



An Ecclesiological Reflection on the Role of Chaplains in 32 Battalion (1977-1993)

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Abstract

From 1966 to 1989, the South African Defence Force (SADF) was involved in a low-intensity war in Namibia, the so-called 'Border War'. To secure sufficient manpower to defend themselves against internal and external threats from liberation movements, often supported by the Soviet Union, the National Party introduced increasingly comprehensive systems of conscription for white males. In the main, though there was opposition from English-speaking churches, the war and conscription was supported by the mainstream Afrikaans churches in South Africa. As such, they supported a comprehensive Chaplain's Service that reached all corners of the SADF. However, the SADF also made use of units that were not primarily made up of white South Africans. One such unit was 32 Battalion, constituted from soldiers that used to belong to the National Front for the Liberation of Angola. When they joined the SADF, the soldiers brought their families with them, necessitating the SADF to care, physically and spiritually, for both soldiers and civilians. This article examines the role that chaplains played in a unit that fell on the periphery of the SADF's commitment; though they were almost continuously involved in fighting for the SADF, to a large extent they fell outside of the normal military structures. Drawing extensively on primary sources, often recently declassified, the study provides an ecclesiological perspective on the influence of chaplains and religion on the men and women associated with 32 Battalion and contributes to the larger discourse about the relationship between religion and the military. Extant primary and secondary sources have been consulted including interviews with relevant anonymised respondents.

Keywords: 32 Battalion, military chaplains, Border War, ecclesiastic-military history.

Introduction

After the departure of Portugal from Africa and the ending of Portuguese rule in Angola in 1975, three factions waged what essentially amounted to a civil war, with the purpose of being the first rulers of independent Angola. These forces were the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) – whose military wing was known as the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA) – the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), and the National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola (UNITA).

At the same time, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) strove to achieve independence in what was then called South West Africa (now Namibia), which was being administered by South Africa as a 'fifth province' (Shubin, 2008, p. 205). Because both the MPLA and SWAPO received extensive support from the East Bloc (Van der Waals, 2011, p. 167) (mostly the USSR, the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland, Hungary and, later, Cuba) and because SWAPO was engaged in a terror campaign in South West Africa (Shubin, 2008, p. 204), the South African government decided that intervention was necessary, both to halt the perceived southwards advance of communism and to protect the peoples of South West Africa (at that time primarily the white farmers of the mandated



territory). They were supported in this thinking by the USA which, keen to strike a blow at communism, was also covertly supporting the FNLA and UNITA, from as early as 1960, before the FNLA had merged with the Democratic Party of Angola and was still known as the Union of the Peoples of Angola (UPA) under the leadership of Holden Roberto (Shubin, 2008, p. 8).

This meant that from 1966 to 1989, during the so-called 'Border War', security forces of South Africa were engaged in a low intensity war against the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN)¹ as well as FAPLA, who was providing support and secure bases of operation to SWAPO (Shubin, 2008, pp. 201-202). This conflict formed part of the South African government's policy of a Total National Strategy (Dutton, 1978, pp. 104-106) to combat the perceived 'multi-dimensional threat' (Alden, 1996, p. 68) to South Africa by liberation movements in other parts of Southern Africa. A large part of the actual fighting during the war was done by what eventually became known as 32 Battalion of the South African Army. This Battalion was made up, initially, of a white South African officer corps with black troops and (NCOs); during the latter part of the war, some of the black non-commissioned officers NCOs were also commissioned. Most of these troops were Angolan or South West African – due to the way in which national borders were drawn up by colonial powers, the same ethnic group might live in two different countries – who were already engaged in fighting FAPLA as part of the FNLA even though some of them had been trained in the USSR when Chipenda was still with the MPLA (Shubin, 2008, p. 278). Since the unit operated far more in the Owamboland region of South West Africa and Angola than any other area, it should be noted that the majority of the inhabitants of Owamboland were sympathetic to SWAPO (Stiff, 2004, p. 16).

