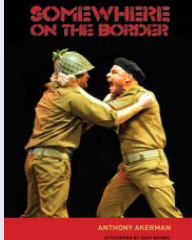




# A disturbing reminder: The experiences of conscripted soldiers in South Africa's Border War

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**Author:**  
Anthony Akerman

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A disturbing reminder: The experiences of conscripted soldiers in South Africa's Border War

**Reviewer:**  
Janet Cherry

**Affiliation:**  
Development Studies  
Department, Nelson  
Mandela Metropolitan  
University, Port Elizabeth,  
South Africa

**Email:**  
janet.cherry@nmmu.ac.za

**Postal address:**  
PO Box 15879, Emerald Hill  
6011, South Africa

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Some may question the value of republishing *Somewhere on the Border*, a play first written and performed in the Netherlands in 1983. The border in the title is a reference to the South African border and the Border War which the apartheid state fought with various liberation movement forces in the neighbouring countries of Angola and Namibia from 1975 to 1988. The history of this messy regional war, a mixture of struggles for independence from colonial rule, against White minority rule, and geopolitical conflicts in the context of the Cold War, has been well documented. Is there any reason to publish or perform such a play in the new South Africa, when the Border War is no longer a matter of public interest? Particularly when the play itself is extremely offensive: it is abusive, racist, sexist, homophobic and appallingly violent.

The subject of the Border War and the experiences of those who fought it – in particular, those young White men who were conscripted into the South African Defence Force – has become, in the past decade, an important field of both social science and of the creative arts. Psychologists have explored post-traumatic stress disorder in the context of the Border War, and historians and political scientists have written critical accounts of the war and its outcomes. Gary Baines and Peter Vale's edited collection of essays, *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa's Late-Cold War Conflicts* (2008) provides a useful context within which the experiences of conscripts can be better understood. The single most contentious event was perhaps the battle of Cuita Cuanavale in Angola – acknowledged by all to be a turning point in the war, but with no consensus from the contending forces as to who won it. What does seem clear is that the apartheid government judged that a significant loss of White conscripts in battle would lose them support among the (White) electorate; a peace agreement was signed in Angola shortly thereafter.

A spate of memoirs of White conscripts has been published in the recent past, reflecting perhaps that this segment of the South African population feels that their role in the conflict has not been adequately acknowledged, nor has the post-traumatic stress experienced by soldiers been dealt with. The published collections of such memories include JH Thompson's *An Unpopular War – Voices of National Servicemen* (2006), and *A Secret Burden: Memories of the Border War by South African Soldiers who fought in it* (Karen Batley (ed.), 2007). Most recently, *Battle Scarred – Hidden Costs of the Border War* by Anthony Feinstein (2011) has provided a vivid and dramatic personal account of the war and its psychological impact on individuals.

While Akerman's play complements the current interest in the way in which the Border War is remembered, and the long-term effects it had on those who participated, it is different in one important respect: it is a contemporary product of that war. The difference between these memories – vivid as they are – and *Somewhere on the Border* is what makes the play worth republishing. It portrays a short period in the life of five conscripts, their commanding officer, and the anonymous 'Black actor'. The identity, politics, beliefs and sexuality of the conscripts are explored, as well as their response to authority, warfare and violence. There is an immediacy to the play which conveys the brutality of military training through the language of those who give the orders as well as of those who receive them and are in turn brutalised. Former conscripts who have seen the play performed respond to it strongly and confirm its authenticity: it was neither a mockery nor an exaggeration of the behaviour of those who acted on behalf of the South African Defence Force. There are those who will oppose the publication or performance of such a script on the grounds that it is so crude that it should not be in the public domain. But the counter-argument is that however offensive it is, it is a true reflection of the reality of that time; it conveys in uncompromising language the reality of a racist, patriarchal colonial war. Unsurprisingly, it was banned by the South African censorship board in 1983. The reasons given for its banning were the vulgar language and that the South African armed forces are placed in an extremely bad light. Despite the banning, it was performed at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival in 1986, and subsequently in theatres in Cape Town and Johannesburg in 1986–1987.

The play was performed again at Grahamstown in July 2011, and was very well received. It complemented an interdisciplinary research project hosted at Rhodes University called 'Legacies



of Apartheid War', and was performed alongside the chilling film documentary *My Heart of Darkness* by Marius van Niekerk (Sweden, 2011), about his revisiting of the sites of war in Angola. Art exhibitions by former conscripts including that by Christo Doherty (*Bos – Constructed Images and Memory of the South African Bush War*) and photographic exhibitions on related themes have also been on display over the past 2 years. The 2009 commemoration at Stellenbosch of the 25th anniversary of the End Conscription Campaign, which campaigned from 1984 to 1993 until its objective of ending conscription in South Africa was achieved, also provided a stimulus for critical reflection on the experiences of conscripts.

The new edition of *Somewhere on the Border* is a slender paperback volume. The play itself is a brief 80 pages, but is published between a preface by the author and an afterword by Gary Baines, Professor of History at Rhodes University and one of the foremost academics in this field. The preface explains the context in which the play was written and the circumstances in which it was performed, and includes a reproduction of the *Government Gazette* banning the play,

as well as correspondence between the author and the Directorate of Publications, which is of historical interest in its own right.

It may also be argued that the play is too parochial in its context and its content to be of value as a publication or for performance to a broader audience. There is some merit in this criticism, in that the language used contains many references and colloquialisms, some of them in Afrikaans, which require translation and explanation. However, *Somewhere on the Border* is more than an anecdotal account of an obscure decades-past regional war. It reflects the universal brutalisation of military training, and the universal experience of young men who are the recipients of such training – much as the film *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) reflected the dehumanising training of US soldiers being sent to Vietnam. It is a stark reminder of just how violent the Border War was, and it prompts us to re-examine the legacy of that war in our own lives. As Gary Baines notes in his useful afterword to the new version, it may have prompted fathers to talk to their sons about 'their war' and to reflect critically on their experience as soldiers in the southern African bush.



Source: Photo taken by Mike Loewe

#### Conscripts in the townships