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TROEPIE SNAPSHOTS: A Pictorial Recollection of the South African Border War

Cameron Blake

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A photographic slice of conscript life in the South African Defence Force

This pictorial is a compilation of images obtained by the author while working on his first book-an oral history of pre-1994 South African Defence Force national service. It was illegal to take photos; however, there were inevitably those conscripts who ignored the rules, aiming their cheap, disposable cameras at whatever they could, but usually among comrades or when it was considered safe to do so. Inevitably certain images are poor in quality, often blurred and off-centre. But that is the reality-hastily-taken amateur snapshots. Even so, many are remarkably clear, serving to illustrate a period when over 600,000 white South African males, between 1951 and 1993, were ordered to join the South African Defence Force for service mainly 'on the border', or the 'Operational Area'-South West Africa (Namibia) and Angola. It is of note that all the photos, apart from Operation Protea, were taken by non-professional soldiers; young men some would call boys. Some patriotically embraced their call-ups as an opportunity to serve their country, while most stoically accepted their unsought-for lot-the law, and a war to protect South Africa from the spread of communism, the Red Tide.

Cameron Blake was born in 1969 in Johannesburg where he grew up. He graduated from the University of Cape Town in 1991, with a Diploma in Graphic Design. In 1992, still liable for compulsory national service-albeit in the early '90s when most conscripts were not heeding their call-ups-he cleared in at Voortrekkerhoogte, a large military base outside Pretoria. After doing his basic training in the Technical Services Corps, he transferred to the Ordnance Services Corps in Cape Town, completing his service in the media department. After a decade of varying careers in creative media fields, he finally teamed up with a long-time friend to open a small shop in Cape Town's CBD. The shop specializes in coins, medals and surplus militaria: his true passions. It was here that he began networking with veterans and collecting their stories, in line with his interest in southern African military history. His first book, Troepie: From Call-up to Camps, was published in 2009, and the sequel, From Soldier to Civvy, in 2010.

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