

**AFTER THE**  

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**COMMANDOS**

**THE FUTURE OF RURAL POLICING  
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

**JONNY STEINBERG**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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ACCU	Area Crime Combating Unit
ANC	African National Congress
Assault GBH	Assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm
CBD	Central Business District
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
J TAC HQ	Joint Tactical Headquarters
Lococ	Local Operational Co-ordinating Committee
NYPD	New York Police Department
OC	Officer Commanding
POP	Problem-Oriented Policing
SADF	South African Defence Force
SANDF	South African National Defence Force
SAP	South African Police
SAPS	South African Police Service
2IC	Second in Command

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In February 2003, President Thabo Mbeki announced that the South African National Defence Force's (SANDF) Territorial Reserve, popularly known as the Commandos, would be phased out. This phasing out process is now well underway. By the end of 2009, the last of South Africa's 183 Commandos will have ceased operating, their rural crime prevention and borderline control functions taken over by the South African Police Service (SAPS).

The task of this monograph is to assess the rural safety capacity that will be lost with the closing of the Commandos, and to discuss the manner in which the SAPS will replace that capacity. To this end, we conducted fieldwork in the three Commando jurisdictions: Ladybrand in the eastern Free State, De Mist in Eastern Cape, and West Rand and Gatsrand Commando areas in Gauteng.

Commando strength is uneven. In Ladybrand, for instance, commercial farmers are actively involved in a number of grassroots security initiatives, primarily in defence of their commercial property, but the Commando is a marginal player in these initiatives. Moreover, the farming community is deeply divided over how the borderline with Lesotho ought to be policed, and, by proxy, over the role the Commando ought to play in borderline control.

The De Mist Commando in Eastern Cape, by contrast, is highly organised, has a large active membership, and a clear and uncontested rural crime prevention programme. It is the dominant player in rural crime prevention; most police stations in its jurisdiction invest the lion's share of their resources in urban policing. In the West Rand, there is a strong identification between white farmers and the Commando, primarily as a result of the Commando's competence in policing agricultural crimes.

We ask whether the Commandos are representative of rural South Africa, and argue that they are not; their function is primarily to protect the property and interests of the rural middle class. This is not necessarily illegitimate. Rural South Africa is deeply divided, by race, by inequality, and by a great deal of history. Asking a security agency to bridge these divides is asking too much;

security agencies can neither mend souls nor conduct projects of social engineering. A more pertinent question to ask is whether the Commandos can make an effective contribution to policing agricultural crimes while not invading the privacy and violating the dignity of other rural constituencies. We argue that when deployed inappropriately, Commandos can indeed be destructive of social harmony and wellbeing, but that when deployed correctly they are both effective and benign.

Finally, we argue that the policing of agricultural crimes, and of the rural sectors of small town police stations more generally, is likely to deteriorate after the closure of the Commandos. However, we do not pretend to offer easy solutions to the problem. The matter is by its nature a difficult one.

All police services exercise discretion in deciding which aspects of policing to prioritise. In the SAPS, this discretion is exercised primarily at a national level. Area and station level managers are given quantifiable crime reduction and police action targets to meet. At present, the highest priority crimes in the SAPS are contact crimes, and are attached to an annual crime reduction target of seven percent. This is a normative, value-laden decision, and a commendable one at that. In small town police stations, however, the policing of rural sectors will suffer as a result. Many of these stations straddle a sharp divide between urban and rural areas. Most contact crimes are committed in urban sectors. If and when the capacity contained in the Commandos is transferred to the police, area and station level managers are bound to transfer much of this capacity from the rural sectors in which it is now deployed to urban sectors. Not to do so would be to respond irrationally to their own performance indicators.

Prioritising the policing of, say, aggravated robbery over sheep theft is not just understandable but commendable. The SAPS should be aware though that there are places where its existing organisational incentives might, unless checked, result in situations where agricultural crimes are almost entirely unpoliced.

## INTRODUCTION

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In his State of the Nation address at the opening of Parliament in February 2003, President Thabo Mbeki announced that the SANDF's Territorial Reserve, popularly known as the Commandos, would be phased out. Mbeki said in his address that:

Measures will be taken to ensure that the structures meant to support the security agencies, such as the Commandos ... are properly regulated to do what they were set up for. In this regard, in order to ensure security for all in the rural areas, including the farmers, government will start in the near future to phase out the SANDF Commandos, at the same time as we create in their place a new system whose composition and ethos accord with the requirements of all rural communities.<sup>1</sup>

At time of writing, two and a half years after this announcement was made, the implementation of Mbeki's directive is well underway. Seventeen of the SANDF's 183 Commandos had ceased operations by the end of February 2005; the figure will have increased to 70 by February 2006. It is envisaged that the last of the Commandos will have shut down by the end of the 2009 financial year. The rural safety and security functions they have played will have been taken over by the SAPS in two institutional forms: first, in the establishment of sector policing structures in police stations throughout the South African hinterland; and second, in the formation of Area Crime Combating Units (ACCUs) across the country, which will have rapid response and high density policing, and border control capabilities.

The aim of this research study is to assess the nature of the rural safety capacity that will be lost with the closing of the Commandos, and to discuss the options the SAPS has in regard to replacing that capacity. We travelled to three Commando areas in South Africa where Commando units are still active: the Ladybrand Commando area on the border between Free State province and Lesotho; the De Mist Commando area in the Eastern Cape; and the Westrand and Gatsrand Commando areas in Johannesburg's West Rand. It is from this sample that we drew our conclusions about the rural safety role Commandos play and what rural safety may look like once they have gone.

The announcement that the Commandos are to be phased out has elicited a great deal of controversy. This is hardly surprising. Any debate about the Commandos must inevitably find itself tackling the charged and difficult question of the relationship between security and race. At one end of the spectrum, government has been accused of leaving isolated white families of the agricultural hinterland vulnerable to violent crime. At the other, it has been lauded for closing down a quasi-private militia sensitive to white farmers' security but insensitive to black citizens' rights. Judging from our interviews with role players and ordinary citizens alike in the three districts we visited, the controversy has not abated.

In what follows we attempt, not to skirt this controversy, but to approach it from a clear and simple perspective. We go back to basics and ask, in the abstract, what it is that security agencies do to reduce crime, and more, specifically, what rural security agencies do to reduce crime in rural areas. We examine the work of the Commandos from this perspective, and conclude that their contribution to rural safety is far more limited than their supporters allow, but far more valuable than their detractors are prepared to acknowledge.

We go on to argue that policing rural South Africa is not only hard, but demands particularly difficult choices. Rural South Africa is characterised by deep social division; different rural constituencies have different, sometimes conflicting, safety needs. The result is there is sometimes a zero-sum relationship between different communities in regard to what they need from local and regional security agencies. The more resources given to the security needs of a rural informal settlement, for instance, the less there are available for security needs of commercial farmers, and visa versa. Rural policing, in other words, is best understood as a cake to be cut into discrete slices.

How to divide this cake is a tough question. It is a matter of police discretion, and there are many rival ways, all reasonable, of exercising this discretion. As things stand, the SAPS is using its discretion to distribute policing services away from agricultural districts and into rural towns. The transfer of capacity from the Commandos to the police is thus likely to result in the deterioration of the policing of agricultural crimes.

## CHAPTER 1 THE TERRITORIAL RESERVE AND ITS ROLE IN RURAL SAFETY

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### **A brief sketch of the Territorial Reserve before 1994**

The Commandos are almost as old as European settlement in southern Africa. The first record of their existence is in the Cape in 1715, which, at that stage, was still being run by the Dutch East India Company. "The commando," the historian Hermann Giliomee has written, "was the fighting arm of the burghers. It originated when the Company sent out soldiers and burghers on expeditions to recover stolen cattle." In one its first instructions to an early Commando, which consisted entirely of volunteers, the Company gave it licence to "fire freely and take prisoners and act otherwise as they saw fit since the marauders cannot be considered as any other but enemies of the Hon. Company".<sup>2</sup>

Yet, if the Company at times gave Commandos licence to act with considerable discretion, there were other times when it regretted that its armed capacity on the frontier was in the hands of private citizens with private interests. On several occasions in the early eighteenth century, the Company threatened to withdraw the Commandos' supply of ammunition "if it was used for unnecessary aggression against the burghers' indigenous enemies." Indeed, Giliomee continues:

More than once insubordinate frontiersmen provoked clashes with the native peoples. Counter-attacks led to large-scale withdrawal of burghers from newly settled regions. Frontier lawlessness and insubordination drove the officials to despair and undermined the cohesion and the discipline of the commandos.<sup>3</sup>

The echoes from almost 300 years ago are quite remarkable. For many of the Commando members we spoke to in 2005 saw their primary function as protecting farmers, their livestock and their equipment from predators who come from across the hinterland's racial frontier. As a Commando member on the West Rand put it to us: "We are still fighting a border war. The fence of every white property is a border and everyone who wants to cross that fence is a military opponent." And the headaches the Commandos gave

the Company back in 1715 also echo: today, many of the Commandos' detractors view them as partisan forces which provoke social tension in rural South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

This is not the place to chronicle the history of the Commandos over the intervening three centuries, although such a project would indeed be fascinating. Instead, we pick up the story in the 1960s, for that is the period in which the Commandos took their current form.

When the South African Defence Force (SADF) was formed in the 1960s, the Territorial Reserve was given the primary function of rear area defence during wartime. Rear area defence consists in securing military communication and supply lines, guarding strategic civilian infrastructure such as power stations, national key points such airports and broadcasting infrastructure, and protecting civilian life from enemy hostility in rural South Africa. The assumption was a scenario of external invasion across South Africa's land borders, and the rationale for giving the Commandos this rear defence function was to free the SADF's conventional forces for deployment on the frontline.

In addition to this primary, wartime function, the Commandos of the 1960s were also given secondary, peacetime functions; given their capacity to mobilise in great numbers from the ranks of the civilian population across the country, they were allocated the function of assisting state departments in time of crisis, be the crisis drought or floods, civil disorder, or the outbreak of an epidemic.

During this period, the Commandos drew their manpower from the conscription system and thus, in theory, had available to them every white adult male under the age of 55 and resident of the countryside. All white men were required to serve short, periodic retraining courses throughout their adult lives, and the Territorial Reserve was responsible for their training. The Commandos in theory had a massive dormant capacity which could be mobilised in times of crisis or war.

The mid- and late-1970s marked a significant moment in the military and political history of apartheid South Africa, and the Commandos were somewhat reshaped by the exigencies of the time. 1975 saw the decolonisation of Angola and Mozambique, and South Africa's invasion of the former. White minority rule was moving inexorably towards its demise in Rhodesia, and the killing of student protesters in June 1976 in Soweto triggered a nationwide civil uprising in South Africa itself. Embroiled in

military conflict beyond its borders and facing an insurgency from within, the South African government had plenty of work for men in uniform.

The role of the Commandos shifted both subtly and not so subtly. Their primary, if latent, function remained the wartime role of rear area defence. It was their secondary, but manifest, function that shifted most. Increasingly, they were employed in an auxiliary role in containing domestic political resistance. Commando units teamed up with the South African Police (SAP), under SAP leadership, in what were known as Internal Security Operations. In June 2005, a resident of Carletonville in the Gatsrand Commando area recalled his own deployment, as a Commando member, in Internal Security Operations in Khutsong, the township adjoining Carletonville. He told us that:

We literally used to close the entire township down. Hundreds of soldiers and riot police would cordon off the whole township and we would search every room of every house and every shack in every street. The operation would take maybe four or five hours. By the end of it, we had between us seen every article of underwear in the township, every Sunday dress, every kitchen ladle.

The role of the Territorial Reserve changed in other ways too. Increasing emphasis was placed on their capacity to gather local intelligence on a permanent basis. The rationale was that in a country facing a domestic insurgency, the eyes and ears of civilians on the ground was a vital source of information. The Commandos were thus encouraged to draw close to their constituencies – rural white families – and to lubricate channels of communication and chatter between civilians and soldiers.

The Territorial Reserve was thus involved both in the quelling of domestic protest and in the militarisation of civilian life in white communities. Through their mobilisation into the Commandos' intelligence and domestic protection functions, civilians were taught that anti-apartheid resistance was the local embodiment of an external military threat, and a global one at that, since it was a provincial manifestation of the Cold War. White civilians, in other words, were to be mobilised into what was understood as protracted warfare against both communism and black revolt.

These functions would appear to blur the line between ideological mobilisation on the one hand, and genuine defence strategies on the other. It would be fair to say that the Territorial Reserve was as much an organ of white nationalist mobilisation as a military organ. Indeed, in many areas the Territorial Reserve invested a great of energy in the visibility and symbolism

of its presence in rural South Africa. As a Ladybrand Commando member interviewed for this project recalled:

In the 1980s there would be special Saturday parades. The town would come to a standstill. Everybody would line the main street and watch out for dad, or uncle, or brother, and wave. It was part of life that family members would leave home every once in a while to wear a uniform and carry a gun. Partly, it was resented, because it was a disruption to daily life. But it was also a source of pride.

### **The Territorial Reserve and the New Dispensation**

When the African National Congress (ANC) government took office in 1994, it found that it had inherited a Territorial Reserve severely knocked by the transition and unsure of its purpose in the new order. The end of conscription had robbed the Commandos of a large slice of their personnel and resources. Many left because they had always resented compulsory military service, others because they objected politically to serving in the military of an ANC-led government.<sup>5</sup> Military spending was at the beginning of a precipitous decline, and the Territorial Reserve was losing resources.

As for the ANC, its attitude to some of the functions the Territorial Reserve had been playing had to have been ambivalent at best. The auxiliary internal security function the Commandos had played was a paramilitary one in which black South African residents were treated, not as citizens requiring a safety service, but as inhabitants of a terrain occupied by an enemy, and as a potentially rebellious population to be quelled. Among the tasks the new government set itself was the normalisation and civilianisation of policing.<sup>6</sup> The high density, paramilitary capacity contained in the Commandos was hardly a welcome resource.

