

Fought hard red line

Jan Dirk Breytenbach

Soldier, author, conservationist, missionary

Born: Bonnievale, South Africa, 1932

Died: Sedgefield, South Africa, aged 91

Colonel Jan Breytenbach was South Africa's most decorated combat soldier.

Appropriately, the "father" of the Special Forces, 44th Parachute Brigade and 32 Battalion died on Father's Day, June 16. He was one of only two men to win the Van Riebeeck Decoration, for distinguished service in the field against the enemy, and also the Southern Cross Decoration.

He was also a writer, conservationist and Christian missionary. It was fitting that the colonel became a writer as bestselling novelist Frederick Forsyth identified the Renaissance man as his inspiration for *The Dogs Of War*.

His long military career included some dramatic events, including with the Royal Navy fleet arm during the Suez Canal crisis of 1956; in the Biafran War; and the long Border War of 1966-89 against Marxist forces, including Soviet-Cuban troops in Angola.

After Suez, he rejoined the South African Defence Force, following South Africa leaving the Commonwealth, and was tasked with establishing 1 Reconnaissance Commando, in 1971, after being involved in SAS operations in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

In the Biafran genocidal war in Nigeria, he led a company of SA paratroopers to rescue Christians from Federal forces in that country. His 1970 flight from Uli was the last out of Biafra, complete with fire and explosions on departure.

In 1975, as a major, he led Operation Savannah the SADF's covert operation in the Angolan civil war. Not only did he rout communist forces, but he also returned with thousands of Angolans recruited to fight for his legendary 32 Battalion. He related this in two of his many books (*Forged In Battle* and *They Lived By The Sword*).

Promoted in 1977, he then led an assault on South West Africa People's Organisation HQ the next year at Cassinga.

As a senior staff officer in Northern Transvaal Command he commanded 44 Parachute Brigade (1980-82), later being founder/leader of the SADF's School of Guerilla Warfare until his retirement (in 1987).

At one stage he terrified his own UNITA freedom recruits during training. While teaching them bayonetting he let out such a bloodcurdling shriek that half of them fled into the bush, only returning a week later.

He was involved in various operations in the African Cold War struggle, played out on the periphery, and on one occasion he was thrown from his jeep after hitting a landmine but



managed to extricate a badly wounded soldier, Dave Barr, from the burning wreckage.

Frontline Fellowship director the Rev. Peter Hammond was shocked to find an application from the recently retired military legend to join his team.

"Jan had read my publication, *The Christian At War*, and wanted to join," he said. "I drove to Wilderness to meet him and his wife Rosalind. It was clear we had much in common as he was also outraged by ivory poaching in the Caprivi Strip of SWA (now Namibia) and Angola, and by some of the corrupt military people involved. Jan had adopted two lions and a leopard as pets. Later when travelling with the colonel in the field I saw numerous battle scars on his body, plus claw marks from his large feline friends."

From January 1989 Mr Hammond had the colonel training his Christian missionary recruits in bushcraft, tracking and anti-tracking behind "enemy lines", infiltration and exfiltration procedures and tactics. "Some of his chaplaincy services made us wince when he would unleash withering sermons in exposing sins and crimes, including in front of General Meiring (the future SADF chief and eventually the first to serve the Mandela Government)," Mr Hammond said. "The colonel preached as he fought, relentlessly and boldly, and he hit his targets."

Another Hammond reflection was when the missionary chief recalled Jan rolling over in his sleeping bag, saying: "Peter, let's go to Angola and preach to the communists." Well, why not?

This involved getting the local SADF commandant to give them

a helicopter, a Portuguese-speaking interpreter, from 32Bn and flying to three separate locations on the South West Africa (Namibia)/Angola border.

Jan would then speak to rival combatants who had gathered on both sides of the border. After opening in prayer, the rival forces would hear a sermon that "took no prisoners", including describing the Marxist atrocities and destruction of Angola, once the Portuguese left. He managed to "get up the nose" of the world's longest-serving foreign minister, South Africa's R.F. "Pik" Botha. At one border airstrip word came to him, "You and Hammond are to be out of there, first thing tomorrow." Jan mused: "I fired the first shots of this war back in 1966, now I am expelled from the country I devoted 24 years in defending for telling the truth to our communist enemies! There is some irony here."

Among his siblings he had two high-achieving brothers, Cloete and Breyten, one a famous photographer who photographed Nelson Mandela as a prisoner, and the other a noted radical writer.

Brigadier Gert Nel remarked to Hammond: "We could never control Col. Breytenbach when he was in the army." However, WA residents Johan Burr-Dixon and Major-General Chris le Roux respectively described him as "the best professional I served under" and "exceptional".

He is remembered by many as key in the fight to prevent Soviet-Cuban expansion in SWA, and in preventing the Angolan imbroglio spilling across the Orange River into northern South Africa. He is survived by his wife, two children and two grandchildren. **John Elsgood**