32 Battalion was engaged almost continuously in the war and for its entire duration, as indeed the 'Roll of Honour' attests. No other unit in the South African Army had as many contacts, 'kills' or casualties. Since success in guerrilla and counterinsurgency war cannot be measured by means of territory captured from the enemy, it had become customary since the Vietnam War to measure success in these types of conflicts by way of body counts and kill-ratios (Parker, 1995, p. 353). While this may seem unnecessarily cruel and inhumane, it was (and, to a certain extent, still is) used as a measure in counterinsurgency operations.

A significant difference between 32 Battalion and the conventional battalions of the SADF is the fact that the majority of the members of 32 Battalion did not report for duty by themselves, but they arrived with their entire families in tow (Breytenbach, 2002, p. 130). The most significant reason for this is that the majority of the troops of 32 Battalion were either ex-FNLA troops or refugees from Angola. This necessarily meant that it was impossible for them to leave their families behind (effectively in enemy territory) while they waged South Africa's war. As a result, in time, a base was established for the families of the soldiers, near the base of the unit itself.

This brought a greater deal of social interaction between members of the unit and their families, and also between the SADF (in the form of various commanding officers, officers and senior NCOs of the unit) and the families of the soldiers. For example, national servicemen were posted to staff the school that was set up in Kimbo (the area where relatives and off-duty soldiers lived) and National Service medical staff was sent to assist with the medical welfare of the families, in what was termed as a 'hearts and minds' project (Nortje, 2003, p. 186).

In 1989, with the end of the Border War, and South West Africa progressing towards independence, 32 Battalion was moved from bases in South West Africa and Angola and was re-established at Pomfret which was essentially a ghost town in the North West Province of South Africa. They went there willingly, with the assurance from several high-ranking military officers and politicians that they need not worry about their post-war future (Breytenbach,

¹ PLAN was the military wing of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO). However, in most sources SWAPO and PLAN are used interchangeably when referring to PLAN, as are FAPLA and MPLA.



2002, pp. 327-328). Ten sprawling tent towns were created and eventually houses were constructed on what was a prior company mining town. In addition three schools were created and there was also a church (Nortje, 2003, p. 274). The soldiers of 32 Battalion became South African citizens in due course, to legalise their presence in Pomfret.

The origins of 32 Battalion led to the situation where not only soldiers, but also their families, depended on the South African Defence Force (SADF) for their wellbeing. While it could be argued that this is the case in many military units, particularly garrison towns and bases, the dependency at 32 Battalion was much more direct. It was not a case of the soldiers earning a livelihood through the SADF and their families benefitting indirectly. At Buffalo, soldiers and civilians did not merely benefit from being associated with the SADF, they were utterly dependent on it for survival. The extent of this challenge is highlighted by the composition of the first group of people to become members of 32 Battalion: in December 1975, shortly after Bravo Group's role in Operation Savannah had come to an end, a total of 651 people – 75 trained men, 39 untrained men, 26 youths, 40 older men, 229 women and 242 children – gathered at Mpupa, awaiting Jan Breytenbach's return from South Africa. This number rapidly increased over the following months, and eventually 1 800 men, women and children were selected to stay with Bravo Group and, eventually, move to Buffalo and the Kimbo (Nortje, 2012, pp. 145-149).

By 1989, 3 162 civilians alone called Buffalo home (Department of Defence Documentation Centre [DODDC], 1989a). In addition, the Angolan soldiers of 32 Battalion were not a homogenous group; they came from six different ethnic groups (Husson, 2019). Clearly, Chaplains at 32 Battalion would not have the luxury of confining their ministry to the spiritual. In an echo of the military trajectory of the unit, which involved developing and testing many new tactics and weapons, the chaplains also had to adapt to their setting. Throughout the history of the unit, chaplains functioned in a role that is much more reminiscent of current chaplain services.