Unsurprisingly, then, right from the start the new government's position was that the SANDF's role in domestic security, and crime fighting in particular, was inappropriate and ought to end. This position was formalised in the Department of Defence's White Paper drafted in 1995, and finally published in May 1996. The White Paper's authors argued that it was "a matter of urgency that plans are formulated to allow for the withdrawal of the SANDF from a policing role."<sup>7</sup> It is worthwhile citing the White Paper's reasoning in this regard at some length:

... [T]he history of South Africa and many other countries suggests that it is inappropriate to utilise armed forces in a policing role on a

permanent or semi-permanent basis. This perspective is based on the following considerations:

Armed forces are not trained, orientated or equipped for deployment against civilians. They are typically geared to employ maximum force against an external military aggressor.

On-going employment in a law and order function invariably leads to the defence force becoming increasingly involved in non-military activities.

Such employment may also undermine the image and legitimacy of the defence force amongst sections of the population.

Internal deployment places a substantial burden on the defence budget...

Efforts to apply military solutions to political problems are inherently limited and invariably lead to acts of repression.

In the light of these considerations, the policy goal of the government is to build the capacity of the police to deal with public violence on their own while political solutions are being sought or have failed. The SANDF would then only be deployed in the most exceptional circumstances, such as a complete breakdown of public order beyond the capacity of the SAPS, or a state of national defence.

In order to achieve this goal, financial resources for maintaining internal stability should be allocated to enhancing the capacity of the SAPS. Further, and as a matter of urgency, the Departments of Defence and Safety and Security will establish a work group to devise strategies for the withdrawal of the SANDF from an on-going policing role.<sup>8</sup>

Nothing in the White Paper suggested that the Territorial Reserve would be phased out. The extract cited above does not speak to the Commandos' primary wartime function. Nor does it object to the Commandos' non-policing peacetime functions. Indeed, the White Paper supports the principle that the SANDF should be available to support the SAPS in "exceptional circumstances" and for the "restoration of law and order" as well as provide services for "disaster relief" and the "maintenance of essential services". But it does state categorically and as a matter of principle that the involvement



of the military in policing is unacceptable and must end as a matter of urgency.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, given the “urgency” with which these matters were addressed in the 1996 White Paper, Mbeki’s February 2003 announcement was, if anything, a while in coming. When the White Paper was written, the SANDF was involved in three discrete spheres of domestic crime fighting: urban crime combating, rural safety, and borderline protection. SANDF forces were withdrawn from urban crime combating in 2001. Their role in rural safety and borderline protection respectively will have been handed over to the SAPS by the end of 2009. It will have taken more than 13 years for the policy vision expressed in the White Paper to reach fruition. Why so long?

### **The character of the Territorial Reserve now**

In the immediate period after its formation, the energy of the SAPS was ploughed into the monumental task of integrating apartheid’s myriad homeland police forces into a central police service, and into grooming a new police leadership. The SAPS accomplished these necessary tasks with aplomb, but they were nonetheless tasks of organisational consolidation rather than crime reduction. While the SAPS was getting its house in order, the crime rate remained high. Crime in rural areas took on inflammatory political meanings. Violent crimes against farmers were dubbed “farm attacks”, a heavily loaded term which suggested a blurring of the lines between criminal aggression and guerrilla activity, and between acquisitiveness and political revenge. Faced with high levels of violent crime which had been sharply politicised, and a police force distracted by the tasks of consolidation, the withdrawal of the crime fighting capacity from rural areas contained in the Commandos was deemed extremely unwise.

Thus, at the very time the authors of the Defence White Paper were talking of withdrawing the military from policing as a matter of urgency, plans were set in place for the Commandos to continue to play a crime combating role. Beginning in 1996, the Territorial Reserve was given budget to recruit aggressively in the black townships of rural South Africa. At least one of the Commandos we visited, De Mist in the Eastern Cape, recruited in excess of a hundred people in the townships of Uitenhage and Despatch in the space of a single week in 1996. The vast majority of the new recruits were unemployed and joined in order to earn a living. Following a period of basic training, an entry-level recruit earns R114.00 per man day (in 2005 prices) and can work for up to 180 days per year. An entry level Territorial Reserve member can thus earn

in the region of R20,000 per year, no mean sum in the context of a rural South African township. As far as recruitment criteria are concerned, recruits must be South African citizens, must not have a criminal record, and should have a matric. However, a large number of recruits with a Standard Eight education have also been accepted into the Territorial Reserve over the last decade.

The Territorial Reserve thus changed dramatically in a very short space of time. In 1990, it was the institution into which hundreds of thousands of white South African men were periodically mobilised for military service. Its manifest presence was that of an auxiliary force in the maintenance of public order and social and political control. By 1996, it was a very different beast. White membership had dwindled considerably – in some areas to little as a few dozen. Black membership grew exponentially as the Territorial Reserve became a *de facto* employment provider and skills developer in rural towns across the country. At present, between 12,000 and 15,000 people are solely dependent on Commando work for their income.<sup>10</sup>

The Commandos of today bear the hallmarks of this legacy. Each Commando hosts two types of structures: area bound units and non-area bound units. Generally – although there are obviously many exceptions – white members of the Commando are full participants in the civilian economy and thus give comparatively little of their time to Commando work. They are generally active in area bound units. These units have two functions: gathering of information and intelligence, which gets relayed to joint, interdepartmental security planning structures; and an area bound rapid response capacity, in essence a mutual assistance function for neighbours. Each area bound component of every Commando is divided into geographically determined cells and platoons, and each cell and platoon has a rapid response plan to emergencies, particularly violent crimes in progress. The primary responsibilities of rapid response are to come to the assistance of the victims and to seal off egress points and thoroughfares to facilitate in the apprehension of suspects. In theory, then, the area bound units are the eyes and ears of the commando, as well as mutual assistance structures for neighbours.

The demands on the time of a member of an area bound unit are small. To remain active and retain his entitlement to keep an army-issue assault rifle at his home, a member must report quarterly for weapons training and must submit to annual inspections which ensure that his weapon is properly stored and in good working order.

The second type of unit present in each Commando is the non-area bound unit, also known as the reaction unit. These are largely – again, not entirely

– staffed by black members recruited in the mid and late 1990s. Most wish to maximise the amount of time they spend on duty, for they are breadwinners whose primary or sole source of income is Commando work.

Non-area bound units are not permitted to work independently of the police. They are strictly an auxiliary force, assisting in intelligence-driven crime prevention SAPS operations. They are, in short, a force multiplier, one with limited powers and capacities. Below is a list of the types of operations non-area bound unit are permitted to join, and, where necessary, a brief description of their operation-specific role.

- Observation posts (Commando members do not have powers of apprehension or arrest. Observation posts should be led by SAPS members)
- Listening posts
- Roadblocks (Commando members' function is to secure the roadblock. They do not have powers to search vehicles or to approach members of the public. They are also not permitted to open fire on vehicles which fail to stop at roadblocks.)
- Vehicle check points
- Vehicle and foot patrols (again, SANDF soldiers do not have powers of apprehension or arrest. Patrols should be led by police officials.)
- Cordon-and-Search Operations (SANDF soldiers have the powers to cordon, but not to search.)

To give a sense of the scale of the Commandos and the operations in which they are involved: Total Commando strength at the end of March 2004 was 43,976, of which 17,957 was utilised and 26,019 was dormant. Between the beginning of April 2004 and the end of March 2005, Commando members were involved in 79,004 operations. The vast majority of these were farm visits (29,351) and vehicle patrols (24,242). Commando members were also present at more at 9,072 foot patrols, 4,207 roadblocks, 2,926 vehicle check points, 2,995 observation posts, 4,907 cordon-and-search operations, 16 air support operations, 46 motorcycle patrols and 49 equestrian patrols.<sup>11</sup>

That, then, is a summary of the Commandos as they currently exist. Essentially, they serve two functions. First, they have structures which collect and relay

grassroots crime intelligence and organise endeavours of local-level mutual security assistance. Second, they have a force multiplication capacity, and thus serve in an auxiliary role in certain types of police operations. It should be added that the operations they jointly conduct with the SAPS ought to be located in farming districts and not in town or residential centres.

Socially, and in the most general of terms, Commando membership consists of two very different categories of people. White members are in general (there are obviously exceptions) volunteer members who operate in the immediate environs of their own homes and districts, and are motivated to join the Commando to defend their families and their properties from crime. Black members, in contrast, seldom operate in their own neighbourhoods and are *de facto* professionals: they are mostly not motivated by the desire to defend their families and their properties from crime, but by the need to support their families and pay their bills.

In the following three chapters, we describe the work of three Commandos in different parts of South Africa.

## CHAPTER 2

# LADYBRAND COMMANDO, EASTERN FREE STATE

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Ladybrand is a rural town on the border of the eastern Free State and Lesotho. The town centre is situated just a few kilometres from Maseru Bridge, the larger of the two commercial border posts between Lesotho and the Free State. (The other commercial border post is at Ficksburg, 70 km north of Ladybrand by road.) As the crow flies, Ladybrand is less than 20 km from the centre of Lesotho's capital city, Maseru.

The Ladybrand Commando area is physically large and made up of a host of social geographies. It stretches across approximately 60 km of the borderline between the cattle and sheep farming districts of Hobhouse in the south and the irrigation farming districts north of Ladybrand. The 60 km of borderline for which the Ladybrand Commando is responsible consists of the Caledon River, which is seasonal and is thus dry for part of the year. Aside from irrigation vegetables and livestock, wheat, grain and maize are also grown in the area.

In addition to the borderline, the Commando's jurisdiction stretches westwards into the interior of the Free State and includes the small town of Tweespruit, which is situated about 35 km from the borderline. Thus, in addition to border farms, the Commando's jurisdiction also includes two non-agricultural settlements – the towns of Ladybrand and Tweespruit.

### **The Commando**

At the time our research was conducted, June 2005, the Ladybrand Commando had 73 active members. 25 of these were white, the majority of whom were both farmers and members of the Commando's area bound unit. In other words, the minimum requirements expected of them were to report for shooting practice four times a year, and to submit to an annual check on the workability and safekeeping of their firearm. Their primary responsibilities were to gather local-level intelligence and to participate in locally based rapid response plans to emergencies and crimes in progress.

Forty-eight of the Commando's 73 active members were black. Almost all were members of the Commando's non-area bound, or response unit. Forty-three of the 48 were unemployed, lived in the township adjacent to Ladybrand, rather than in rural areas, and did Commando work in order to earn a living. They were permitted to work 180 days per year, and the vast majority wanted to work as much as possible. Two black troops we interviewed during the course of our research had both been members of the Commando for five years. Both were entirely dependent on Commando work for their incomes, supported members of immediate and extended families, were unemployed before the SANDF recruited them, and expected to return to unemployment after the Ladybrand Commando ceases operations some time in 2006.

Nobody we interviewed was certain precisely how many commercial farms there were in the Commando's jurisdiction, but everyone agreed that there were probably in excess of 200. In this context, 25 area bound members is not much at all. Size is not necessarily a reflection of effectiveness, and we will return later to precisely what it is that area bound members do. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to dwell on this question for a moment.

According to the Commando's Second in Command (2IC), after 1994 membership immediately declined from more than 300 to about 125. The Commando has gradually been losing its members ever since. In the wake of President Mbeki's announcement that the Commandos were to be phased out, the rate of the exodus picked up again. We were informed that 12 people had resigned from the Commando in the previous 12 months.

The average age of area bound members has also gradually increased over time. A Commando member told us that "planning area bound rapid response is increasingly difficult. The young and able-bodied are the ones assigned to retrieve their weapons and move immediately to the scene of the crime. But there are fewer and fewer young, strong men to do this work."

As in all Commandos around the country, the question of why white membership levels are dwindling is a fairly loaded one. Some argue that people have left the Commandos in response to its incrementally depleting resources. As one member put it to us: "People aren't fools. When you cut their budget every year, they get the message. They vote with their feet." There is probably a measure of truth in this. Dwindling numbers may in part be a consequence of the policy ambiguity surrounding the SANDF's internal deployment in the mid and late 1990s. On the one hand, the SANDF's long term policy objective was to disengage from domestic policing; this objective was reflected in consistent annual cuts to the Territorial Reserve's budget. Yet at the precisely

the same time, the Territorial Reserve was instructed to conduct an aggressive recruitment drive in order to bolster its auxiliary role in policing.

Others, however, point out that voluntary structures which require a level of commitment from their members are inherently prone to losing personnel. Talking about the province as a whole, the commanding officer of the Free State Joint Tactical Headquarters (J TAC HQ) told us that:

In the mid-1990s we started a sifting process. We went round the province to see who is actually active. Those who were in practice dormant, we told must hand their weapons in and resign. There was a huge backlash. We were accused of leaving people vulnerable. But the reality is that they were not active. That is the nature of things. When there is a wave of violent crime in an area, there is a lot of interest in the Commando. When things have been quiet for a year, active involvement decreases.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, it is worth pointing out what is happening in the broader Free State environment. Before the beginning of the phasing out of the Territorial Reserve, there were 33 Commandos in the Free State. Two were closed in 2004, and a further nine in 2005, leaving 22 operative. On the 450 km borderline between the Free State and Lesotho, the number of operative Commandos has reduced from eight to five. The three borderline Commandos that have ceased operations are Wepener, immediately south of the Ladybrand Commando's jurisdiction, and Caledon and Ficksburg, both immediately north of Ladybrand.

A number of criteria were used to determine which Commandos to close first. According to J TAC HQ Free State, the two most important were levels of commando activity and the level of assistance the SAPS required in each area. The three borderline Commandos that were closed – Wepener, Caledon and Ficksburg – were chosen for closure because all were dormant. As a member of J TAC HQ bluntly put it, one of these three commandos consisted of "the OC, the *tannie*, and that's it." In other words, while these Commandos were ostensibly closed in 2005, they had to all intents and purposes ceased to function some time earlier.

