



# The role of storytelling as a possible trauma release for war veterans: A narrative approach



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The master narrative of Apartheid South Africa created a specific identity for white boys and men and, together with this identity, a very particular role and place within the South African context. This identity was exemplified in the men who were conscripted into the military from 1967 until 1994, and who participated in operations on the border regions of Namibia and Angola as well as within local townships in the war of liberation against apartheid and minority rule. Many veterans have been left grappling not only with the traumas associated with combat but also with the loss of their identities as war heroes in a country under changed political control. As a result, many of their personal stories and experiences of combat have been silenced by society at large and also, to varying degrees, within their own families, the Church, and among the younger generation who have grown up under a different dispensation. The conflict between vacillating narratives of villains who fought on the wrong side of history and victims of a closed socialisation system has supported the identity struggle faced by many veterans today. Against this backstory, this article explores the effects of storytelling as a trauma release using a narrative approach.

**Contribution:** This article offers a contribution to the use of storytelling in pastoral conversations as a trauma release for untold stories. This insight links to the focus and scope of the journal as a pastoral narrative approach has been used under the umbrella of Practical Theology.

**Keywords:** stories; meaning-making; master narrative; construction of identity; socially constructed discourses; trauma; militaristic masculinity; storytelling.

## Introduction

The overarching master narrative of the apartheid-era South Africa fashioned a distinct identity for white boys and men. Alongside this identity, a very particular role and place within the South African framework of the time was exemplified. This rather distinct identity found its embodiment in individuals who were conscripted into the military and in those who fought in the border war regions of Namibia and Angola, and those who were deployed locally in the war of liberation<sup>1</sup> against apartheid and minority rule.

Compulsory military service for all young, physically fit, white South African men over the age of 17 was legalised with 'The Defence Amendment Bill' in June 1967. Conscription resulted in normalising the identity of the soldiers as brave, aggressive, heterosexual, and heroic warriors with white South African society applauding the 'brave young men on the border' (Elliott 2003:5).

Post-apartheid, these identities were politically and socially invalidated leaving two generations of men grappling not only with the traumas associated with combat but also with the loss of who they believed themselves to be. Baines (2014) suggests that veterans have been left with two ambivalent narratives – one being soldiers as 'villains...who fought on the wrong side of history' (2014:13) and the second being 'victims of an authoritarian, masculinised, militaristic society' (2014:84). As a result, their personal stories and experiences of combat have been largely silenced by society and also, to varying degrees, within their own families, the Church, and among the younger generation who have grown up under a different dispensation. This, I believe, serves to highlight the identity struggle faced by many veterans today.

1. *The Military Veterans Act 18 of 2011* speaks of South Africa's Liberation War to indicate the majority's struggle against the oppression of apartheid and minority rule.

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In recent times, stories of significant change have emerged from trips back to operational areas<sup>2</sup> in Angola. This started me wondering what it was about returning to the soil that left such an impression on some of the veterans. In July of 2022, there was an opportunity to join a group of white<sup>3</sup> border war veterans returning to operational sites in Angola. This journey back to Angola would become the fieldwork for a PhD dissertation.

Baines (2014:1) writes that ‘wars do not end with the cessation of hostilities; they have an afterlife’. This idea concurs with Scurfield and Platoni (2013:11) who write of a ‘second battleground’ which gets fought by war veterans on the home front. It is this afterlife, this second battleground that was of interest to this research. One of the questions of the research was where the spaces are in which some of the untold stories can be shared.

The main objective of the research was to collect the stories of veterans on a remembrance trip back to the operational site of Operation Sceptic<sup>4</sup> in Angola for the first time since 10 June 1980. Because of the focus on the stories of white border war veterans, it is acknowledged that both the research and this article contain a single narrative. The research used a pastoral narrative approach for the gathering of research stories.

## A landscape of trauma

Trauma associated with war presents itself in a wide and varied way, and may also differ from soldier to soldier. The term ‘landscape of trauma’ has been used in this article to acknowledge the multifaceted impact of trauma on a soldier’s life, encompassing various psychological, emotional, social, spiritual, and physical dimensions. Despite not including a lengthy discussion on it, this article acknowledges the presence of combat stress, the immediacy and horror of life and death encounters, diagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), secondary and collective trauma and moral injury.