A summary of the role of military chaplains, compiled in 2018, is applicable to the chaplains of 32 Battalion almost verbatim. It includes providing public service, being communication facilitators, providing advocacy and being multi-competent with diverse skills (Layson et al, 2022, p. 1156). An overview of the history of religious provision and practices at 32 Battalion will indicate to what extent chaplains conformed to this description.

History - ecclesiological reflections

Although military institutions across the Western world have historically used chaplains as 'moral spokesmen with the unique power to help incite the 'spirit of victory' and to bestow forgiveness afterwards' (Bourke, 1999, p. 270) – and South Africa was certainly no different in this regard – 32 Battalion required additional spiritual guidance. Firstly, the unit's very nature dictated that the majority of people to whom a chaplain would minister would not need incitement to victory, as they were civilians. Secondly, many of the men doing 32 Battalion's fighting did not necessarily do so out of a desire to win, nor did they necessarily feel the need for forgiveness afterwards. While every military unit is unique, and a theological or spiritual approach that worked for one might not work at another, chaplains and religious leaders at 32 Battalion faced particularly challenging circumstances. This is even more poignant when viewed against the current prevailing perception of chaplains, which is that they are an integral part of military commanders' imperative to ensure that 'their Soldiers and their Families are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually fit' (Searle & Vance, 2021, p. 40). While the SADF was concerned, to an extent, about the spiritual fitness of white National Servicemen and Permanent Force members and their families, this concern definitely did not extend to black units like 32 Battalion. In large part, it was left to individual commanders, chaplains and senior officers to ensure that soldiers and civilians had any form of spiritual care and guidance whatsoever.



On 17 February 1977, the chaplain of 1 Military Area, GH Theron, recognised that the composition of 32 Battalion created a unique challenge regarding religious and spiritual services to the unit. He noted that the white component of 32 Battalion spoke Afrikaans, English and Portuguese and that the languages of the black component included Portuguese and '*al die inheemse tale van Angola* [all the indigenous Angolan languages]'. This, already significant, obstacle was compounded by the fact that members were from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds. Although the white members were regularly visited by Theron and other visiting chaplains, the black troops received no personal spiritual guidance and were reliant on cassette recordings of sermons in Portuguese. In addition, the only Catholic clergyman available at the time was one Father Boniface from the mission nearby at Andara. However, Father Boniface could only speak Afrikaans, while the translator that was available could only speak English and Portuguese. This resulted in a situation that would have been comical, but for the inevitable difficulties that attended it: Father Boniface delivered his sermon in Afrikaans, whereafter someone translated it into English for the benefit of the translator. He then translated the English into Portuguese, for the benefit of the troops.

While the Catholic part of 32 Battalion's black contingent derived at least some benefit from this inelegant solution, Theron claimed that '*Die protestante het tans geen deeltydse kapelane [...] nie* [The Protestants currently do not have any part-time chaplains]'. This is a particularly strange remark, as the majority, if not all, of the chaplains that visited the white members on a regular basis would have been Protestant. The logical solution would have been to follow the same, admittedly clumsy, system as with the Catholic Father Boniface. Nonetheless, Theron did identify a former refugee, then employed by the Evangelical Reformed Church of the Kavango, as a suitable candidate to minister to the needs of the black Protestants and urged the chaplain of 101 Task Force to employ him at 32 Battalion (DODDC, 1977). While it is uncertain how long 101 Task Force took to address the issue, by 1987 32 Battalion was able to draw on a comparatively extensive pool of National Service Chaplains, primarily from the mainstream Afrikaans churches, though many of these were reluctant to be deployed to units as remote as 32 Battalion and preferred deployments within South Africa or to large bases like Grootfontein or Ondangwa in Namibia (Kambinda, 2019).