So much for the issues surrounding dwindling numbers of white members. For obvious reasons, there are few problems of motivation or commitment among black members. On the contrary, given levels of rural unemployment, one can only imagine that the Commando could double or triple its black membership overnight were it given the budget to do so.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the non-area bound unit is active in operations jointly planned by security agencies and others at local, area and provincial level. The Ladybrand Commando's non-area bound unit is mandated to assist SAPS stations in its jurisdiction with rural crime prevention operations, and to play an auxiliary role in borderline operations. Indeed, all five Commandos still active on the 450 km borderline between the Free State and Lesotho are mandated to play an auxiliary role in borderline control. In order to discuss the role of the non-area bound unit in its proper context, we turn now to a discussion of the borderline and those tasked to control it.

### **The borderline and the SANDF**

The nature of the border between Lesotho and the Free State can only be properly comprehended in the context of the deep shock which convulsed Lesotho's national economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and from which it has not yet recovered. Historically, Lesotho's economy has relied heavily on the employment on Basotho nationals in the South African gold mining industry. A decade and a half ago, migrant wage remittances from Lesotho nationals working on South Africa's gold mines comprised 65% of Lesotho's GDP.<sup>13</sup> In the late 1980s, the South African gold mining industry began to rationalise heavily in the face of dwindling reserves and diminishing rand gold prices. Between 1987 and 1993, the industry shed 40% of its labour force.<sup>14</sup> In the space of a few years, Lesotho's domestic economy lost its primary source of income. During the last decade, Lesotho's peasant households have been involved in a ceaseless quest to make up the deficit lost by the contraction of the gold mining labour market. Most of the traffic that crosses the border is best understood as an expression of this quest.

Maseru Bridge and Ficksburg Bridge, the two commercial border posts between the Free State and Lesotho, are, like all of South Africa's commercial border posts, jointly managed by the SAPS, Customs & Excise, and Immigration. There are also six non-commercial border posts between Lesotho and the Free State at which Customs & Excise is not present. Patrolling the 450 km borderline between these eight border posts is the responsibility of a single SANDF Fulltime Force Company with the assistance of about 85 members of a SAPS ACCU. Responsibility for borderline control on this border is scheduled to pass from the SANDF to the SAPS in the 2006/2007 financial year. It is necessary that we discuss the work of the SANDF Company responsible for borderline control in some detail, for it is this Company the non-area bound unit of the Ladybrand Commando assists when it is assigned to borderline work.

As the Officer Commanding (OC) of the SANDF Company that patrols the borderline put it to us, at any given time there is one borderline control official on duty for every 5 km of Free State/Lesotho borderline. As with all limited resources, the Company must prioritise carefully and deploy its staff wisely.

South African border control officials have long been aware that contraband moving across land borders tends to go through commercial border posts, rather than the borderline. Borderlines are often impassable, or remote, or devoid of adequate infrastructure. Commercial border posts, by contrast, are built to facilitate the movement of goods. The only task for a smuggler is to avoid detection.<sup>15</sup> The Company OC agreed with this assessment. "In general," he told us, "more sophisticated and organised forms of contraband smuggling go through the border post. More informal, less organised smuggling crosses the river."

According to the OC, the four priority crimes associated with the borderline are drug smuggling, movement of stolen vehicles across the borderline, movement of undocumented people, and stock and grazing theft. By drug smuggling, the OC is referring primarily to cannabis that moves from Lesotho into the Free State. The Company estimates that 600 – 800 kg of cannabis crosses the borderline every year.

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that illicit cannabis cultivation is an important source of revenue for a significant number of peasant households in Lesotho's domestic economy. Beginning in the late 1980s, the very period in which Lesotho gold miners began to lose their jobs en masse, southern African cannabis grew in a remarkably short space of time from a minor player in world markets to the largest source of cannabis imported into Western Europe.<sup>16</sup> While we are not aware of hard evidence, it is likely that many Lesotho households shifted into cannabis production in the early 1990s as income from mining remittances began to dry up.

The Company is embroiled in an endless cat-and-mouse game with those who smuggle cannabis across the Caledon River into South Africa. It has identified two forms of smuggling. In the first, dubbed the "dagga train," groups of smugglers cross the border in single file by foot with up to 40kg of cannabis strung across their shoulders. Moving by night and sleeping by day, they walk as far as Welkom to deliver their loads. In the second form of smuggling identified by the Company, smugglers cross the river late at night and are met by a vehicle on the South African side of the border.

The Company deploys nighttime foot and vehicle patrols and observation posts to combat cannabis smuggling. The OC readily acknowledges that

the Company loses the game hands down. It has been responsible for confiscating 60 kg of cannabis in the last three years. During that time, an estimated 1,800 kg to 2,400 kg has crossed the borderline.

In regard to vehicles, the Company believes that there is a thriving parts market across Lesotho and that it is fed by vehicles stolen in South Africa. According to its information, the majority of stolen vehicles are driven through the border posts, but some are pulled across the river by tractors late at night. The borderline between Wepener and Zastron in the southern Free State is fence rather than river; there, the fence is cut and vehicles driven across the borderline.

The third form of cross-border crime identified by the Company is the movement of undocumented people. Lesotho nationals have sought work in South African labour markets for generations. The collapse of gold mining labour markets in the late 1980s had a profound effect on the eastern Free State's agricultural labour market. We discuss the movement of labourers across the border, both legally and illegally, in greater detail in the next section. Suffice it to say here that the SANDF at times finds itself in conflict with farmers who rely on hiring labour from the other side of the border, and renting grazing land to Basotho herders.

The fourth form of cross-border crime identified by the Company is stock and grazing theft. The SANDF regards grazing theft as the more prolific and serious of the two. The land along the Caledon River is fertile and lends itself to irrigation farming. Irrigated vegetables are grown in several of the agricultural districts that border Lesotho. Ficksburg, for instance, has become a successful asparagus-growing district in the last two decades. The SANDF believes that grazing theft is the greatest risk faced by South African irrigation farmers along the borderline. Lesotho herdsman drive their cattle across the river to graze and destroy vegetable fields on the South African side of the border.

The OC told us that policing grazing theft is extremely difficult. Herdsman, he believes, are capable of controlling their herds from the other side of the river; they thus do not need to cross into South Africa to commit grazing theft. Herdsman have also developed elaborate early warning systems, the OC told us; it is very difficult to surprise them. "The only effective way to combat the problem," the OC told us, "is with helicopter operations. You swoop in quickly giving their early warning system no time to kick in, drop in troops and surround the cattle."

But even then, the OC complained, success breeds its own problems. The only cattle pound along the border is at Zastron, which is at the southern end

of the borderline. Transporting cattle there is seldom practicable. Often, the Company's troops are reduced to driving the cattle back across the border.

The OC told us that when he began his job on the borderline, he was shown SANDF statistics on cross-border crime. One particular figure stood out: of the 156 South African farms along the borderline, 104 had been abandoned, mostly as a result of cattle and grazing theft. These figures were so precise that we took them for granted as true. Yet none of the farmers we interviewed over the following days was aware of anyone who had abandoned a border farm because of crime. Almost all agreed that crime was a serious problem, but none knew of farms abandoned because of crime. Most knew somebody who had abandoned farming, but because of tough market conditions, not crime. Indeed, several farmers pointed out that the fertility of the land along the river means that some border farms have high market values. Two farmers we interviewed had put border farms on the market within the previous 12 months, attracted considerable interest, and sold land without much trouble.

We are not suggesting that grazing and livestock theft are spectres invented by professional soldiers. As the following section shows, the problem of theft is quite real. However, the story above does go to show that one's profession is a powerful factor in shaping how one understands the border. As we illustrate in the following section, farmers also have a range of perspectives on the border, and on how it should be policed.

### **The borderline and farmers**

Those in the Ladybrand district who farm along the borderline either grow natural rainfall crops, irrigation vegetables, or farm livestock. The last of these, livestock farmers, probably have the greatest interest in a closed border between South Africa and Lesotho. For them, movement of Lesotho nationals across the border primarily represents a risk of stock theft.

For vegetable farmers, however, the situation is far more complicated. On the one hand, they too are vulnerable to cross-border crime – primarily in the form of grazing theft. Yet they are also dependent on the movement of people across the border, for many hire seasonal labourers from Lesotho. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that the contraction of the gold mining industry's labour market has benefited employers of seasonal labour in the eastern Free State. The drying up of gold mining remittances in Lesotho households has led to growing numbers of Basotho women seeking seasonal

work on the South African side of the border. Between 1992 and 1998, the number of seasonal Basotho labourers working legally on Free State farms grew from less than 1,500 to more than 7,000.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the crisis in the gold-mining labour market appears to have increased the supply of cheap seasonal labour to the eastern Free State's vegetable farmers. For some farmers, the time consuming, expensive and bureaucratic path to hiring Basotho nationals legally is an impediment to business. Some of the farmers we spoke pointed out that both sides of the border participate in a single regional economy, and advocated to an open border and a free labour market.

Indeed, at several points along the border, employment relationships have evolved over the generations which simply do not respect the border. A fruit and vegetable farmer in the Ladybrand district told researchers in 1998 that:

We have a very complicated [employment] arrangement. We don't really distinguish between Basotho and our local people because the village they come from – Ha Fusi – basically grew up with the farm. Its existence is to do with our existence and a lot of families are intermarried with villages across the way. We've had maybe three or four generations working here.<sup>18</sup>

Farmers' differing positions on border policy obviously manifest themselves in their attitudes to the presence of the SANDF along the border. We interviewed the proprietor of a large fruit and vegetable farm north of Ladybrand who was a strong advocate of an open border and a single labour market. He argued that the presence of the SANDF on the border was counterproductive and had damaged cross-border relations. "Patrolling the border has broken down relationships," he argued. "The Caledon was negotiated as the border 150 years ago; Basothos have been crossing it ever since. They always have and they always will. Having a Company of armed men on the border doesn't stop people from crossing it. It just sours relationships and makes co-existence more difficult."

The proprietor told us he was involved in an initiative to develop commercial co-operative farms on the Lesotho side of the border. Emerging Basotho farmers, he argued, could use his access to international fresh-food markets, rendering agricultural development in Lesotho mutually beneficial.

Asked about grazing theft, he replied that in the half century his family had farmed in the district, they found that investing in consistent communication

with communal leaders across the border paid dividends. "It's a question of how you respond to grazing theft," he told us. "Some people respond by shooting cattle that trespass. For a Basotho, a cattle is his all. He will retaliate. He will burn your crops."

Yet, other farmers we spoke to, particularly those who did not recruit Basotho labour, were adamant that the border be sealed and heavily patrolled. A dairy and sheep farmer from the Hobhouse district put it to us thus: "On one side of the border, people have no work, no food and no decent land. On the other side, there is rich grazing and healthy livestock. A hungry man will do what he must do to feed himself. I do not blame them, but they are the biggest threat to my business. If I am to make a living, they must be kept on their side of the river."

It is often said that in a rural district characterised by divisions between black and white, rich and poor, farmers and labourers, forging a Commando that is representative of the rural community as a whole is not an easy task. On the border between the eastern Free State and Lesotho, shaping a security policy representative of the interests of farmers alone is not easy. The auxiliary role the Commando plays in patrolling the borderline is thus inherently controversial.

### Local problems, local solutions

We visited an area on the borderline between Ladybrand and Hobhouse which primarily farms livestock. The farms in the area employed few Basothos. Most were fairly consistent victims of livestock theft. The area thus appeared to have a common interest in keeping the border closed. We set out to discover the strategies and resources farmers use, collectively and individually, to combat stock theft.

Interestingly, it appears that the state security institution farmers valued most was the SAPS stock theft unit. The unit has jurisdiction to cross into Lesotho in pursuit of suspects and to arrest them there, although suspects apprehended in Lesotho are tried in Lesotho. Farmers valued the unit's detectives because they were fast and efficient trackers and thus often retrieved sheep and cattle alive. Farmers were dismissive of Lesotho's criminal justice process. They were motivated to turn to the stock theft unit, not to bring livestock thieves to justice, but to get their livestock back. Through the work of stock theft unit, farmers commonly traced their livestock to butcheries, either in Lesotho villages or in Maseru itself. In a sign of the state of economic desperation on

the Lesotho side of the border, one farmer told us that the butcher on whose premises his livestock were found had paid R600 for 12 sheep from the thieves who had stolen them.

Farmers were also involved in individual and private crime prevention initiatives, some of them creative and eccentric. Three farmers in the area employed former 31 Battalion Khoi-San trackers to guard their livestock. The former soldiers live in tents on their employers' grazing land. They are armed, and guard their employers' livestock 24 hours a day. Other farmers in the area have turned to technology. For instance, some attach harnesses to their cattle which trigger their cell phones to ring whenever the harness's bearer begins to move at a speed of more than 5km an hour. Farmers in the district also conducted voluntary patrols during high risk periods, but these, we were told, were sporadic.

Interestingly, while several farmers in the area were active in the Commando's area-bound unit, the Commando itself appeared to play little role in these local security arrangements. Commando membership appeared to be a source of pride and tradition as much as anything else. We were told that for the last seven years, the Commando members in the area went hunting in the Karoo together every July.

Thus, even at this local level, where farmers share a common interest in regard to the border, and are extremely active in crime prevention initiatives, the role of the Commando's area bound component appears to be somewhat marginal.

### **The Commando and the SAPS**

Much of the area covered by the Ladybrand Commando is situated in the jurisdiction of the Ladybrand police station. The National Commissioner of the SAPS did not permit us to make contact with the organisation's personnel at local and area level, and so we can only talk about the SAPS in Ladybrand in broad and generic terms. Nonetheless, the remarks that follow are both uncontroversial and easy to surmise.

Like many rural police stations in SA, the Ladybrand police jurisdiction consists of a dense population centre – the town of Ladybrand – surrounded by a sparsely populated hinterland. Again, as with most rural SAPS stations, crimes are concentrated where people are concentrated, and contact crimes, committed primarily on the weekend and at night, predominate over other crimes. A brief glance at the station's crime stats tells one immediately that

the most frequently reported crimes in the area in the last decade have been assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm (assault GBH) and common assault.<sup>19</sup>

The SAPS is a national organisation, and a highly centralised one at that. Crime reduction priorities are set nationally, and local police managers are evaluated by the success with which they respond to nationally determined priorities. At Ladybrand, the station commissioner's most urgent task is to reduce levels of reported contact crimes. The majority of these happen on weekend nights and in town, rather than on the borderline. From the vantage point of the police station and the organisational pressures it faces, the force multiplication represented by the non-area bound unit of the Commando is not being optimally deployed if its work is confined to the borderline. As a senior officer at OPS J TAC Free State told us: "Ladybrand SAPS want us as a force multiplier in the township. But we are interested in the borderline. Compromises have to be made."

