

CHAPTER 4

WEST RAND, GAUTENG

We visited two Commandos in Gauteng – West Rand and Gatsrand – which lie adjacent to one another on Johannesburg’s West Rand. Of the two, Gatsrand has a smaller jurisdiction and far fewer crimes; we spent much less time there and concentrated more heavily on the West Rand Community, which will thus take up that bulk of this chapter. We do briefly discuss Gatsrand later in regard to a specific matter concerning stock theft.

Randfontein’s farming district

Ostensibly, the West Rand Commando’s jurisdiction covers a gigantic swathe of the Witwatersrand, including the whole of Soweto and much of Lenasia. In practice, of course, the Commando has nothing to do with these urban areas, and the built-up centres of its *de facto* jurisdiction are the mining towns of Randfontein and Westernaria. There are three vast rural areas in its jurisdiction: one fans out westwards from Randfontein; the other two lie east of Lenasia and Soweto. During our visit, we spent much of our time in the farming area west of Randfontein, which falls into Randfontein SAPS’s jurisdiction, and it is that area to which we devote much of our attention here.

Randfontein is an old mining town about 40 km west of Johannesburg. It has a population of approximately 130,000, about two-thirds of whom live in its African township, Mohlakeng, and its coloured township, Toekomsrus. It also has a CBD and a cluster of formally white suburbs to its north and west. A district of smallholdings fans out west from the town centre. Immediately adjoining the western boundary of the smallholdings district is a farming area, which is dominated by maize and livestock farming. Both the smallholdings and farming areas are located in the Randfontein SAPS’s jurisdiction. Each constitutes a single sector in Randfontein SAPS – the smallholdings district is sector six, the farming district sector seven – and each is in principle allotted one response and patrol vehicle 24 hours a day.

Our concern is with the farming area, sector seven, which is where the West Rand Commando assists the Randfontein SAPS with policing.

Two Communities, Two Sets of Needs

For anyone who has spent any period of time patrolling Randfontein sector seven, the gap between the security needs of the sector's black and white communities must be glaringly obvious. A member of the Commando's non-area bound unit, who had been patrolling sector seven for several years, summed up the difference very evocatively:

The vast majority of complaints the SAPS respond to, perhaps eight or nine out of ten, come from black people living on white farms. A lot of them are domestic violence – either assault, assault GBH, or malicious damage to property. Others come from the vicinity of these small, makeshift shebeens you get in the rural areas – drunken people fighting with one another. Occasionally the complaint is robbery, but usually the perpetrator is somebody the victim knows; usually there is a bigger story behind the robbery.

The other one or two out of ten complaints are from whites, and almost all of those are theft: stock has been stolen, or a tractor has been stripped, or diesel or batteries or mealies taken, or the copper cable on sprinkler pivots. Imagine anything you possibly can that is needed for farming; if it is possible to move, it will be stolen.

So black people make complaints because somebody they know has hurt them. White people make complaints because someone they don't know has stolen from them. The problem is that whites think it is the blacks living on the farms who are stealing from them, and the two communities hate each other.

We asked a white farmer from the district whether black farmworkers participate in the SAPS's Sector Crime Forum, the main liaison mechanism between the SAPS and the civilians of sector seven. "That would be like inviting the enemy into a strategy session," he replied. "Nobody would speak freely. Nobody would say: 'A suspicious white Cressida with tinted windows has been driving round the district for the last week,' because maybe that Cressida belongs to the black man's cousin; maybe the black man benefits from what the cousin in the Cressida does."

As we discussed in the previous chapter, bringing rural communities together is a complex social and political task surely well beyond the capabilities of a law enforcement agency. A more sober aim is to endeavour to provide both communities with the service they require. Yet if security agencies cannot

heal racial divisions, can they aggravate them? In this instance, does the manner in which Randfontein sector seven is policed either sharpen or blunt divisions between black and white. We were not in the district long enough to find out. But it is nonetheless worth raising a few questions.