In July 1978, the base commander of Buffalo Base reported to the OC 32 Battalion that the officers, men and civilians of the unit still did not have sufficient spiritual support. It seems that Father Boniface's efforts were insufficient and that the plan to appoint the Evangelical minister from the Kavango did not work out. The base commander commented on the remarkably high level of religious education in 32 Battalion, but also highlighted that this came from two very different traditions, Catholicism and Protestantism. His suggested solution to the problem was that the Portuguese soldiers receive separate Portuguese-speaking clergymen, and church buildings, for the Protestant and Catholic groups, and he expressed the opinion that the contingent of white SADF members of 32 Battalion was sufficient to justify a permanent chaplain (DODDC, 1978). Despite these comments and attempts, as late as 1986, authorisation had not yet been received for a full-time chaplain. Protestant Chaplain Sydney Middlemost, a co-minister in Rundu (Nortje, 2012, pp. 912-913), was a regular figure at 32 Battalion, and a request had been made to have him permanently stationed there, but it had not yet been approved and the makeshift-ministry at the unit continued (DODDC, 1989b). Middlemost did, eventually, become the unit's full-time chaplain and a respected figure among officers, soldiers and civilians (Kambinda, 2019).

The lack of a permanent solution to the ministry issues experienced at Buffalo is made more relevant by a comment of the OC, Eddie Viljoen, in 1983. At an OC's conference on 31 January 1983, he bemoaned the poor attendance of the previous year's Christmas service and '*gewaarsku dat hy enige ongelowige summier uit 32 Bn sal wegjaag* [warned that he would summarily dismiss any non-believer from 32 Bn]' (DODDC, 1987a, p. 5). While encouraging troops to attend religious events, in order to provide a measure of stability in their turbulent lives through the moral advocacy of chaplains is not necessarily ill-considered, the threat of



summary expulsion for non-attendance seems harsh. In addition, the difficulties experienced in providing regular, dependable access to clergymen compounds the hypocritical nature of this statement. In addition, it is a marked contrast to the management style of three years earlier, under Deon Ferreira. At that time, when Ferreira was faced with the problem of former Angolan troops either resigning from 32 Battalion (DODDC, 1987b, p. 3), or going absent without leave (AWOL) to Botswana for short periods, Ferreira ordered an investigation into the feasibility of selling 'sterk drank [strong liquor]' in the Kimbo, and even wanted to know what 'die belangstelling is vir 'n bordeel in die Kimbo vir SP lede [the level of interest would be for a brothel for the SP members in the Kimbo]' ² (DODDC, 1987c, p. 2). Ferreira obviously reasoned that, if he could not stop his black troops from going elsewhere for their indulgences, he might as well provide it to them in a controlled environment. It is only natural that different OCs would have different ideas about how a unit should be administered, and different ways of implementing their ideas. However, for the soldiers that had to bear the practical implications of these differences, it would have been difficult to understand how they could have gone from the lenient style of Ferreira to the puritanical demands of Viljoen. Unfortunately, accessible official records from the SADF do not provide any insight into the role that the unit's chaplains played in either Ferreira's or Viljoen's reasoning.

By the late 1980s, Sydney Middlemost was the Permanent Force (PF) chaplain stationed at 32 Battalion's Buffalo base. He realised that the unit, and the population of the Kimbo, had grown beyond his capabilities. The way in which he went about securing additional clerical capacity for the unit is illustrative of the level of care that officers – as a PF chaplain, Middlemost would have had a rank equivalent to colonel – showed towards the soldiers and civilians in the battalion. It would have been a relatively simple matter for Middlemost to request a chaplain from the SADF through official channels and hope that his request would be granted. However, Middlemost realised not only that the unit needed spiritual leaders with certain characteristics, but also that a request to the SADF was likely to be dealt with as a low priority.