### **Conclusion**

The field of security service provision on the border between the Free State and Lesotho is by no means clean or simple. As we have shown, the Ladybrand Commando, and presumably others on the same borderline, is deployed in the context of several perspectives, interests and objectives, some of which clash. Farmers are divided according to how they wish the border to be policed; the interests of some clash with others. Adding to this complexity, the SAPS has an interest in deploying the force multiplication contained in the Commando away from the borderline.

If things go according to plan, and the SAPS begins to pay its reservists for the time they spend on duty, the majority of personnel currently deployed in the Commando's non-area bound unit will be recruited to join the SAPS Reserve. Once this capacity finds a new institutional home in the SAPS, its alignment to the various security perspectives described above will shift. Perhaps the most crucial policy question surrounding the closure of the Commandos, not only in Ladybrand but throughout the country, is how this shift will be engineered. Given the multiplicity and complexity of security needs in rural South Africa, which needs, precisely, will the capacity contained in the Commandos serve once it moves into the SAPS? We raise this issue briefly again in chapters three and four, and then tackle it more methodically in chapter six.



### CHAPTER 3

## DE MIST COMMANDO, UITENHAGE, EASTERN CAPE

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The De Mist Commando's Head Quarters is situated in Despatch, a few kilometres from the industrial town of Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape. Driving through its jurisdiction is a study in contrasts. Anyone who has done the half-hour trip between Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage will know that the area between the two cities consists of an uninterrupted sprawl of industrial development and peri-urban settlement. Yet 20 minutes north or west of Uitenhage one finds oneself in empty wilderness: the aloe-rich game and livestock farms to the north of town; the unblemished Groendal Wilderness Area and Van Staden's Wild Flower Reserve to the northwest and west of town. The Commando's jurisdiction thus encompasses both dense industrial areas, and sparsely inhabited rural districts.

Such sharp demographic contrasts make policing a difficult business. They also make this case study particularly useful. As we discuss in Chapter Six, a significant proportion of the police stations that will be taking over the Commandos' crime prevention work straddle urban and rural areas. How they use the capacity they inherit from the Commandos to manage the urban/rural interface, is, we will argue, the most critical question in this monograph. The De Mist case study, then, with its particularly sharp divide between urban and rural, serves to highlight a central theme.

### **The geography of the De Mist Commando area**

The De Mist Commando area is home to little under half a million people.<sup>20</sup> With the exception of about three or four thousand, who are scattered across the Commando area's northern and western hinterland, the entire population lives in the southeastern corner of the Commando area. The centre of this agglomeration is Uitenhage, the hub of South Africa's motor industry, host to the Volkswagen plant and about three dozen other factories associated with the motor industry, ranging from tyre to axle manufacturers. The township adjacent to Uitenhage, KwaNobuhle, is home to about 250,000 people, half the population of the Commando area. As with all industrial metropolises in South Africa, several informal settlements, all of them less than a generation old, mark the periphery of the urban/industrial centre.

The Commando's concern is with the couple of thousand people in its jurisdiction who are not jammed into the urban/industrial complex. It has divided the rural areas of its jurisdiction into five zones. Kruisriver and Perseverance are both directly adjacent to the urban agglomeration of Uitenhage and Despatch. Kruisriver consists largely of smallholdings, but is also home to a number of vegetable farms. Perseverance also consists largely of smallholdings, and is home to a quarry and a large cattle farm. The zone to the north of Uitenhage – Addo/Amaanzi/Hillwacht – is both large and diverse. Hillwacht is close to town and consists largely of smallholdings, while Addo is a vast swathe of barely inhabited land, and consists of livestock and game farms. Elandsriver in the south and Adolphskraal in the north are both large, remote zones, dominated by livestock farming.

The largest agricultural crime problem in the area is stock and game theft. It was not possible to gather anything more than anecdotal information, but it appears that there is a large, informal, door-to-door meat market in the townships and informal settlements in the southeastern corner of the Commando's jurisdiction, and that a fair proportion of this informal industry's supply is taken illegally from the stock and game farms of the Commando's area. In general, those who farm closer to the densely populated southeastern corner are more vulnerable to stock theft, but the remoter parts of Addo and Eland River also report a steady stream of theft.

Recast in social terms, the crime tendencies that keep the Commando busiest are in essence a cat-and-mouse game between members of a struggling, peri-urban informal sector on the one hand, and livestock farmers on the other. Livestock farming is generally a fragile, low margin industry in which the fortunes of small family businesses are prone to waver. The stakes in the cat-and-mouse game are thus pretty high for both sides.

Naturally, these are by no means the only crimes committed in the area; they are the crimes that most concern the area's agricultural sector. We deal with the relationship between these and other crimes shortly.

### **The Commando and the SAPS**

The De Mist Commando is reputed to be among the strongest in the country. This was certainly confirmed during our visit. At time of writing, June 2005, it has 237 active members. Across the agricultural zones of the Commando's jurisdiction, area bound units are formed along the natural boundaries of church congregations and agricultural associations. The Commando is

strongly represented and well organised in each. For instance, in the Eland River area in the south, the Commando has two area bound sections and 25 to 30 active members. In Adolphskraal in the north, it has three sections and about 35 active members. The Addo/Amaanzi/Hillwacht area has about 30 active members, and Kruisriver about 20. Only Perseverance, which has only one farm and otherwise consists of smallholdings, has just seven active members.

The machinery of these local structures appears to be well oiled. Each is debriefed about crime trends by Headquarters on a weekly basis, and the following week's patrols are designed accordingly. Each local structure rehearses and refines its rapid response and emergency plans regularly. In contrast to Ladybrand, where the area bound structures of the Commando seemed to play a peripheral role in grassroots security initiatives, it appears that in the hinterland of the De Mist area, the Commando is the central grassroots security organ.

In a sense, then, the De Mist Commando is an idealised version of what one might expect a rural civilian force to be: a homogenous, close-knit community coming together in a collective endeavour of mutual assistance. Yet if the farming community is indeed close-knit, part of what binds it is collective disdain for the service provided by the SAPS. Farmers complained that stock theft is seldom reported because the local stock theft unit is overworked and is rarely successful. Others complained that in the remoter parts of the area, Eland River in particular, the SAPS usually takes between one and two hours to respond to a 10111 call. Others claimed that SAPS patrol officers simply did not know their way around the rural districts and would often get lost and fail to arrive at all. Yet despite the litany of complaints, farmers had nothing but praise for the station commissioner at Uitenhage and sympathised with his predicament. Most stressed that relations between the farming community and the SAPS in general, and the Commando and the Uitenhage SAPS in particular, were very good.

These ostensibly conflicting sentiments are not difficult to explain. For it does not take much sympathy to see why the SAPS finds it difficult to police its hinterland.

Four police stations fall into the Commando's area. The jurisdictions of KwaNobuhle and Kamaehs police stations are entirely urban; they are thus not responsible for policing farms (although they do police some of the areas where livestock stolen from farms is sold, a point we return to shortly). Despatch is responsible for policing only a single zone of the Commando's

area, Perseverance. The fourth SAPS station in the Commando's area is Wolwefontein. It polices the Adolphskraal and Cockscomb districts of the Commando's area. It is a remote rural police station in a sparsely populated area with a remarkably low crime rate. From April 2003 to March 2004, the highest incidence of recorded crime in its jurisdiction was in the category of stock theft and numbered 21 – fewer than two per month. It recorded no murders, three rapes, and not a single robbery.<sup>21</sup> Farmers are thus naturally happy with the quality of service. Every patrol officer knows every farmer by name, has a working knowledge of his business, and his concerns about crime. And since on average a crime is recorded every three to four days, patrol officers have the time and resources to respond thoroughly and satisfactorily to calls.

It is in regard to the Commando's relationship to the fifth police station in its area, Uitenhage, that the mixed litany of complaints and praise arise. The problem, quite simply, is that the SAPS station is inadequately resourced to properly police both its urban and its rural districts. The northern reaches of the Addo district and the western reaches of the Eland River district are both within the Uitenhage police station's jurisdiction. Both are a considerable distance from town, and many addresses are situated on unmarked district roads. Given resource constraints, the station usually has two, occasionally three or four vehicles, patrolling its entire jurisdiction 24 hours a day. The station has divided into jurisdiction into a rural and an urban sector. The entire expanse of the jurisdiction's agricultural hinterland is thus on an average day patrolled by a single vehicle. This effectively means that the SAPS has next to no rapid response or visible policing capacity in the rural districts, except when operations are organised and extra personnel is drafted into the area.

Naturally, the bulk of the police station's crimes accumulate around its people – in the town of Uitenhage itself. The townships adjacent to Uitenhage, although not in the station's jurisdiction, have poorly developed service and retail industries, and township residents travel to Uitenhage to shop. There is thus a massive influx of cash-laden consumers into Uitenhage's central business district (CBD) after payday, pension day and at weekends. Taxi ranks, footpaths between town and township, and the streets of the CBD itself are thus high-risk spaces in regard to common and aggravated robbery. And the suburbs of Uitenhage are, like all suburbs, packed with motor vehicles and electronic household equipment, and thus record a steady stream of car theft and residential burglary.

In stark contrast to Wolwefontein, then, stock theft is not a priority crime in Uitenhage. As with any South African police station whose jurisdiction

straddles urban and rural areas, the bulk of crime, especially contact crime, accumulates around the urban areas. That is where people are robbed with greater frequency; assault one another when drunk with greater frequency, get embroiled in domestic violence with greater frequency; and have their cars, DVD players and personal computers stolen with greater frequency. So that is where the bulk of a police station's resources must be invested.

Moreover, post-apartheid policing happens to have settled on a style of crime combating that demands large concentrations of personnel. The classic SAPS crime combating tactic is a variant of "hotspot policing": crime patterns are analysed according to where and what time they happen; hotspots are thus identified and are saturated with visible police presence; officers police aggressively for risk factors such as concealed weapons. All of which requires feet on the ground. South African policing is thus highly "operations driven". Large numbers of uniforms are assembled and deployed at crime-prone times and in crime-prone areas.

Any South African station commissioner is thus desperate for numbers. In Uitenhage, some of these numbers are provided by the local government, which recruits and trains unemployed people. For R40 per day, these "volunteers" stand as visibly as possible in the CBD's hotspots all day every day wearing bright green bibs.

A station commissioner in a town like Uitenhage is thus delighted and relieved to have a strong Commando working in his hinterland. De Mist Commando has a 145-member non-area bound reaction force; about sixty of these are unemployed people recruited from KwaNobuhle, breadwinners keen to work their full annual quota of 180 days. In a place like Uitenhage, the Commando is thus a lifesaving resource for the police station; the SAPS can throw what numbers it has at urban crime, because the Commando is in a position to invest its numbers in policing rural crime.

Indeed, in the Uitenhage area the Commando is in effect the lead agency in rural crime prevention. Operations are planned jointly with the SAPS at a weekly meeting, but in most cases, it is the SANDF that effectively designs operational plans, since it is they who have been gathering rural crime intelligence during the course of the previous week, via their grassroots area bound structures throughout the rural districts. And despite the fact that Commando members are not meant to conduct operations in the absence of the SAPS, the scarcity of SAPS personnel means that Commandos do in fact perform patrols and observations alone. The proviso is that they carry police radios, and wait for a police presence before suspects are apprehended.

What does the presence of the Commando accomplish? The effects of their presence are modest and simple; they have sufficient numbers to be visible, and their knowledge of the area is good enough to deploy in the right places. Their visibility is thus a deterrent; stealing livestock from their jurisdiction carries an element of risk.

### **How representative is the Commando?**

At the briefing given to us at J TAC HQ Eastern Cape, we were told that Commandos used to represent the security interests of white farmers only, but that the aim now was for them to reflect the needs of the entire rural community. Indeed, one of the resolutions adopted by government and organised agriculture at the Summit on Rural Safety and Security in October 1998 was that the Rural Protection Plan “be more inclusive of all people in the farming and rural communities by inter alia strengthening and expanding the commandos and reservists so that they can become more accessible to the whole rural community”.<sup>22</sup>

The officers briefing us at J TAC HQ told us that making rural security more inclusive was not that easy. Local Operational Co-ordinating Committee (Lococ) meetings, at which joint security operations are planned, were in principle open to all civil society stakeholders. But the truth, one officer told us, is that “the only civilians who believe their presence is permanently required in regard to security matters are farmers”. Even farmers, as the discussion on the eastern Free State in the previous chapter shows, can be extremely difficult to mobilise.

Is the De Mist Commando representative of the area’s rural community as a whole? While the Commando employs black part-time soldiers, it is indisputable that the constituency it serves is the predominantly white farming and smallholding community. Its area bound membership is drawn from the heart of the white property-owning rural community. And the non-area bound unit’s operations are generally aimed at preventing crimes against the people, property and businesses of the rural middle class.

Does this make the Commando a problematic structure? Political orthodoxy tells us that all public security structures must represent everybody’s interests, that the Commandos, for instance, must include everybody. But is that goal possible? Rural South African communities are deeply divided – by race, by inequality, and by a great deal of history. Asking a public security structure – whether a Commando or the SAPS – to bridge these

divides, is perhaps asking too much of it. It is asking a structure tasked with defending people and property to mend souls; a structure with limited means and blunt instruments to conduct social engineering. Public security organs must, of course, be given mandates which are fair. And everybody must be given the policing service they require. But that is a very different point.

A brief example to illustrate the argument: The Commandos’ intelligence system is known as Explor. In the De Mist Commando, it works like this: Each sector has an Explor leader who is chosen by the farmers in the area. The leader is not necessarily a Commando member; the only stipulation is that she be a woman, since farmers’ wives spend far more of their time at home than their husbands, and are thus in principle more aware of movements and events. Every sector is divided into five sub-sectors, and each sub-sector appoints a leader, and so on, until every farm in the Commando’s jurisdiction is covered. Every Tuesday, Commando HQ phones each sector leader, who in turn phones each sub-sector leader, and so on. By Tuesday evening, HQ should, in principle, have collected information, observations, fears and concerns, about crime from each farm.