White residents were certainly unhappy about policing, but more of that later. As for black residents, we did not canvas nearly enough people, or spend enough time on patrol, to gauge. We do know, however, that the SAPS frequently uses the extra personnel provided by the Commando to raid shebeens and conduct cordon-and-search operations in the sector's small settlements. This sort of policing is inherently difficult, its relation to communities ambiguous. On the one hand, shebeens that generate crime are legitimate targets for police action. On the other, shebeen raids are pretty much universally unpopular. Many residents regard shebeens as legitimate community institutions. Many do not appreciate having the places in which they choose to drink and relax being raided and closed down by groups of armed, uniformed men. Many regard such action as aggressive and provocative: as criminalisation of socially acceptable leisure activities, and as victimisation of respected community entrepreneurs. As mentioned earlier, we cannot say for certain whether this is the case in Randfontein sector seven, but if other experiences in South Africa with which we are familiar are anything to go by, there could well be a sense in the black homes of sector seven that whites and blacks are policed according to different standards.²³

The Commando and the SAPS

The West Rand Commando has 32 active members, 25 of them black and seven white. The Commando's reaction force is divided into two units. The first consists entirely of black members and is located at the Commando HQ in Randfontein. The second consists of the Commando's seven active white members. Its headquarters is a farm some distance northwest of Randfontein. The motivation for this distribution is that white Commando members run farms or are employed and thus cannot work during the day. The 25 black members are unemployed – most live in Mohlakeng – and thus can work during the day. The black unit thus does day patrols, while the white unit does night patrols.

The auxiliary status of the SANDF's role in crime prevention is observed far more emphatically in Gauteng than in the other provinces we visited. Recall that in De Mist in the Eastern Cape, Commando members would be given a police radio and patrol on their own. In Gauteng, the rule that Commandos

only ever play a support function in SAPS operations is strictly observed. No operation in support of the SAPS may be executed or planned without a written instruction from JTAC HQ. Commandos are only permitted join SAPS operations if they deploy seven or more commando members. Commando units are not permitted to join routine SAPS patrols or crime prevention operations, but may only execute intelligence driven operations. Even farm visits are not permitted in the absence of a SAPS officer.²⁴

The SANDF's participation in rural crime prevention operations is thus limited by availability of SAPS personnel and resources. Randfontein SAPS sector seven has a single patrol vehicle and nine members. The vehicle patrols the sector 24 hours per day when all nine members are available for duty. When an officer is sick or on leave, there is a gap in the daily patrol. There is a fulltime sector manager, but he has no vehicle and works at the police station in town. The Commando often uses one of its own vehicles to increase the SAPS' visible policing capacity in the sector. A Commando vehicle will pick up the SAPS sector manager from town to allow him to patrol.

The Commando's daytime patrols are generally restricted to tailing the single police vehicle that patrols sector seven. The Commando vehicle is packed with seven part-time soldiers, all armed with automatic weapons. It is difficult to see what function they serve during ordinary patrols. They do not increase the scope of security force visibility since they are not permitted to wander from the SAPS patrol vehicle. Theoretically they provide much needed backup when the SAPS officers respond to crimes in progress, or confront civilians who may be armed and may resist apprehension. In truth, though, the Commando's vehicle is slow, distances in sector seven are large, and a police vehicle responding to a crime in progress will arrive at the scene of the complaint long before the Commando vehicle.

It is in regard to operations, rather than routine response and crime prevention patrols, that the Commando's presence would appear to make a difference. The extra numbers provided by the Commando undoubtedly enable the SAPS to exert a more visible and more aggressive presence in the sector: roadblocks, shebeen raids, cordon-and-search operations – these are all contingent on the availability of sufficient personnel, and they are the primary source of SAPS visibility in the sector.

There is another way in which the presence of the Commando makes a profound difference to the policing of the sector: this is in regard to the policing of stock theft. The difference the Commando makes in this sphere here concerns the quality of policing rather than simply extra numbers. A

common complaint among farmers in the area is the tardy quality of police investigations of stock theft. As farmer in sector seven put it to us:

Whites in the *platteland* accept the Commando more than they accept the police because the Commando is a farmer's force and does farmer's work. If I report stock theft to the police, a detective will come out, maybe a few hours later, maybe the next day, and open a docket. He can't solve the case. He doesn't stand a chance. But if I call the Commando it is a different story. They will drop what they are doing, find a policeman to take along so that their operation is legal, and they will follow the spoor through the night, either until they find my livestock or until the spoor runs dead.

The second Commando reaction unit, the one that works at night, is staffed predominantly by livestock farmers; they are men whose knowledge about stock theft in the area is a matter of core business, passion and expertise. Thus, while JTAC HQ instructions insist that the SANDF plays a support role in SAPS operations, the reality is that night-time stock theft operations are designed by, and driven by the expertise of, farmers.

