covered. Every Tuesday, Commando HQ phones each sector leader, who in turn phones each sub-sector leader, and so on. By Tuesday evening, HQ should, in principle, have collected information, observations, fears and concerns, about crime from each farm.

The intelligence officer at HQ of course knows that the information she gathers would be far wider, richer, and no doubt more useful, if it was also collected from farmworkers, and their families. Their “eyes and ears” obviously see and hear more than those of the farmer’s wife. To this end, the Commando’s intelligence officer told us, “I taught the ladies to build up relationships with their people. I taught them to understand what their people say. It is hard work because the workers have their own culture – they won’t speak in a straightforward way. For instance, a worker will come up to the farmer’s wife and ask, ‘Were you safe last night?’ I need to teach her what that means – that he knows something was going on last night.”

In one sense, the story is amusing. A white woman from town trains a white woman on a farm to interpret the words of a black farmworker. Yet the farm wife’s and farmworkers’ respective forbears have probably been proximate neighbours for several generations. In many areas of the country, farmers and farmworkers are simply light-years away from working openly together in the same security structures. They have inherited a divide too deep to be bridged in a single generation. Asking the Commandos to bridge this divide is to ask the impossible. To judge a Commando’s success by whether it embraces all rural constituencies is to judge it by the wrong criterion. There are two far more reasonable yardsticks: first, whether the Commandos can defend commercial agriculture from its security risks without violating the wellbeing

of others, and second, whether the very presence of a security structure that primarily defends agricultural interests steals resources from the provision of other civilians' security needs. These are both important questions. We deal with them in chapters five and six respectively.

There is, to our thinking, a far greater threat to rural security in the De Mist area than the presence of a Commando which does not represent the entire rural community. The danger is that when the Commando closes, what rural policing exists will rapidly deteriorate. If Uitenhage SAPS does inherit and retrain the personnel currently contained in the Commando, the pressures on it to use this capacity in town, rather than in the hinterland, will be overwhelming. The station's most urgent task, established by formal national priorities, is to affect a decrease in the level of contact crimes. A station commissioner who inherits a force multiplier and does not use it in town is behaving irrationally. The thrust of the SAPS's organisational incentives would dissuade him from investing this resource in his rural districts. We discuss this theme in greater depth in Chapter Six.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that where Commandos do work very well, as the De Mist Commando appears to, it is often precisely because its constituency is homogenous and close-knit. Its members experience the Commando as an expression of themselves; as a structure that grows organically from their own interests. The SAPS, by contrast, must provide a service to all constituencies, some of which many Commando members regard as their natural enemies. This is perhaps partly why many Commando members regard the SAPS as a distant, distracted, impenetrable bureaucracy. Such is the nature of deeply divided rural communities.