The intelligence officer at HQ of course knows that the information she gathers would be far wider, richer, and no doubt more useful, if it was also collected from farmworkers, and their families. Their “eyes and ears” obviously see and hear more than those of the farmer’s wife. To this end, the Commando’s intelligence officer told us, “I taught the ladies to build up relationships with their people. I taught them to understand what their people say. It is hard work because the workers have their own culture – they won’t speak in a straightforward way. For instance, a worker will come up to the farmer’s wife and ask, ‘Were you safe last night?’ I need to teach her what that means – that he knows something was going on last night.”

In one sense, the story is amusing. A white woman from town trains a white woman on a farm to interpret the words of a black farmworker. Yet the farm wife’s and farmworkers’ respective forbears have probably been proximate neighbours for several generations. In many areas of the country, farmers and farmworkers are simply light-years away from working openly together in the same security structures. They have inherited a divide too deep to be bridged in a single generation. Asking the Commandos to bridge this divide is to ask the impossible. To judge a Commando’s success by whether it embraces all rural constituencies is to judge it by the wrong criterion. There are two far more reasonable yardsticks: first, whether the Commandos can defend commercial agriculture from its security risks without violating the wellbeing

of others, and second, whether the very presence of a security structure that primarily defends agricultural interests steals resources from the provision of other civilians' security needs. These are both important questions. We deal with them in chapters five and six respectively.

There is, to our thinking, a far greater threat to rural security in the De Mist area than the presence of a Commando which does not represent the entire rural community. The danger is that when the Commando closes, what rural policing exists will rapidly deteriorate. If Uitenhage SAPS does inherit and retrain the personnel currently contained in the Commando, the pressures on it to use this capacity in town, rather than in the hinterland, will be overwhelming. The station's most urgent task, established by formal national priorities, is to affect a decrease in the level of contact crimes. A station commissioner who inherits a force multiplier and does not use it in town is behaving irrationally. The thrust of the SAPS's organisational incentives would dissuade him from investing this resource in his rural districts. We discuss this theme in greater depth in Chapter Six.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that where Commandos do work very well, as the De Mist Commando appears to, it is often precisely because its constituency is homogenous and close-knit. Its members experience the Commando as an expression of themselves; as a structure that grows organically from their own interests. The SAPS, by contrast, must provide a service to all constituencies, some of which many Commando members regard as their natural enemies. This is perhaps partly why many Commando members regard the SAPS as a distant, distracted, impenetrable bureaucracy. Such is the nature of deeply divided rural communities.

## CHAPTER 4 WEST RAND, GAUTENG

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We visited two Commandos in Gauteng – West Rand and Gatsrand – which lie adjacent to one another on Johannesburg's West Rand. Of the two, Gatsrand has a smaller jurisdiction and far fewer crimes; we spent much less time there and concentrated more heavily on the West Rand Community, which will thus take up that bulk of this chapter. We do briefly discuss Gatsrand later in regard to a specific matter concerning stock theft.

### **Randfontein's farming district**

Ostensibly, the West Rand Commando's jurisdiction covers a gigantic swathe of the Witwatersrand, including the whole of Soweto and much of Lenasia. In practice, of course, the Commando has nothing to do with these urban areas, and the built-up centres of its *de facto* jurisdiction are the mining towns of Randfontein and Westernaria. There are three vast rural areas in its jurisdiction: one fans out westwards from Randfontein; the other two lie east of Lenasia and Soweto. During our visit, we spent much of our time in the farming area west of Randfontein, which falls into Randfontein SAPS's jurisdiction, and it is that area to which we devote much of our attention here.

Randfontein is an old mining town about 40 km west of Johannesburg. It has a population of approximately 130,000, about two-thirds of whom live in its African township, Mohlakeng, and its coloured township, Toekomsrus. It also has a CBD and a cluster of formally white suburbs to its north and west. A district of smallholdings fans out west from the town centre. Immediately adjoining the western boundary of the smallholdings district is a farming area, which is dominated by maize and livestock farming. Both the smallholdings and farming areas are located in the Randfontein SAPS's jurisdiction. Each constitutes a single sector in Randfontein SAPS – the smallholdings district is sector six, the farming district sector seven – and each is in principle allotted one response and patrol vehicle 24 hours a day.

Our concern is with the farming area, sector seven, which is where the West Rand Commando assists the Randfontein SAPS with policing.

## Two Communities, Two Sets of Needs

For anyone who has spent any period of time patrolling Randfontein sector seven, the gap between the security needs of the sector's black and white communities must be glaringly obvious. A member of the Commando's non-area bound unit, who had been patrolling sector seven for several years, summed up the difference very evocatively:

The vast majority of complaints the SAPS respond to, perhaps eight or nine out of ten, come from black people living on white farms. A lot of them are domestic violence – either assault, assault GBH, or malicious damage to property. Others come from the vicinity of these small, makeshift shebeens you get in the rural areas – drunken people fighting with one another. Occasionally the complaint is robbery, but usually the perpetrator is somebody the victim knows; usually there is a bigger story behind the robbery.

The other one or two out of ten complaints are from whites, and almost all of those are theft: stock has been stolen, or a tractor has been stripped, or diesel or batteries or mealies taken, or the copper cable on sprinkler pivots. Imagine anything you possibly can that is needed for farming; if it is possible to move, it will be stolen.

So black people make complaints because somebody they know has hurt them. White people make complaints because someone they don't know has stolen from them. The problem is that whites think it is the blacks living on the farms who are stealing from them, and the two communities hate each other.

We asked a white farmer from the district whether black farmworkers participate in the SAPS's Sector Crime Forum, the main liaison mechanism between the SAPS and the civilians of sector seven. "That would be like inviting the enemy into a strategy session," he replied. "Nobody would speak freely. Nobody would say: 'A suspicious white Cressida with tinted windows has been driving round the district for the last week,' because maybe that Cressida belongs to the black man's cousin; maybe the black man benefits from what the cousin in the Cressida does."

As we discussed in the previous chapter, bringing rural communities together is a complex social and political task surely well beyond the capabilities of a law enforcement agency. A more sober aim is to endeavour to provide both communities with the service they require. Yet if security agencies cannot

heal racial divisions, can they aggravate them? In this instance, does the manner in which Randfontein sector seven is policed either sharpen or blunt divisions between black and white. We were not in the district long enough to find out. But it is nonetheless worth raising a few questions.

White residents were certainly unhappy about policing, but more of that later. As for black residents, we did not canvas nearly enough people, or spend enough time on patrol, to gauge. We do know, however, that the SAPS frequently uses the extra personnel provided by the Commando to raid shebeens and conduct cordon-and-search operations in the sector's small settlements. This sort of policing is inherently difficult, its relation to communities ambiguous. On the one hand, shebeens that generate crime are legitimate targets for police action. On the other, shebeen raids are pretty much universally unpopular. Many residents regard shebeens as legitimate community institutions. Many do not appreciate having the places in which they choose to drink and relax being raided and closed down by groups of armed, uniformed men. Many regard such action as aggressive and provocative: as criminalisation of socially acceptable leisure activities, and as victimisation of respected community entrepreneurs. As mentioned earlier, we cannot say for certain whether this is the case in Randfontein sector seven, but if other experiences in South Africa with which we are familiar are anything to go by, there could well be a sense in the black homes of sector seven that whites and blacks are policed according to different standards.<sup>23</sup>

## The Commando and the SAPS

The West Rand Commando has 32 active members, 25 of them black and seven white. The Commando's reaction force is divided into two units. The first consists entirely of black members and is located at the Commando HQ in Randfontein. The second consists of the Commando's seven active white members. Its headquarters is a farm some distance northwest of Randfontein. The motivation for this distribution is that white Commando members run farms or are employed and thus cannot work during the day. The 25 black members are unemployed – most live in Mohlakeng – and thus can work during the day. The black unit thus does day patrols, while the white unit does night patrols.

The auxiliary status of the SANDF's role in crime prevention is observed far more emphatically in Gauteng than in the other provinces we visited. Recall that in De Mist in the Eastern Cape, Commando members would be given a police radio and patrol on their own. In Gauteng, the rule that Commandos

only ever play a support function in SAPS operations is strictly observed. No operation in support of the SAPS may be executed or planned without a written instruction from JTAC HQ. Commandos are only permitted join SAPS operations if they deploy seven or more commando members. Commando units are not permitted to join routine SAPS patrols or crime prevention operations, but may only execute intelligence driven operations. Even farm visits are not permitted in the absence of a SAPS officer.<sup>24</sup>

The SANDF's participation in rural crime prevention operations is thus limited by availability of SAPS personnel and resources. Randfontein SAPS sector seven has a single patrol vehicle and nine members. The vehicle patrols the sector 24 hours per day when all nine members are available for duty. When an officer is sick or on leave, there is a gap in the daily patrol. There is a fulltime sector manager, but he has no vehicle and works at the police station in town. The Commando often uses one of its own vehicles to increase the SAPS' visible policing capacity in the sector. A Commando vehicle will pick up the SAPS sector manager from town to allow him to patrol.

The Commando's daytime patrols are generally restricted to tailing the single police vehicle that patrols sector seven. The Commando vehicle is packed with seven part-time soldiers, all armed with automatic weapons. It is difficult to see what function they serve during ordinary patrols. They do not increase the scope of security force visibility since they are not permitted to wander from the SAPS patrol vehicle. Theoretically they provide much needed backup when the SAPS officers respond to crimes in progress, or confront civilians who may be armed and may resist apprehension. In truth, though, the Commando's vehicle is slow, distances in sector seven are large, and a police vehicle responding to a crime in progress will arrive at the scene of the complaint long before the Commando vehicle.

It is in regard to operations, rather than routine response and crime prevention patrols, that the Commando's presence would appear to make a difference. The extra numbers provided by the Commando undoubtedly enable the SAPS to exert a more visible and more aggressive presence in the sector: roadblocks, shebeen raids, cordon-and-search operations – these are all contingent on the availability of sufficient personnel, and they are the primary source of SAPS visibility in the sector.

There is another way in which the presence of the Commando makes a profound difference to the policing of the sector: this is in regard to the policing of stock theft. The difference the Commando makes in this sphere here concerns the quality of policing rather than simply extra numbers. A

common complaint among farmers in the area is the tardy quality of police investigations of stock theft. As farmer in sector seven put it to us:

Whites in the *platteland* accept the Commando more than they accept the police because the Commando is a farmer's force and does farmer's work. If I report stock theft to the police, a detective will come out, maybe a few hours later, maybe the next day, and open a docket. He can't solve the case. He doesn't stand a chance. But if I call the Commando it is a different story. They will drop what they are doing, find a policeman to take along so that their operation is legal, and they will follow the spoor through the night, either until they find my livestock or until the spoor runs dead.

The second Commando reaction unit, the one that works at night, is staffed predominantly by livestock farmers; they are men whose knowledge about stock theft in the area is a matter of core business, passion and expertise. Thus, while JTAC HQ instructions insist that the SANDF plays a support role in SAPS operations, the reality is that night-time stock theft operations are designed by, and driven by the expertise of, farmers.

Not that the Commando works miracles in preventing stock theft. The reaction unit is broadly aware of stock theft patterns. It believes that the majority of livestock stolen from Randfontein sector seven makes its way to the large informal settlement at Bekkersdal, about 15km southeast of the boundary of sector seven, where it is sold in the informal meat market. It is also aware of most of the cattle trails between sector seven and Bekkersdal; and it knows that full moon, and the evening before pension payout day are high risk times. It is thus capable of targeting its patrols quite finely.

Nonetheless, the target is always moving. The Commando is involved in an intricate game of surprise and deception with stock thieves, a game in which stock thieves are usually a step ahead. As a Commando member explained to us:

Stock thieves have an incredibly keen awareness of how we patrol. This time last year they had a particular modus operandi: they would drive the livestock across the district, to the outskirts of Bekkersdal, and then drive them into a series of steep sinkholes. The cattle would break their legs; they would be immobilised and invisible.

As soon as we discovered these routes the modus operandi changed. Now the most common practice is to slaughter the animals where

they are found; a bakkie is waiting on the nearest district road to take the carcass away. So now stock theft patrols must be as much about roadblocks as about foot patrols. They are stretching our resources too thin. They are in a better position to win the game so they usually do win.

Members of the Commando pointed out that preventing agricultural theft is frustrating and difficult when the area in which the stolen merchandise is retained is inaccessible to them. They argued that their work was far more effective when they had a mandate to recruit and pay informers and to gather covert intelligence. That mandate was withdrawn from the SANDF two years ago. As a Commando member recalled: "Years ago, we had a problem with a scrap dealer in town. We discovered that he was buying copper wire stolen from all over the agricultural district. We sent in one of our guys in civilian clothes who sat in a shebeen and spoke to some of the workers from the scrap yard. That gave us enough information to go and bring a police detective in to confront the scrap yard owner and warn him to stop."

In regard to livestock theft: "We knew most of the animals were going to Bekkersdal, so we sent three or four people into the informal settlement pretending to buy. We got a good sense of who was selling and gave all our reports to the police."

People interviewed about the smart and daring things they did in the past tend to smooth over rough edges and present a flattering imagine; information gathering is a complicated exercise, and the risk of receiving distorted, imperfect or misleading information is high.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the point holds that stolen goods move along a market chain, and law enforcement works best when it targets the weakest link in the chain. If, for argument's sake, the weakest link is indeed the moment at which the meat is sold to retailers, not having access to that link is very frustrating. Asked whether the SAPS gathers information on Bekkersdal's informal meat market, Commando members said they did not know.