Prospective National Service Chaplains could indicate preferences for their placement for National Service. Middlemost consulted the applications and travelled to Heidelberg (in the then Transvaal province of South Africa, some 2 000km from 32 Battalion's base at Buffalo) to have an interview of sorts with Kevin Kambinda (pseudonym) to ascertain whether he would be a suitable candidate for the unit. (Kambinda, 2019). This kind of attention to detail ensured that, as in many other cases, the black soldiers of 32 Battalion seem to have had a much better relationship with their white counterparts than elsewhere in South Africa and Namibia. At the time of Kambinda's appointment at Buffalo, black church leaders in South Africa were increasingly discontent with the SADF's presence in black townships. They used their clerical networks to express their dissatisfaction to, inert alia, the Chaplain's Service. The matter was considered important enough to warrant a discussion point at a Chaplain's Conference in 1987, though no clear resolution was formulated at the conference (DODDC, 1988a, p. 2). Nonetheless, the difference in the acceptance of SADF personnel, including chaplains, at 32 Battalion stands in stark contrast to the resistance encountered in South African townships, where chaplains were essentially seen as mechanisms through which complaints would be lodged, rather than having any spiritual value.

Perhaps understandably, given the life-or-death nature of the existence of civilians during the early years of 32 Battalion, providing for the religious needs of the unit was not a high priority, and it took until 1988 before permanent church buildings, sufficient for the needs of the men, women and children of 32 Battalion, were erected. At this point, separate buildings were constructed for Protestants and Catholics, although the relationship between the groups had improved significantly (DODDC, 1988b, p. 10). Of course, the unit would only use these

² The suffix 'SP' was added to the force numbers of all black members of 32 Battalion, and became something of a shorthand, non-political way of referring to them.



buildings for about a year, before relocating to Pomfret. The construction of churches did not, however, solve the linguistic challenges that the Portuguese-speaking inhabitants of Buffalo faced. Although 32 Battalion's ministry had much more structure, sermons for the Angolans still had to take place through an interpreter. Kevin Kambinda (pseudonym), a soldier at 32 Battalion in the late 1980s, recalls that

[...] boodskappe moes [ge]gee word deur middle van 'n tolk [...] by wat ons genoem het kapelaansperiodes – ek praat nou spesifiek van die Angolese bevolking – die blankes het [...] meestal Engels gepraat, of Afrikaans [... sermons had to be given through a translator ... at what we called chaplain's periods – I'm specifically referring to the Angolan population now – the whites ... mostly spoke English, or Afrikaans] (Kambinda, 2019).

Interestingly, the soldiers of 32 Battalion seem to have been set on following their own religious tradition (either Protestant or Catholic), except when it came to funerals. When someone had to be buried, the minister's denomination did not matter, and Protestant chaplains conducted funerals for both Catholic and Protestant congregants (Kambinda, 2019). This phenomenon echoes broader anthropological observations, where there is something of an inverse relationship between the need for spiritual intervention and the origin of the intervention. In times of greater spiritual and emotional distress, people seem to be less concerned about the 'credentials' of the person supporting them than they might otherwise have been (Choi et al, 2015). At 32 Battalion, whether wittingly or unwittingly, chaplains used this opportunity to establish their presence among the soldiers and civilians of the unit.

Spiritual Presence

Chaplains must distinguish between pastoral and prophetic roles. The latter implies a duty to proclaim the truth to those in power, while the former implies a duty of care (Houston, 2016, p. 213). At 32 Battalion, this dichotomy was emphasised, in addition to the normal tension between military hierarchy and religious needs, by the multiracial nature of the unit. For this reason, chaplains at the unit often prioritised pastoral aspects to the detriment of the prophetic. A notable exception is the way in which they helped to facilitate the relocation of the unit to South Africa, though ultimately the success of their endeavours is debatable.

Pastoral and Prophetic roles

Prophetic chaplains must invariably embody a persona that exemplifies the prophetic preacher who creates a respected and loving pastoral relationship with their people. This ideal is seen modelled in Jesus as well as the range of the Old Testament prophets. From a pastoral perspective, the chaplain needs to participate in delivering and arranging for appropriate spiritual care to congregants and their loved ones. He or she, *inter alia*, actively participates in the delivery of spiritual care and responds to requests for spiritual care.

