

Twenty -Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

8/11/15

“Jesus, me and the SADF...”

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

I slowly, slowly started to become aware of my surroundings. Vaguely. I became aware of my breathing. Of being. I opened my eyes. I was in darkness. I was lying down. Somewhere. Slowly, my eyes started to adjust to the dark surroundings. I panicked. Where was I? Where was I? I don't understand? Then, suddenly, almost like an epiphany, it all flooded back in seconds... I was in a standard issue military barracks. This was my first night on the base as a Rifleman in Kimberley, 1st Maintenance Unit, Diskobolos. The date? Somewhere around the February of 1989. The vague outlines of my fellow troops became clearer in the dim light. All sleeping. The intense knot returned to my gut – immediately. I pondered for a moment how on earth I came to be here...

A few weeks ago, Father Derek asked me if I would be prepared to share something about my experience in the South African Defence Force. I responded by saying that I would be more than happy to reflect upon my experience but that I doubt it would be what many parishioners would like to hear.

This has been a journey for me.

It all started two years ago when I came across a book entitled, “Back to Angola”. After doing some research on the book, I requested my school librarian to order the book for the school. I eagerly read the book and after a few chapters began to realise that the author, Paul Morris, was alluding to the exact same high school that I had attended. A meeting was set up between Paul and me. It transpired that Paul had in fact been a few years behind me at Fairmont High School. Whereas I went to Rhodes University first in order to study theology, Paul had gone directly to the army. Paul is no fool. He completed his national service and went to London in order to complete a Masters in psychology. He then realised after a few years that if he was to have

closure and a sense of healing from his national service experience, he needed to rewrite his personal narratives. For Paul, this meant getting on his bicycle and cycling through the same Angola, all alone, and constructing new experiences of his journey that would, in time, replace his traumatic military experiences of the same area. He completed his journey and was successful in his quest. The book is a riveting read and I highly recommend you to read it, especially if you have had a military experience with the SADF.

However, I am no Paul. Firstly I am not fit enough to cycle through southern Angola unassisted. Secondly, I do not hold a Masters in Psychology and I am not sure if I hold all the correct tools necessary to rewrite my personal narratives without professional therapy. What Paul did do for me, is for the first time since 1989/90, allow me to revisit my personal experience of the SADF without a sense of guilt or fear.

Thousands of White young South Africans saw active duty in this country from the 1970's through to the 1990's. For many, many years after the first democratic election in 1994, very few ex-conscripts spoke about their journey. Instead, their experiences were sublimated. In a sense, because of this, these very real, and often traumatic experiences, were invalidated. Ex-conscripts no longer felt that it was politically correct to talk about their experiences in the new dispensation. So, for many years, the subject became almost taboo. I have no doubt that many ex-servicemen suffered and perhaps still do suffer, from post-traumatic stress syndrome. By writing his book, *Back to Angola*, Paul now sent a clear message to ex-service man that it was ok to talk about their experiences, in fact, I would go so far as to say that it was in fact, necessary.

How exactly did the whole National Service system work? Under the Apartheid Regime of the National Party, a conscription policy was put into place whereby all White South African males from the age of eighteen were eligible to be called up for National Service. Initially, this was only for a period of nine months. Later on this compulsory service period was increased to one year and finally to twenty-four months. (It's quite ironic that today is the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentacost!) The increase in service time became essential as the war along the Namibian/Angola border intensified. What many people don't understand, or perhaps have forgotten, is that the whole schooling or grooming, for want of a better word, actually started at high school already.

Cadets, in many government schools, was a formal subject included under the title, YP or Youth Preparedness. Here, teachers who had already been through the SADF were used to teach high school boys the basics of marching and drilling. By the time you reached Grade Ten, or the old Std 8, you were summoned to the hall one break. Here the SADF would greet you in full uniform and after a short talk about the importance of serving your country; various weapons were put on display for us young boys to toy with. Shortly after this, a brown envelope would arrive in the post. This letter would be from the SADF. It would inform you of your military number which would stay with you for life. My number was 82448242BG. It would also inform you that you were liable for military service the year after you had completed school.

There were various options with regards to your call up:

Firstly: If you felt very strongly about not serving, you were allowed to register as a conscientious objector. The ECC, which stands for the End Conscription Campaign, was instrumental in fighting for the end to conscription and the rights of the conscripted. Once you had made it clear to the authorities that you were not prepared to serve, you would be summoned before a panel and interviewed. Worst case scenario was a six year stint in DB or detention barracks. Best case scenario you were required to complete community service.

The second option on the table was to leave the country. Many of my university colleagues did this once they had graduated. This was a tough decision to make. It would mean that you would be leaving loved ones and family behind. It would also mean that you could never return. There are still stories doing the rounds of how the Military Police would often be waiting at International Arrivals once intelligence had reported that a certain person who had skipped the country, was now trying to come back.

The third option was to join the Police Force. If you were drafted into the Police Force, you were automatically excused from National Service, as you were seen as playing a core role in the function of society. You could also opt to join Telkom. If you did this, you would be required to complete basic training only and after this you would be allowed to return to your place of

work. Once again, Telkom was seen by the government as a core function in society.