In this regard, the experience of Gatsrand Commando, West Rand's Commando's southwestern neighbour, is of interest. The agricultural districts in Gatsrand Commando's jurisdiction fan out east and west from the town centre of Carletonville. Carletonville has a population of about 45,000, and the adjoining township, Khutsong, a population of approximately 200,000. Commando members told us that the maize and dairy farming districts to the east and west of town are remarkably crime free. The last violent, predatory

crime committed against a farmer in the area was in 1996. Stock and crop theft are seldom reported.

The Gatsrand area, Commando members told us, is a net generator, rather than a net victim, of agricultural crime. A large livestock district lies just beyond the northwestern border of the Gatsrand Commando area, and the Commando is aware that stock stolen from that district is sold in Khutsong's informal meat market. "On pension payout day," we were told, "a whole street market springs up on the streets of Khutsong. The cattle routes heading out to the northwest are well trodden. That is where Khutsong gets a lot of its meat."

Asked whether the Khutsong SAPS polices the township's meat market, we were told: "It is a very difficult crime for the SAPS to police. First, the theft docket is opened at another police station, so it is strictly speaking not Khutsong's job to investigate. And second, there is no way to gather proper information about the meat market without putting in a lot of informers for a long time. The information comes out very slowly, very difficultly."

Two points in regard to the policing of stock theft arise. The first is an old, often-repeated point that applies to many crimes, not just stock theft. Illicit market chains seldom fall neatly into security agencies' bureaucratic jurisdictions. Livestock is stolen in one jurisdiction and sold in another. Why should Khutsong SAPS invest a great deal of time and labour policing stolen meat if it is not going to help them close their own dockets? The second, and perhaps more interesting point, concerns how difficult it is to extract information about the informal meat market from the Khutsong community. It would suggest that those who sell stolen meat are not frowned upon by their community, and certainly not by their customers. It hardly comes as a surprise that low-income black communities fail to rise to the defence of white farmers' property rights; but it is a social and political fact that profoundly limits the range of available possibilities in the policing of agricultural crime. We develop this point in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER 5

# IS WHAT COMMANDOS DO USEFUL?

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The previous three chapters should have given the reader a sense of what it is Commandos do in regard to their mandate of assisting the SAPS in combating crime. Is what they do useful? This question is perhaps best answered by going right back to basics and asking in the most general and abstract terms what it is that visible policing agencies do to reduce crime.

### **Visible policing and crime reduction**

The last three decades or so have seen a slew of policing experiments across the globe, each attempting to forge creative ways of reducing crime. These experiments can broadly be divided into three or four innovations. The first is called hotspot policing or targeted patrols. It is based on the observation that crime is never distributed evenly across an urban suburb or a rural district. It clusters around particular addresses, times of day, days of the week and seasons. The result, as crime prevention theorist Lawrence Sherman has put it, is that giving each part of a police jurisdiction its “fair share” of policing “may be as useful as giving everyone his fair share of penicillin – regardless of whether the person is sick”.<sup>26</sup>

At its simplest, the idea of hotspots or targeted patrols is to place visible police patrols where and when crime happens. There are large variations, both tactical and philosophical, within the idea of hotspot policing. At one extreme, police in a hotspot may be entirely passive and play what amounts to a security guard function – simply guarding the property and people in a hotspot. A particularly stark example of this is SAPS Uitenhage’s deployment of civilians in bright green bibs in CBD hotspots, discussed in chapter three. At the other extreme, police may cordon off an entire hotspot and search every sugar bowl and underwear drawer within the cordon. How passive or active hotspot policing should be is a matter of endless debate.<sup>27</sup>

A second innovation in crime prevention involves identifying and controlling risk factors. Strictly speaking, this is about directing police officers to look out for things which have been identified as causing elevated risks to public

harm. For instance, police may evaluate that the single largest risk factor in the incidence of serious violent crime on weekend evenings in a particular jurisdiction is the combination of alcohol and knives. Controlling for risk factors might then consist of visiting every tavern and shebeen in the area and searching patrons for weapons.

A third development in crime prevention, perhaps the most innovative in the last 30 years, has been dubbed problem-oriented policing, or POP. POP essentially takes the logic and methods of public health and epidemiology and applies them to policing.<sup>28</sup> The principle is a variant of the old fashioned “prevention is better than cure” motto. For instance, tuberculosis was largely eliminated in the developed world when public health analysts identified the social practices that stimulate its transmission and eliminated them through public campaigns and social work programmes. In theory, POP does the same thing with crime. It consists of breaking crime patterns down to micro details, reducing each micro pattern to a particular problem or cluster of problems, and then managing or solving that problem.

For instance, the theft of copper pivots on sprinkling systems could hypothetically be curtailed by developing an alternative sprinkling technology which does not require copper; by a successful public appeal to consumers not to buy stolen copper; or, to take the logic of this argument to its absurd extreme, by abandoning irrigation farming for rainfall crop farming. In all three variants of the example, the principle is the same: instead of chasing copper thieves or guarding sprinklers, remove the opportunity or the rationale for stealing copper.

In South Africa, the SAPS has developed a strong penchant for the first of these three innovations – hotspot policing. Whether at station, area or provincial level, whether in the heart of metropolitan Gauteng or in the farflung reaches of the eastern Free State, whether in regard to housebreaking, street robberies or car theft, the SAPS operates by accumulating as much manpower as it can and throwing it at hotspots. Styles of hotspot policing vary widely. A settlement of tens of thousands of people may be cordoned and searched, with airborne support, armoured vehicles and a battalion of public order police. Or a civilian in a bib may be assigned to guard a problematic street corner. But the broad principle is the same; the SAPS polices by saturating hotspots.

Why the organisation has gone this route is subject for another time. Suffice it to say that the SAPS is a large centralised national police service facing high crimes levels and urgent demands for service; that it inherited a fairly poor

stock of human capital and had to work immediately with what resources it had; that under these conditions, throwing numbers at problems was perhaps the best choice available; and that the SAPS has indeed mobilised its resources with admirable efficiency.<sup>29</sup>

### **Reducing crime in the countryside**

Of these three innovations – hotspot policing, risk factor identification and problem-oriented policing – which would be most, and which least, propitious to the policing of rural areas? From the vantage point of crime prevention, rural areas differ from cities in at least two respects. First, people are more spread out than in cities, and second, people are less anonymous.

Let us deal first with the second point: anonymity. In urban environments, strangers live in close proximity to one another. The anonymity of urban spaces is a predatory criminal’s strongest advantage. The pedestrian who is mugged or the cashier who is robbed at gunpoint hardly ever knows the perpetrator by name or sight. And even if he is identified through eye witness identikits, fingerprints or DNA, there is no guarantee he will be found; in cities it is possible to disappear.

In several countries throughout the world, it has been observed that the rate of property crimes is much the same in urban and rural areas, but that the rate of violent crime is much higher in cities than in the countryside. Some crime theorists argue that this is because rural communities possess far stronger “informal controls” over their members than urban communities do.<sup>30</sup> But this is perhaps simply a way of saying that in rural communities people are less anonymous than in urban communities. Property crime is by its nature about concealment. Violent crime is by its nature personal and unconcealed. Knowing that you will be identified, that the police will know your address, your family, your place of work, is a strong deterrent to committing violent crime.

One should not exaggerate the density of acquaintanceships in the countryside, especially in country like South Africa. Rural areas do host large informal, first generation settlements where neighbours may be relative strangers. Some rural settlements also host large, transitory populations; a great many people move incessantly between town and countryside, without settling permanently in either. Nonetheless, acquaintanceships are undeniably denser in rural than in urban South Africa, and the difference profoundly shapes both crime and crime fighting. For instance, where investigations into predatory crimes committed in the countryside are sufficiently resourced,

conviction rates are many times higher than for comparable crimes in urban areas. A comparative docket analysis conducted in the Eastern Cape, for instance, found that between 2000 and 2001, the conviction rate for house robberies committed on farms was 43%, while the rate for urban robberies was six percent.<sup>31</sup> Some commentators have provided creative and eccentric explanations for this discrepancy, such as the use of specialist tracker teams.<sup>32</sup> But a crucial factor must surely be that in rural areas there are fewer opportunities to disappear into anonymity.

The second difference works in the opposite direction. Rural areas are more sparsely populated than urban areas. And if people are more spread out, so is property. This makes the police's security guard function far less effective in rural than in urban areas. Property that is widely dispersed is more difficult to guard than property that is concentrated. For instance, an urban law firm's property may consist of a building and everything contained in it – furniture, office infrastructure, a large collection of electronic equipment, perhaps a pool of cars in the basement. A farmer's property, in contrast, may consist of a herd of beef cattle spread over several thousand of hectares of land; or a sprinkler system located in a remote, unlit acreage several kilometres from the nearest human settlement. Rural hotspots are too dispersed to be saturated or contained.

This is not to say that hotspot policing is impossible in rural areas. Crime still accumulates around specific times and places. In chapter four, for instance, we saw that the West Rand Commando was aware that in regard to stock theft 1) the high risk times of month were full moon and the period before pension payout day 2) most stolen stock was sold in Bekkersdal 3) there were only a handful of viable cattle trails between Randfontein sector 7 and Bekkersdal. Stock theft patrols were thus blind to neither time nor place. But the hotspot zone was enormous, the group of personnel on patrol small.

If all this is true – that rural areas are far more conducive to the policing of people than the guarding of things – it would follow that hotspot policing in rural areas stands a far smaller chance of reducing crime than problem-oriented policing. For instance, it is far easier to steal a head of cattle undetected than to sell stolen beef without people knowing that you stole it and where you stole it from. In the three cases studies above, the perpetrators and victims of stock theft were near neighbours; whether across the border in Lesotho, in the informal settlement outside Despatch, or in Bekkersdal, meat was generally sold publicly, on the streets, within 20km from where it was stolen. Victims of stock theft probably rubbed shoulders with someone who had bought stolen meat whenever they went shopping in town.

All things being equal, then, it would be more efficient to police stock theft by policing the meat market than by guarding herds of livestock. A community policing initiative which used civilians' eyes, ears and moral approbation should, theoretically, be a more potent weapon against most categories of rural property crime than guarding property. Recall the Ladybrand vegetable farmer from chapter two who complained that the presence of the SANDF on the borderline with Lesotho had worsened relations between Basotho peasants and white farmers. He claimed that in the half-century his family had farmed in the district, they had dealt with grazing theft by constantly renegotiating the mutual rules of neighbourliness. He was essentially saying that in the context of the countryside's lack of anonymity, a context where the identities of perpetrators are no secret to anybody, solving problems is far more efficacious than guarding property.

And yet all things are not equal, and the Ladybrand farmer is only partially right; for a crucial characteristic of rural South Africa we have not discussed in this section is social division, and it changes everything.

### **Policing in the context of social complexity**

Aside from the themes of informal control and the density of acquaintanceships, there is another, crucial, theme in the international literature on rural policing. In the United States, a comparative study conducted in Maryland in the late 1980s examined the relationship between a police agency's staff numbers, the size of its jurisdiction, and its effectiveness in solving reported crimes. The results were somewhat counterintuitive. It turned out that neither the size of a police agency nor the size of its jurisdiction were important determinants in success rates. Rather, the main determinant was social complexity. The more socially homogenous the population of a police jurisdiction, the more crimes the police solved, no matter what the ratio of police officers to population, and no matter how big the policing agency's physical jurisdiction. The greater the social complexity of the jurisdiction, the less effective policing was.<sup>33</sup>

In the United States, which is heavily over-represented in the international literature on rural crime, rural police jurisdictions are usually characterised by a high degree of social homogeneity.<sup>34</sup> In South Africa, this is hardly ever the case, as is abundantly evident in all three case studies above. A single rural police station is often responsible for policing both a town with a five- or six-figure population, and remote farmland. In a jurisdiction like Uitenhage, two 24-hour patrol vans are typically responsible for patrolling a stark divide between industrial, urban and deep rural.

Policing property crimes across deep social divides is an unforgiving task. Take an informal, rural settlement with a large informal meat market. If the meat sold in that market is stolen primarily from subsistence farmers and survivalists in the settlement itself, the presence of the market will create communal and moral strife. The losers will take issue with the winners, and the broader community will take sides. This sort of scenario cries out for a community or problem-oriented policing response. Galvanising the community's moral approbation is potentially far more effective than guarding livestock.

Yet if the meat sold in the informal settlement's door-to-door market is stolen from a commercial farming district 20 km away, it is unlikely that consumers are going to ask too many questions about where it came from. It is simply cheap and convenient; it saves a trip to town, and the meat is less expensive and of a better quality than supermarket meat. Nobody loses. Everybody wins. This is surely one of the reasons why Gatsrand Commando members told us in chapter four that Khutsong SAPS finds it very difficult to gather information about the township's pension day meat market. The market retails in public, on the street, during daylight hours. The market players are anything but anonymous. They are protected by the absence of moral censure.

Two points arise. First, when property crimes are committed across deep social divides, the density of acquaintanceships in the countryside does not assist with policing. For although the perpetrators are not anonymous, they are sheltered by the politics and the culture of the social divide itself. This leads directly to the second point: when property crimes are committed across deep social divides, hotspot policing, as blunt and imperfect as it may be, is arguably the most effective form of policing. Once the livestock crosses the social divide, it is rendered invisible and thus irretrievable by social norms. The remaining option, then, is simply to guard it.

That is precisely the humble and inelegant task the non-area bound units of Commandos perform, at least when they are doing their jobs well. They are, it should be said, a blunt instrument: armed soldiers without the power to arrest or apprehend, indeed without the power to patrol at all in the absence of a police officer. But when their deployment is based on sound intelligence, when they are placed in the right places at the right times, the type of passive hotspot policing they perform is perhaps the most effective form of policing available in regard to agricultural crime. As we noted earlier, rural hotspots are generally larger, more fluid, and less sharply delineated than urban hotspots. Policing them thus meets with varying degrees of success.

Commandos are not an antidote to agricultural crime. But the sort of policing they have been doing over the last decade may be the best available.

When deployed poorly or ill advisedly, Commandos can, and in some areas of the country have been known to, play a particularly destructive role. When every gathering of black people around a crate of beer is deemed to be a hotspot; when every rural drinking establishment in the countryside is deemed a potential source of crime; when every rural settlement is regarded as a hideout for criminals, Commandos begin to aggravate racial tensions and to do their jobs inequitably. That is when they begin to police the property of one constituency by invading the privacy and violating the dignity of another. The type of "hotspot policing" with which Commandos ought to be involved is discreet and passive.