Not that the Commando works miracles in preventing stock theft. The reaction unit is broadly aware of stock theft patterns. It believes that the majority of livestock stolen from Randfontein sector seven makes its way to the large informal settlement at Bekkersdal, about 15km southeast of the boundary of sector seven, where it is sold in the informal meat market. It is also aware of most of the cattle trails between sector seven and Bekkersdal; and it knows that full moon, and the evening before pension payout day are high risk times. It is thus capable of targeting its patrols quite finely.

Nonetheless, the target is always moving. The Commando is involved in an intricate game of surprise and deception with stock thieves, a game in which stock thieves are usually a step ahead. As a Commando member explained to us:

Stock thieves have an incredibly keen awareness of how we patrol. This time last year they had a particular modus operandi: they would drive the livestock across the district, to the outskirts of Bekkersdal, and then drive them into a series of steep sinkholes. The cattle would break their legs; they would be immobilised and invisible.

As soon as we discovered these routes the modus operandi changed. Now the most common practice is to slaughter the animals where

they are found; a bakkie is waiting on the nearest district road to take the carcass away. So now stock theft patrols must be as much about roadblocks as about foot patrols. They are stretching our resources too thin. They are in a better position to win the game so they usually do win.

Members of the Commando pointed out that preventing agricultural theft is frustrating and difficult when the area in which the stolen merchandise is retained is inaccessible to them. They argued that their work was far more effective when they had a mandate to recruit and pay informers and to gather covert intelligence. That mandate was withdrawn from the SANDF two years ago. As a Commando member recalled: "Years ago, we had a problem with a scrap dealer in town. We discovered that he was buying copper wire stolen from all over the agricultural district. We sent in one of our guys in civilian clothes who sat in a shebeen and spoke to some of the workers from the scrap yard. That gave us enough information to go and bring a police detective in to confront the scrap yard owner and warn him to stop."

In regard to livestock theft: "We knew most of the animals were going to Bekkersdal, so we sent three or four people into the informal settlement pretending to buy. We got a good sense of who was selling and gave all our reports to the police."

People interviewed about the smart and daring things they did in the past tend to smooth over rough edges and present a flattering imagine; information gathering is a complicated exercise, and the risk of receiving distorted, imperfect or misleading information is high.²⁵ Nonetheless, the point holds that stolen goods move along a market chain, and law enforcement works best when it targets the weakest link in the chain. If, for argument's sake, the weakest link is indeed the moment at which the meat is sold to retailers, not having access to that link is very frustrating. Asked whether the SAPS gathers information on Bekkersdal's informal meat market, Commando members said they did not know.

In this regard, the experience of Gatsrand Commando, West Rand's Commando's southwestern neighbour, is of interest. The agricultural districts in Gatsrand Commando's jurisdiction fan out east and west from the town centre of Carletonville. Carletonville has a population of about 45,000, and the adjoining township, Khutsong, a population of approximately 200,000. Commando members told us that the maize and dairy farming districts to the east and west of town are remarkably crime free. The last violent, predatory

crime committed against a farmer in the area was in 1996. Stock and crop theft are seldom reported.

The Gatsrand area, Commando members told us, is a net generator, rather than a net victim, of agricultural crime. A large livestock district lies just beyond the northwestern border of the Gatsrand Commando area, and the Commando is aware that stock stolen from that district is sold in Khutsong's informal meat market. "On pension payout day," we were told, "a whole street market springs up on the streets of Khutsong. The cattle routes heading out to the northwest are well trodden. That is where Khutsong gets a lot of its meat."

Asked whether the Khutsong SAPS polices the township's meat market, we were told: "It is a very difficult crime for the SAPS to police. First, the theft docket is opened at another police station, so it is strictly speaking not Khutsong's job to investigate. And second, there is no way to gather proper information about the meat market without putting in a lot of informers for a long time. The information comes out very slowly, very difficultly."

Two points in regard to the policing of stock theft arise. The first is an old, often-repeated point that applies to many crimes, not just stock theft. Illicit market chains seldom fall neatly into security agencies' bureaucratic jurisdictions. Livestock is stolen in one jurisdiction and sold in another. Why should Khutsong SAPS invest a great deal of time and labour policing stolen meat if it is not going to help them close their own dockets? The second, and perhaps more interesting point, concerns how difficult it is to extract information about the informal meat market from the Khutsong community. It would suggest that those who sell stolen meat are not frowned upon by their community, and certainly not by their customers. It hardly comes as a surprise that low-income black communities fail to rise to the defence of white farmers' property rights; but it is a social and political fact that profoundly limits the range of available possibilities in the policing of agricultural crime. We develop this point in the following chapter.