The fourth option was to study and to keep on studying. The government was prepared to delay your call up as long as your university was able to submit proof that you were registered and passing your course every year. I had many friends at university who just carried on studying, chiefly to avoid the final call up once they had completed their studies. This is problematic, as continuing your studies ad infinitum becomes expensive and eventually there does come a time when you just want to carry on with your life.

The fifth option was to merely submit to the demands of the government and do your National Service. What many of us forget is that young White South African men were under massive social pressure to complete their service and do “their duty” for their country. Often it was family and loved ones who put their sons and boyfriends under pressure to don their browns. In a way, you were seen as a sell-out or a coward by some if you didn’t report on that fateful day. Therefore many, many young White men were drafted, not really realising that they had a choice...

At the end of the day, the South African Defence Force was propping up an unjust government. The National Party had developed the policy of Apartheid and was fearful of neighbouring countries that were often supported by strong communist countries who wanted to see an end to Apartheid. By donning a set of browns and carrying a R4 rifle, you were, in effect, aligning yourself with the system, even if you did not agree with what they stood for or believed in. This was difficult for many young men who were unable to compromise their conscience, yet felt that they had no way out.

Unfortunately, it needs to be said, that were many young men who did take their lives during their National Service and I for one, will be lighting a candle this morning after communion in remembrance of all those who lost their lives in service of their country, including those who committed suicide. It happened on my watch too. It also needs to be said that the SADF did not take kindly to young men of alternate sexual orientation. Often these young men were treated very poorly and even occasionally sent to an institution in Pretoria where it was attempted to change their sexuality. This is traumatic for anyone

to undergo and the SADF had no right to interfere in the personal sexual choices of people under their command.

At the end of the day, if I had to summarize my feelings about my National Service, it would be under the title of “Mixed Feelings”?

You may ask why?

Well, history does tell us that during the 1980's the SADF was the most powerful defence force in Africa. It was efficient. It was professional. People joined up for life and made a career out of it. Our trackers were world class, as were our commandos. Our Air force was to be taken seriously. Thus, I become confused with my own feelings when I come across video clips on Face Book of the old SADF. I recognised the heavy duty military trucks that I was trained to drive. I recognised the R4 rifle that was glued to my body. I recognised the army tents, the C 130 Hercules, the Mirage, the uniforms... and I swell up with pride and nostalgia... even to a point when I start to miss the old army days... I then suddenly remind myself of what the SADF stood for and the feeling dissipates...

I also feel confused when I raise the subject of the SADF and some of my best friends from days gone by have been unable to make the transition from propaganda to a realisation that the SADF was unjust. Some men remain strongly loyal to the army that once was and absolutely adamant that there was a “swart gevaar” and all that they did was justified. I have realised that we are at different stages of our journey... some will never make the transition to reality. I do not judge them for that, but they cannot be part of my journey of enlightenment.

I also feel confused when I remember how many Coloured and Black men actually volunteered to serve in the SADF. By doing this, they were in effect supporting an unjust system against their own race. I am sure, they had their reasons and I do not stand in judgement.

My experience as a basic rifleman (I chose to serve as a ground troop and not a chaplain as I did not wish to support the system through rank) and during basics and later HQ 10 Anti-Aircraft was brutal in that, like all young White

men, we were forced to submit to a culture of racist hate. This was the culture that permeated the SADF. It was disgusting.

I came across a quote recently on a 4x4 forum where someone had started reflecting on their National Service. This gentleman said, "They were the best days of my life that I do not want over!"

How did Jesus fit into my life through all of this?

As I have grown older, I have come to realise that life is not black and white. I apologise for the pun. Life is full of grey areas. There are times when we will be forced to make a decision. Neither decision is right nor wrong; perhaps neither decision is even desirable, but a decision, none the less needs to be made. Things have happened in my live that have been life changing:

I have gone to university and studied theology...

I have been married...

I watched Shannon being born...

I went through a divorce...

I have prayed over a dying man...

I have lost everything I have every worked for...

I have stood by a friend as she agonised over a decision whether or not to abort her baby...

I have served in the SADF...

I do know this. I am still Darron. God still loves me in spite of all my struggles, weaknesses, imperfections and failures. I have no doubt in my mind that Jesus was with me every step of the way, even when I felt so utterly alone and abandoned. He has kept me safe and alive in spirit, even when I have abandoned God over the years.

Jesus struggled.

He also had to conform to a society that He did not agree with. Yes, He did speak out. Yes, He did fight for change, but I have no doubt in my mind that there were also times for Him that He really struggled with His experiences.

The lessons for me, are that no matter what we go through in life, keep a place in your heart where you are true to yourself, true to Jesus. No one can take your faith away from you. It is this that will carry you through the trials of life ... and there will be many.

Are you able to reflect upon your traumatic life experiences and rewrite your personal narratives?

Do you have Jesus deep in your heart ready for those times when you will be facing your own life changing experiences?

May God bless you in the weeks ahead as you continue to reflect upon your life's experiences and how Jesus has always walked with you, even when you thought you were all alone.

Amen.