That is a long answer to the question: Is what Commandos do useful? The answer is yes. In the context of property crimes committed across social divides, mobilising feet on the ground to police hotspots is indeed among the more effective modes of policing agricultural crime. We turn now to the question of what will happen to this capacity if and when it is absorbed into the SAPS. Is the SAPS able to absorb it, keep it, and deploy it to the same ends it is being deployed now? Or will the very nature of this capacity be transformed by its absorption into the SAPS? If so, what will the consequences be? All these questions can be condensed into one: What will the closure of the Commandos mean for the policing of agricultural crime?

## CHAPTER 6

# INTEGRATING SANDF CAPACITY INTO THE SAPS

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The process of handing over the Commandos' rural safety functions to the SAPS has been, and remains, the cause of some uncertainty. On the one hand, the SAPS is in the process of creating a new category of reservist in order to broaden the social base from which civilians are recruited into the reserve. The planned change in the structure of the reserve coincided with a national SAPS instruction to implement the concept of sector policing at police stations across the country. Broadening the base of the reserve was designed specifically to recruit reservists into sector policing functions. It has also been understood from the start that sector policing structures, together with ACCUs, are to absorb the capacity of, and fill the role played by, the Territorial Reserve in the wake of the latter's closure.<sup>35</sup> It was thus envisaged that Commando members would be invited to apply to join the police reserve.

There was, however, a snag. The police reserve is a voluntary structure. Members of the Commandos' non-area bound units are remunerated for their work; as discussed earlier, between 12,000 and 15,000 Commando members have no other significant income, and their participation in the Commando is the primary source of their and their family's livelihoods. Thus, when 17 Commandos around the country ceased operating during the course of 2004, it came as no surprise that the vast majority of their members did not apply to join the police reserve. Most, presumably, went in search of remunerated work.<sup>36</sup> In police jurisdictions where Commandos have ceased functioning, the force multiplication capacity contained in the Commandos has, for the moment at any rate, been lost.

This is an unfortunate state of affairs. As is apparent in the three case studies above, the farming community's relationship with the SAPS in many parts of the country is a troubled one. There is a more or less ubiquitous perception that the delivery of policing services to rural areas is extremely poor. Allowing Commandos to cease operating in the absence of a replacement capacity not only weakens policing in rural areas, it further sours the relationship between the SAPS and the farming community. This creates a vicious circle: the souring of police/civilian relations itself weakens policing services.

In mid-2005, the SAPS began to move to clarify the situation. In May, the Safety and Security Minister announced that the SAPS plans to recruit all 50,000 part-time members of the Territorial Reserve into the SAPS Reserve.<sup>37</sup> Since then, the SAPS has set aside budget to remunerate an annually escalating number of reservists beginning in the current financial year until 2009. For the 2005/06 financial year, budget has been set aside to call up 2,000 reservists for a maximum of seven days per month for active duty. This figure will rise incrementally until by 2009/10, when 20,000 reservists will be called up for a maximum of seven days per month. At the rank of Inspector, reservists will be paid R126.99 per day of active duty at 2005 prices.<sup>38</sup>

If one assumes that 12,000 part-time soldiers currently earn a living in the Commandos, and that they work an average of 120 days per year, their collective manpower totals 1.44 million working days per year. If, by 2009, the SAPS deploys 20,000 reservists on active duty for seven days each month, collective manpower will total 1.68 million working days per year. By this narrow and limited measure, a total gain of 14% of annual working days would have been gained by the time the last Commando closes its doors in 2009.<sup>39</sup> The issue that remains is how the SAPS will fashion and deploy this capacity. The rest of the present chapter explores this issue.

A number of questions remain in this regard. First, for what sort of work is the SAPS going to remunerate reservists? In the latest draft of the SAPS national instruction on the police reserve, the principle that reservist work is voluntary is reaffirmed. The instruction states that reservists will only be remunerated when they are “called up for fulltime duty”.<sup>40</sup> Typically, reservists are called up for fulltime duty “during special operations and big events (i.e. elections, sporting events etc.)”.<sup>41</sup> One assumes that the SAPS is to reinterpret the meaning of “fulltime duty” far more broadly; it is hard to imagine that the SAPS will expend 1.68 million working days a year at football matches. Yet, the question remains just how broadly the meaning of “fulltime duty” will be redefined. Will budget be available to remunerate reservists for participating in regular rural crime prevention operations? If not, the capacity currently contained in the Commandos will be lost to rural policing.

Assuming that reservists will be paid for participating in regular patrols, another question arises: it is not clear – indeed, it is in fact unlikely – that the reserve capacity the SAPS obtains will be distributed in the way the SANDF distributed it. The SAPS has stated that in making budgetary provisions for the recruitment and training of reservists, the SAPS’s 169 priority stations will be prioritised. These stations are overwhelmingly urban. The result is that the

capacity currently contained in the Commandos will, once transferred to the SAPS, shift, to a greater or lesser degree, from rural to urban areas.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that we are wrong on both of the above accounts. Let us assume that reservists are to be remunerated for participating in regular patrols, and that the geographical distribution of working days remains unchanged, ie, that Commando members currently deployed in police station jurisdiction X will, once recruited into the police reserve, still be deployed in police station jurisdiction X. Even then, station commissioners will be compelled by their performance targets to shift increasing proportions of this capacity from the rural to the urban sectors of their jurisdictions. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to elucidating this argument.

### The police reserve

The SAPS is in the process of redesigning the structure of the police reserve in order to broaden the social base from which it recruits. A standard police reservist, known as a Category A reservist in the new structure, can in principle be trained and empowered to perform general functions in all operational facets of policing.<sup>42</sup> To be eligible for recruitment as a Category A reservist, a person must have a matric and pass a psychometric test.

An additional category of reservist created by the new schema, a Category D reservist, needs neither a matric nor pass a psychometric test to be eligible for recruitment. But along with the lowering of entry criteria, a Category D reservist’s powers and functions are circumscribed in three ways:

- 1) he or she can only perform one set of functions, those of a sector patrol officer.
- 2) Each Category D reservist is assigned to a specific sector, either urban or rural, within a police station jurisdiction, and can only perform functions as part of a sector team.
- 3) A Category D reservist may wear a uniform, but can only perform his or her functions under the direct supervision of a permanent member or a Category A reservist.<sup>43</sup>

It is probably safe to assume that the vast majority of Commando members who apply to join the police reserve will first attempt to do so as Category A reservists. It is probably also safe to assume that most of those who fail will

be invited to join the SAPS as Category D reservists. How many Commando members will fail to meet Category A criteria? It is difficult to say. A large minority of those recruited into the Commando's non-area bound units in the last decade do not have a matric and will thus be automatically disqualified from Category A recruitment. Many will thus be joining as Category D reservists. We have described the formal ambit of their powers and functions. How are they to be deployed within this ambit? What, precisely, is sector policing?

### Sector Policing

In its National Instruction on Sector Policing, the SAPS has interpreted the concept very broadly and very modestly. What it will mean on the ground is thus to be shaped in no small part by how it is interpreted and implemented at area and station level. Interpreted conservatively, it requires few changes to grassroots policing. Each police station is divided into sectors. Each sector is assigned a sector manager, and his or her primary task is to convene a Sector Crime Forum – a formal structure of liaison between the SAPS and civilians. Sector policing may thus entail only that one or two personnel be redeployed from patrol and response work to do community liaison work in geographically demarcated sectors. The rest of the organisation can function much as it always has.

In this scenario, stations and areas will rely on hotspot policing as they have in the past. They will, as has become tradition in SAPS, throw numbers at problems, whatever those problems might be. Category D reservists will thus be used in ways not dissimilar to the part-time soldiers of the Territorial Reserve: they will be force multipliers, bodies to place in hotspots.

The Instruction is open to more ambitious interpretations. In the West Rand, for instance, police stations' centralised Crime Prevention Units have been stripped, and their personnel distributed permanently into the sectors. The primary mechanism for high visibility hotspot policing has thus been weakened. Stations are forced to place less emphasis on throwing numbers at problems, and more at trying to solve or manage those problems through target hardening, environmental design and civilian partnerships.<sup>44</sup>

The chances are that at most police stations around the country, Category D reservists will be used more to intensify hotspot policing than to develop alternative forms of policing. First, throwing numbers at problems is easier than attempting to problem-solve, and real attempts at problem-solving policing are thus probably reserved for pockets of excellence within the

SAPS. It is safer, and perhaps wiser, for a police manager to stick to what he knows his personnel can do. Second, it appears from their brief statements on the matter that force multiplication is precisely what the SAPS and ministerial leadership have in mind. In the May 2005 statement in which he stated that he the SAPS aimed to recruit 50,000 former Commando members into the reserve, Minister Nqakula said that the increase in police numbers would coincide with a "massive crackdown" on serious and violent crime. "A huge number of police will be deployed," he said, and warned the public that the operations he had in mind would cause a degree of civic upheaval.<sup>45</sup> One can only imagine an intensification of the regular SAPS fare of high-density police operations.

As far as the rural sectors of police stations are concerned, one may be tempted to imagine that the transition to the post-Commando era will be reasonably seamless. In a SAPS rural sector that inherits a strong area bound unit, a good sector manager will keep its intelligence and information-gathering functions alive. It is hardly necessary for the entire area bound unit to join the SAPS for this to be accomplished. Commandos' information gathering functions do not require large investments either in fulltime personnel or in infrastructure. A well-chosen sector manager is probably sufficient to keep existing information gathering networks functioning. And if sufficient members of area bound units are recruited into Category A of the police reserve, there is no reason why the Commandos' emergency and rapid response capabilities cannot be retained.

As for the existing non-area bound unit members, there is little reason, in this scenario, to imagine that they cannot play their historical function in their new capacity as Category D reservists. They would remain force multipliers, bodies to place in hotspots, guided by appropriate intelligence and expertise.

Yet everything in this scenario assumes that the SAPS will deploy much of the capacity it is to inherit in the rural sectors of its police stations. This assumption is mistaken. There will in fact be inexorable pressures on police managers at area and station level slowly to siphon capacity from rural sectors to urban sectors.

### Police discretion

It is a universal feature of policing that there are always more crimes committed than the police are able to detect or investigate. Whether as matter of policy

or through the more random predilections and decisions of its individual officers, police forces inevitably exercise discretion over which crimes to police. Indeed, exercising this discretion is probably the most fundamental and the most important strategic decision senior police management makes.

Choosing which crimes to police is usually influenced, among other things, by a theory of crime reduction. And since nothing in social theory is quite as indeterminate and undecided as crime reduction theory, fashions come and go. For instance, in the 1960s, the New York Police Department (NYPD) shifted its budgetary emphasis from visible policing to the detective branch. Within the detective branch, it invested its resources in getting convictions on serious violent crimes at the expense of such crimes as petty theft and common assault. The theory on which this discretion was based was that the rate of serious violent crimes would decline as convictions in these categories went up. Gradually, the police could shift resources back into policing less serious crimes.<sup>46</sup>

Thirty years later, the NYPD had reversed its strategy. In the 1990s, it began policing public spaces very aggressively, with an emphasis on “zero tolerance” for petty crimes. On the subways, for instance, police were instructed to enforce the laws against fare-shirkers and graffiti artists; on street corners, panhandlers and idlers. The theory was that when public spaces are dominated by petty miscreants, the confidence of ordinary citizens is weakened, rendering them fearful in their own neighbourhoods, and thus facilitating the emergence of more serious crime.<sup>47</sup>

During the early years of its existence, it was difficult to discern precisely how the SAPS had chosen to exercise police discretion. There was a list of priority crimes, and it was revised annually, but the list was very long indeed. Nor were specific crime reduction targets attached to priority crimes. This state of affairs changed dramatically in the early 2000s under the leadership of Commissioner Jackie Selebi. The annual list of priority crimes is now considerably shorter, and each priority crime is linked to a reduction target. The list has various incarnations. A broad list is drawn up nationally. Each province, area and station draws up its own priority list, taking its cue directly from the national list. For instance, if the national list cites contact crimes as a priority and the most prevalent recorded contact crimes in a station jurisdiction are rape and assault GBH, then rape and assault GBH become that station’s priority crimes.

For the 2005/06 financial year, the SAPS has established a number of specific targets for police action.<sup>48</sup> For instance, getting illegal firearms off the streets

has been prioritised: the specific target is to recover 80% of the number of firearms reported stolen during the financial year. In regard to vehicle theft, the target is to recover 46% of the number of vehicles reported stolen in the financial year. Another target is that property and commercial crimes, as well as attacks against police officials, decrease during the financial year.

The most important priority by far, however, is contact crimes. The crime reduction target in this regard has been set at seven percent for every station in the country. The target is a direct response to a Cabinet instruction: in January 2004, a Cabinet Lekgotla decided that government must work towards a reduction of contact crimes of between seven percent and ten percent annually over the next ten years.<sup>49</sup> It is an extraordinarily ambitious target, and its consequences have rippled through the entire SAPS organisation. At station-level, the seven percent reduction target becomes police management’s most important performance indicator; station commissioners are under overwhelming pressure to invest their energy and resources in areas where the level of contact crimes is high. The target also shapes police management at sub-station or sector level: the formal aim of the implementation of sector policing is to decrease the number of serious and violent crimes in each sector.<sup>50</sup> At area and provincial level, police managers must respond to the target by increasing investments of infrastructure and personnel in stations where levels of contact crimes are highest. And at national level, it has become a matter of explicit policy that 169 stations identified as contributing to the lion’s share of violent crime be prioritised.

Exercising police discretion in this manner is not just reasonable, but perhaps commendable. The SAPS is a large, centralised police organisation, indeed, one of the largest in the world. Setting quantitative targets from the centre, applicable to the entire organisation, to which all levels of police leadership are accountable, is perhaps the most effective mechanism national management has at its disposal to ensure that all 1,100-odd stations across the country are reading off the same score.

