



## *The War for Africa: Twelve Months That Transformed a Continent*

by Fred Bridgland.

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Thomas Ricks recently described the South African Border War as a conflict “we don’t know about.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars of African history in the West often see it as the Namibian War of Independence or part of the Angolan Civil War. However, the apartheid government in South Africa saw these conflicts as intertwined in one very long war. But even white South Africans found (and still find) the war hard to explain. News coverage of the war was tightly controlled and the civilian population was not well informed about what was going on, even though a generation of white South African men was being conscripted into service.

*The War for Africa* concentrates on the last year of combat operations in the South African Border War, especially those of South African forces and Angolan units supported by both Cuba and the USSR. Its author, veteran journalist Fred Bridgland,<sup>2</sup> writes from the South African perspective, using many interviews with former members of the apartheid-era South African Defence Force (SADF) and Jonas Savimbi’s National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).

First published in 1990, just before the end of apartheid in South Africa, the book now appears in a revised edition featuring an updated preface, revised epilogue, and postscript. It remains a well researched operational history of the SADF campaign, with a close focus on the men who experienced the conflict at firsthand. But its heavy reliance on interviews makes it read like an Armaments Corporation of South Africa (Armcor) publicity piece. The author celebrates the ingenuity and technical prowess of the apartheid defense industries in bypassing international arms embargos on the South African government. Indeed, former South African minister of defense, Magnus Malan (1980–91), cited *The War for Africa* in his memoirs<sup>3</sup> when recalling the technical and tactical proficiency of the SADF artillery. On South African military equipment, Bridgland states that

The ZT3s [missiles], untested in battle until ... September 1987 and still on the official secret list to this day, was [sic] developed by Armcor in the teeth of the international arms embargo. It has a range of 3,5 km which is claimed by the SADF to be longer than any other modern anti-tank weapon. It has possibly been developed from NATO’s Milan missile with the help of many West European weapons engineers hired to develop the Republic’s fast-growing arms industry. (85)

The author portrays the Angolan conflict as a relatively straightforward contest between communism and the West; whether intentionally or not, he casts South Africans in a sympathetic

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1. “Annals of Wars We Don’t Know About: The South African Border War of 1966–1989,” *Foreign Policy* (12 Mar. 2015).

2. He worked as a reporter for Reuters in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and the wars of independence in Southern Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. He is best known for exposing American covert support to both the SADF and UNITA in 1975.

3. *My Life with the SA Defence Force* (Pretoria: Protea, 2006) 236.

light, asserting that, while apartheid was evil, communism was worse. Thus, Angolan, Cuban, and Russian soldiers appear as nameless, faceless, and completely unsympathetic, with little attention to their motivations. By contrast, SADF troops are praised for their battlefield heroism and integration of black African units into their operations. This is typical of books that concentrate on the operational history of conflicts in South Africa and Zimbabwe during this period. Generally written for a popular audience, such accounts accept the apartheid government's propaganda about trying to save the West. This sanitizes the more insidious aspects of its actions and ignores the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Bridgland mentions atrocities committed by Savimbi, the African National Congress, and the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola, but omits those committed by the SADF. This may be understandable in the context of his book's first edition, but not in a version updated ca. thirty years on. The main text itself is largely untouched, and the additions to the beginning and end of the volume merely serve to justify the author's original conclusions.

As an operational military history, *The War for Africa* has merit, especially for its granular descriptions of tactics and the constraints one side faced. Beyond that, its twisted view of the political, diplomatic, and military situation in Southern Africa during the 1980s makes it unsuitable reading for nonspecialist readers.