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A Soldier Forgotten

'The people who are not part of the problem are South Africa's 'white' male population that were subjected to national conscription, because National Conscription said, for a limited period in your life, your country expects you to avail yourself to serve it in this capacity, after which you can continue with your life.' Thabang Makwetla (Deputy Minister: Defence & Military Veterans)

The reality of the matter is that white ex-NSM (national servicemen) are not recognised as war veterans in any sense of the word regardless of the time span of their military service. When it was reported in the news that the South African government had conceived the Military Veterans' Bill to tackle issues including "special pensions" for veteran soldiers, many breathed a sigh of relief because South Africa had finally caught up with countries like the US when it came to giving back to veterans of war. The announcement that followed this report took many white South African's aback. The bill would not include ex-national servicemen, i.e. any man who served under the "old" government but would include ex-Umkhonto we Sizwe (or MK) and APLA (Azanian People's Liberation Army) soldiers. Many look at ex-NSM as evil and even classify them as war criminals. Many have used the term "crimes against humanity" to justify why these soldiers have been left out the bill.

One such man is now paramedic and author, Steven Webb. Webb joined the South African Medical Services wing of the military in 1984; he then underwent further training in Pretoria as an Operational Combat Medical Orderly, more commonly known as an Ops Medic. Following this he served in Angola as a medic and ended his career in Cape Town, teaching the Cape Coloured Corps to be paramedics at Tygerberg Hospital. Upon leaving the army in 1986, Webb received the Pro Patria (For Country) Medal for service in the prevention of terrorism as well as the General Service medal. Webb has since written the book "Ops Medic" about his experience.

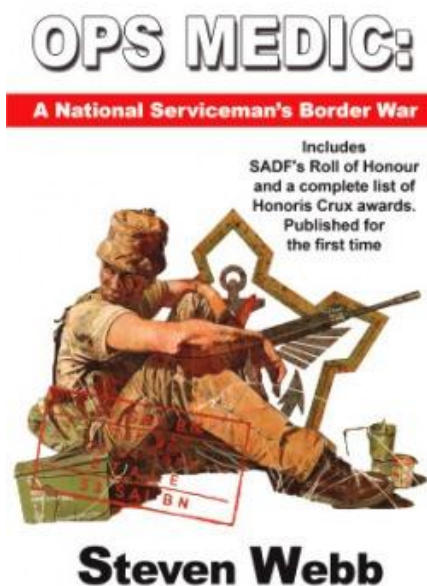
Webb is extremely vocal when it comes to ex-national servicemen and how they seem to have been forgotten by the current government. When it comes to his book, Webb claims that an employee at defense headquarters in Pretoria told him that "the new government/military hierarchy is not interested in anything that occurred before 1994". Webb feels strongly that this part of South African history, albeit a controversial one, cannot be swept under the rug and forgotten. "There are only a small handful of people in SA today who know who we are and what we did back in those days. The majority of the country and I'm talking black and white have no interest and don't care, the youth especially" said Webb.

For someone who keeps up to date on any developments made on the bill, Webb has an obvious understanding of this sticky situation unfolding in South Africa. “If you had to ask any ex-NSM what he thought about the government’s proposed Vets benefits, they would tell you that they can keep them, we don't want their money. Very little thought has been put into this Bill and the government is now trying to back pedal.” Webb stated matter of factly. I am beginning to think that it is not a fiscal issue with the bill that has provoked such outcry amongst ex-NSM, but rather that they are being simply excluded when it comes to recognition of service to the country.

Aside from this, it is a rather amusing assumption by Makwetla that all white ex-NSM are in the “pinnacle of their lives right now”. (Carte Blanche, 04-09-2011) Surely not every white in South Africa is living well? And what about the obvious effects one would experience after taking part in military activity? What about injuries that one could have incurred that still affect you today? What about the psychological and mental effects? Or are ex-NSM immune to the afore mentioned afflictions?

For me, it’s not a black – white thing. If that’s possible in our current political climate. It’s more about men who served their country, men who were not all necessarily right-wingers, men who risked their lives for South Africa, who want to be recognised as war veterans. They may not have been serving for the rainbow nation, but then again, at the time, who was?

In closing Webb summed up the soldier’s perspective – “Twenty three years of history cannot be erased from history books or the minds of the men and women who took part in that war, black and white. That part of South African history does not just belong to white former soldiers it also belongs to those who fought for MK, PLAN and APLA. We were soldiers, we followed orders we fought for what we believed in, just as they did. Don't condemn us for it like the government is doing.”



Webb’s book.

Bibliography

Reference Type

Acknowledgments

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Television

Carte Blanche; 04-09-2011