Nor can the choice of priorities be faulted. Of all the crimes committed in South Africa, contact crimes cause a disproportionate share of personal pain and trauma, and are disproportionately corrosive of human wellbeing. Deciding to invest more resources in policing serious assault than in sheep theft, for instance, is a normative, value-laden decision, and a commendable one at that.

There are, of course, reasonable criticisms of exercising police discretion in this way. One is that the heavy reliance on recorded crime figures as a performance



indicator will motivate police officials to suppress the reporting and recording of crimes. One need not have spent much time on patrol to see how this might happen. Police can use a host of informal mechanisms to discourage members of the public from reporting certain crimes. Perversely, then, police might attempt to reach their targets by providing a poorer service.

A more fundamental criticism attacks the very idea of a nationally centralised police organisation setting global targets. The primary function of a police force, the argument goes, is to provide policing services to communities. A national organisation is simply too inflexible to provide a nuanced, responsive service to communities across the country. Only a decentralised organisation, one in which decisions are taken close to the ground, can truly be accountable to the people it serves.<sup>51</sup>

A third criticism is that setting quantifiable targets for priority crimes in the absence of a sufficient increase in policing resources is unfair to management, and leads to intolerably skewed forms of policing. For instance, prioritising contact crimes over sheep theft is reasonable. But if a station manager is forced to leave sheep theft *entirely unpoliced* in order to meet quantifiable reductions in contact crimes, is this still reasonable?

This is a danger worth contemplating. In each of the three case studies above, a single police station is responsible both for dense urban settlements and for sparsely populated commercial farming districts. In all three cases, contact crimes obviously cluster around town. Take Uitenhage, for example. KwaNobuhle, a township of about 250,000 people, situated just outside the boundaries of Uitenhage SAPS jurisdiction, has poorly developed service and retail industries. On weekends and pension payout days, cash-laden consumers pour into Uitenhage CBD from KwaNobuhle, and are the prime victims of the station's share of aggravated and common robbery cases. The station commissioner's strongest performance indicator, and thus his most urgent task, is to bring contact crimes down by seven percent. He really only has one instrument at his disposal to do so: numbers. He must identify hotspots by place, time of day, week and month, and, to the extent that he is able, saturate them. He is, in essence, in search of feet to put on the ground.

Say, hypothetically, that the De Mist Commando closes down, and that most of its non-area bound members join the SAPS as Category D reservists. The national instruction on the reserve tells the station commissioner that he is to deploy each of these new recruits "in a specific sector in an urban or rural area at station level..." The station commissioner would be behaving

irrationally were he not to invest as much of this capacity as he can in urban rather than rural areas. His priority is contact crimes, and the vast majority of these happen in town. A few are recorded in the rural districts, but it is quite difficult to prevent them by police action: the rural area is large, and its contact crimes far less patterned than in urban areas. True, he has also been instructed to reduce property and commercial crimes, but these are scattered across his jurisdiction, and do not have the heavy, punitive figure of seven percent attached to them.

Recall that in Uitenhage, the bulk of rural sector policing was conducted by the Commando. In the scenario described above, much of the capacity currently used to police the rural districts will move ineluctably into urban sectors. Such must be the case if local police managers are to respond responsibly to their crime reduction targets. The policing of the rural district must weaken.

Station commissioners are placed in an invidious position. On the one hand, a very vocal and vociferous local constituency – commercial farmers – will protest that the quality of policing has declined since the demise of the Commandos. They will demand better service. Indeed, by establishing Crime Sector Forums in rural sectors, the SAPS is encouraging that such demands be made. Yet pressure exerted on the station commissioner from within the SAPS, in the form of performance targets will be to feed the urban sectors. The station commissioner will find himself wedged between the demands of a grassroots constituency and the priorities established nationally.

The dilemma is not an easy one at any level. We have no intention of sounding self righteous, or of pretending that we have simple solutions. But it would be well to point out some of the dimensions of this dilemma as sharply as possible:

- 1) The concept of sector policing encourages civilians at the grassroots to enter into a dialogue with the SAPS and to articulate their needs. There is an implied reciprocal responsibility on the part of the SAPS to respond to these needs. However, police discretion in the SAPS is exercised primarily at national, not local level. Some sub-station sectors will thus be neglected. The civilian/SAPS dialogue at sector level will thus, in some instances, be a false dialogue, and will trigger a deterioration in police/civilian relations.
- 2) Prioritising contact crimes is more than reasonable; it is commendable. In certain instances, though, the trade-offs are stark. Where Commandos

close down and their personnel are absorbed into the police reserve, the likelihood is that the quality of policing in rural areas will visibly deteriorate.

There isn't an easy solution to these tensions. We would not like to propose, for instance, that ex-Commando members recruited into the police reserve be deployed exclusively in rural areas. That would be to pretend that there isn't a problem.

The task of this paper, however, is to assess the crime combating capacity that will be lost with the closing of the Commandos, and the capacity that will replace it in the SAPS. A combined reading of the SAPS national instruction on the police reserve, together with its crime reduction and police action targets, tells us that, for better or for worse, the closing of the Commandos will see a transfer of policing resources from rural to urban sectors of police stations throughout the country. The result will be a deterioration in the policing of rural sectors, and in particular of agricultural crime. The potential gain is that residents of rural town centres will be better policed.

## NOTES

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- 1 State of the Nation Address, President of the Republic of South Africa, 14 February 2003, at <[www.dwaf.gov.za/Communications/President%20state%20of%20nation%20address.doc](http://www.dwaf.gov.za/Communications/President%20state%20of%20nation%20address.doc)>, accessed June 2005.
- 2 H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2003, p 59.
- 3 Ibid, p 59.
- 4 See, B Manby, *Unequal Protection: The State Response to Violent Crime on South African Farms*, Human Rights Watch, August 2001, at <<http://www.hrw.org>>.
- 5 Evidence for this point is anecdotal but pervasive. Since 1999 I have visited about two dozen Commandos across the country; the story of people leaving in 1994 for political reasons is ubiquitous. See, for instance, J Steinberg, *An Assessment of the Rural Protection Plan in the Letaba and Mooi River Areas*, Johannesburg, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2000.
- 6 The government's early thinking on policing is best expressed in the National Crime Prevention Strategy of 1996 <<http://www.polity.org.za/html/govdocs/policy/crime1.html>> and its Safety and Security White Paper of 1998 <[www.polity.org.za/govdocs/white\\_papers/s&swp.html](http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/white_papers/s&swp.html)>.
- 7 South African White Paper on Defence, 1996, chapter 4, paragraph 33, at <<http://www.mil.za/Articles&Papers/Frame/Frame.htm>>.
- 8 South Africa White Paper on Defence, 1996, chapter 5, paragraphs 14 to 16.
- 9 In other words, the principles articulated in the White Paper do not require the Commandos to close. Closing the Commandos is one of many available options to implement the principles embodied in the White Paper. After their closure, the Commandos' non-policing functions – namely, wartime rear area defence and peacetime assistance in “exceptional circumstances” – will become the responsibility of the permanent force. Assessing the SANDF's capacity to perform these functions after the closure of the Commandos is beyond the remit of this monograph.
- 10 Author's correspondence with Major General J.F. Lusse, Co-Chairman, National Joint Task Team, 2 August 2005.

- 11 Author's correspondence with Major General J.F. Lusse, Co-Chairman, National Joint Task Team, 2 August 2005.
- 12 JTAC HQ Free State, briefing to ISS researcher team, 30 May 2005.
- 13 D Coplan and T Thohlane, Motherless Households, Landless Farms: Employment Patterns among Lesotho Migrants, in J Crush and W James (eds), *Crossing Boundaries: Mine Migrancy in a Democratic South Africa*, Cape Town, Idasa, 1995, pp 41-62.
- 14 N Natrass, *South African Gold Mining: the 1980s and beyond*, Migrant Labour Project, University of Cape Town, 1993, p 32.
- 15 See J Irish, *Illicit trafficking of vehicles across Beit Bridge border post*, Institute for Security Studies, Paper 109, June 2005; and J Steinberg, *Drug smuggling and border control at Johannesburg International Airport and Durban Harbour*, Pretoria, Institute for Security Studies, Paper 104, April 2005.
- 16 T Leggett, *Rainbow Vice: the drugs and sex industries in the new South Africa*, London, Zed, 2001, p 36.
- 17 Lesotho Ministry of Labour, National Employment Services Figures, cited in T Ulicki and J Crush, Gender, Farmwork, and Women's Migration from Lesotho to the New South Africa, in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 34(1) 2000, pp 69-70.
- 18 Cited in Ulicki and Crush, op cit, p 69.
- 19 See annual station-level crimes stats for the whole of South Africa for the last ten years at <<http://www.iss.co.za/CJM/stats0904/index.htm>>.
- 20 This figure is a little dated. It was calculated in 1999 and based on the last available census figures at that time.
- 21 See <<http://www.iss.co.za/CJM/stats0904/index.htm>>.
- 22 Cited in AgriSA, Options for the Replacement of the SANDF Commando, paper presented at the ISS Symposium on options for the replacement of the SANDF Commando system, 25 September 2003.
- 23 For a discussion on the policing of shebeens, see J Steinberg, *Sector Policing on the West Rand: Three Case Studies*, Pretoria, Institute for Security Studies monograph series no 110, 2004, p 30 and pp 38-39.
- 24 Briefing at JTAC HQ, Gauteng, 14 June 2005.
- 25 For an account of how badly intelligence gathering can go wrong in post-apartheid rural South Africa, see J Steinberg, *Midlands*, Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2002, pp 153-174.
- 26 L Sherman, The Police, in J.Q. Wilson and J. Petersilia (eds), *Crime*, San Francisco: ICS Press, 1995, pp 331-332.

- 27 For a discussion on some of the debates around hotspot policing, see L Sherman, P Gartin and M Buerger, Hot Spots of Predatory Crime: Routine Activities and the Criminology of Place, in *Criminology* 27, 1989, pp 27-55.
- 28 The classic and original statement of the idea of POP is H Goldstein "Improving Policing: A Problem-Oriented Approach", *Crime and Delinquency* 25, 1979, pp 236-258.
- 29 For two fine discussions on the SAPS's reliance on high visibility, high density policing, see M Shaw, *Crime and Policing in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Transforming Under Fire*, Cape Town, David Philip, 2002; T Leggett, The State of Crime and Policing, in S Buhlungu, J Daniel, J Lutchman and R Southall (eds) *The State of the Nation: South Africa 2004/2005*, Pretoria, HSRC Press, 2005.
- 30 See, for instance, R Weisheit *et al*, Rural Crime and Rural Policing, Washington DC, National Institute of Justice, September 1994; K Baird-Olson, *Doing what we've always done: a case study of rural policing*, Washington, National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 2000, at <[www.ncjrs.org](http://www.ncjrs.org)> (17 June 2005).
- 31 Report of the Committee of Inquiry in Farm Attacks, July 2003, p 351, at <[http://www.saps.gov.za/statistics/reports/farmattacks/farmattacks\\_2003.htm](http://www.saps.gov.za/statistics/reports/farmattacks/farmattacks_2003.htm)> (18 June 2005).
- 32 D Mistry, Ploughing in Resources: the investigation of farm attacks, in *SA Crime Quarterly* No 6, December 2003, pp 7-12.
- 33 G Cordner, Police Agency Size and Investigative Effectiveness, in *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 17(1), 1989, p 153.
- 34 See R Weisheit *et al*, *Crime and Policing in Rural and Small-Town America: an overview of the issues*, Washington DC, National Institute of Justice research report, 1995.
- 35 See J Burger, Phasing in SAPS capability to replace the SANDF commandos, presentation to the ISS symposium on options for the replacement of the SANDF Commando system, 25 September 2003.
- 36 In the three provinces we visited – Free State, Eastern Cape and Gauteng – we were informed that a total of eight former members of non-area bound Commando units have joined the reserve.
- 37 See, *inter alia*, Cops to woo 50,000 commando members, *Sapa*, 6 May 2005.
- 38 Author's communication with SAPS Assistant Commissioner Ben Groenewald, 26 July 2005.
- 39 Individual Commando members who are recruited into the police reserve will not, however, gain a 14% increase in income. On the contrary, they will lose income. Currently, an entry-level recruit in the Commandos (the equivalent to a police corporal) who works 120 days per year at R144.00 per day earns

R13,680 per year. Under the police reserve dispensation, a middle-ranking inspector, working his maximum of 84 days per year, will earn R10,667.16 per annum. Commando members who join the police reserve, and rely solely on their SAPS work for their livelihoods, will in general experience a steep decline in income.

- 40 South African Police Service, Draft National Instruction 1/2002, The South African Reserve Police Service.
- 41 Author's communication with SAPS Assistant Commissioner Ben Groenewald, 26 July 2005.
- 42 South African Police Service, Draft National Instruction 1/2002, The South African Reserve Police Service, 2(2).
- 43 Draft National Instruction 1/2002, 2(2)(d)(i).
- 44 See Steinberg, *Sector Policing on the West Rand*, op cit.
- 45 Cops to woo 50,000 commando members, *Sapa*, op cit.
- 46 See B Johnson, A Golub, and E Dunlap, The Rise and Decline of Hard Drugs, Drug Markets, and Violence in Inner-City New York, in A Blumstein and J Wallman (eds), *The Crime Drop in America*, Cambridge Mass, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p 173.
- 47 For a particularly eloquent statement of this thesis, see J.Q Wilson and G.L Kelling, Broken Windows: The Police and Neighbourhood Safety, in *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1982, pp 28-39. For an account of policing in New York in the 1990s, see J.E Eck and E. R Maquire, Have Changes in Policing Reduced Violent Crime? An Assessment of the Evidence, in Blumstein and Wallman (eds), *The Crime Drop in America*, pp 207-265.
- 48 See Planning Information for the SA Police Service, 2005-06, at <[www.saps.gov.za](http://www.saps.gov.za)>.
- 49 Planning Information for the SA Police Service, 2005-06, p 29.
- 50 Planning Information for the SA Police Service, 2005-06, p 28.
- 51 For an argument of this nature in relation to the SAPS, see Shaw, *Crime and Policing in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, op cit.