In explaining their pastoral role, chaplains and other religious and spiritual leaders and counsellors, often use the term 'presence' in their interaction with the people in their care. While the term originated in the medical community (hospital chaplains and the like), it is also applicable to the military setting. In fact, an argument could be made that soldiers and, in the case of 32 Battalion, their families have an even greater need for presence from their chaplain. Loosely defined, presence involves a chaplain creating a setting that goes beyond the typical, religious atmosphere by putting participants at ease and allowing an environment where compassion and non-judgement facilitate discussing and addressing personal issues that are not necessarily of a religious nature (Adams, 2019, pp. 1253-1254). The chaplains of 32 Battalion were ahead of their time in establishing presence among the black troops. They were, by current standards, vastly understaffed with, at best, two or three chaplains and/or other religious figures attending to more than 5 000 souls. By comparison, during the American war in Iraq and Afghanistan, commentators are shocked by the notion that military chaplains



were responsible for 'up to 1,500 soldiers', not even considering the possibility that these chaplains should also care for the soldiers' families (Besterman - Dahan et al, 2014, p. 109).

Despite the challenge of caring for such a large, diverse group at 32 Battalion, chaplains had to pay attention to more than just the spiritual needs of the unit in order to establish their presence among the foreign (in terms of nationality, race and culture) troops. They were involved in various social projects that were part of life at 32 Battalion, including the running of the school for the children of the unit. When the then South West Africa Department of Education appointed a new teacher to the school at Buffalo, it fell to the chaplain to arrange for accommodation for the teacher (Fernando, 2019). In 1987, Sector 20 heeded 32 Battalion's call for a social worker to be appointed to the unit, though under the condition that the social worker also attended to 31 Battalion (DODDC, n.d) who, like 32 Battalion, were made up of ex-Angolan soldiers and their families. The chaplains of both units were instrumental in getting the social worker assigned.

Chaplains also played an important role in establishing the unit's post-war trajectory, embracing their prophetic role. The future of units like 32 Battalion was always going to be uncertain after the war. From 1976, they had been assured by SADF officers that 'there is a future for you' (Eduardo, 2019) and, as a result, they had served South Africa's interests with distinction and emerged from the forge of the Border War as a complete and effective blade but, as is often the case with military units that excel at their task, was something of a liability at the cessation of hostilities. As it became increasingly clear that the United Nations' Resolution 435 – South African and Cuban withdrawal from Angola and Namibia – was going to be implemented, the future of the South African Defence Force's (SADF) 'irregular' units was discussed at a South West Africa Territory Force (SWATF) Chaplain's Conference in 1988. There Brig Van der Westhuizen noted that the SADF's Chief of Staff Personnel had indicated that, after the war, these units would be demilitarised, but would continue to be employed by the '*Regering* [government; presumably Namibian]' and would continue to receive remuneration. However, a handwritten note on the document, probably by Cpln Middlemost of 32 Battalion, indicates quite clearly that this was not an acceptable compromise, stating in rather stern Afrikaans: '*Nee – 32 gee pad RSA toe* [No – 32 is going to the RSA]' (DODDC, 1989c). Middlemost's prediction would prove accurate, but it would not necessarily be a beneficial move for the members of 32 Battalion. These examples are indicative of the lengths that not only chaplains, but also officers of 32 Battalion, took to establish presence among the black troops under their care and command and went a long way towards facilitating race relations in the unit that far exceeded the norm in South Africa and Namibia at the time.

Conclusion

Chaplains were a significant part of the fabric of 32 Battalion. The nature of the unit resulted in a social structure largely absent in the rest of the SADF. Chaplains were the initial link between the military structures of the SADF and the social needs of the unit's soldiers and their families. This article has shown that, at various times, the roles of chaplains in the unit differed, but that they served an undeniable purpose throughout. They often went beyond the requirements, sometimes reluctantly issued by the SADF and were obedient to their higher calling while serving in the defence force. Chaplains at 32 Battalion embraced both their prophetic and pastoral calling when it was needed, though not to the extent that they were openly critical of the institution that they were serving in, or the government that it represented. Nonetheless, in a microcosm of the unit as a whole, they were pathfinders in finding a way to function in a multiracial society within apartheid South Africa.



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