Moral injury, a concept explored by Denborough 2021, Hubl 2020, Scurfield and Platoni 2013, Yandell 2019 and Moon (2016, 2021), among others, names a collective of responses to traumatic events resulting from injury done to conscience or moral compass when a soldier perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that transgress ones’ own moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct.

## A narrative approach

This approach refers mainly to the ideas and practices of White and Epston (1990) and others such as Freedman and Combs (1996). White himself believed that narrative therapy is less of an approach and should be considered a ‘worldview,

2.The areas of operation in Angola where skirmishes and combat took place.

3.‘White’ is used to identify the race of the veterans participating in this research.

4.Operation Sceptic was a military operation conducted by the South African Defence Force (SADF) in Angola on 10 June 1980.

an epistemology, a philosophy, a personal commitment, a politics, a practice, a life’ (White 1995:37). There are two aspects of narrative to consider in this research.

## A narrative approach is about the stories we tell

The stories that inform our lives are created from conversations happening in relational, social and cultural contexts (Morgan 2000:5–8). Stories, therefore, have the ability to form realities in the sense that they construct and constitute what we see, feel, believe, and do.

It can be said that ‘Stories have been a powerful, innermost part of all cultures and communities since the beginning of time’ (Duvall & Béres 2011:27). Stories organise our experiences temporarily and they offer a sense of continuity between past and present. Stories also serve as a framework for the future and because they are evolving ever-changing social constructions, have the capacity to hold any unexpected events while making meaning simultaneously. According to White and Epston (1990), stories as metaphor help:

[P]ersons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them. (p. 10)

### Master narratives

Master narratives refers to the overarching and dominant stories or frameworks that shape our understanding of history, culture, identity, and social relations. These narratives often present a particular interpretation or perspective as the standard or norm with the possibility of influencing our collective understanding of events and shaping both individual and collective identities (Béres 2014). Master narratives are often associated with power structures and can serve to reinforce existing social hierarchies, ideologies, and systems of control. They provide a framework through which history, knowledge, and experiences are filtered, defining what is considered important or legitimate. These narratives are found in various environments, such as politics, religion, education, and media. The power and clout of such narratives have a tendency to show up for people and society as dominant stories.

### Dominant stories

The dominant stories of interest are those of once revered white, conscripted soldiers fighting under the ideology of apartheid who lost their identity following the demise of the nationalist government. Socially and politically these narratives have been retold for the veterans in ways that villainise and illegitimize their lived experiences. Duvall and Béres (2011) speak of the ‘downgrading influence’ of any new master narrative. This supports the loss of identities of the veterans.

We suggest that the second key idea of narrative theory is about the meaning we make of narratives. This is explored next.

## Narrative is about the meaning we make

Meaning-making in narrative therapy refers to the process of constructing and interpreting the meaning of one's life experiences. Meaning is not an inherent or fixed quality, but rather something that is actively constructed and negotiated by individuals as understanding is sought about stories and experiences. Swart (2013) suggests that meaning-making is constructed from 'language and relationships and informed by taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs' and cultural stories (2013:24).

In order to make visible the influence of social constructionism on the South African context, the 'closed socialization environment' which governed white South African society can be storied according to the environments of family, school, and church as per the next section.

## Exploring the culture of closed socialisation

Baines (2014) maintains that the mindset of a typical white South African conscript at that time was shaped largely by what he considers a 'closed socialisation environment' (2014:76) of family structures, school, and church.

### Family

In South Africa, as in much of the Western world, the concept of a traditional family was greatly espoused during the late 1960s through the late 1980s, with Morrell naming the country 'a man's country' (2001:18) in which public and political power was exercised by white men – at home, in places of religion, work, economics and government. This is supported by Rees (2010:10), who states that under apartheid 'whiteness, nationality and the church were three facets of life that were inextricable from one another'. Rooted in traditional gender norms and operating within a framework of male privilege and control, most white families lived under systems of patriarchy.

### School

Schools also reinforced masculine gender roles through separate sports activities for boys and girls and by promoting certain subjects as more suitable for one gender than another. This played out through the elevation of the game of rugby for boys which became an institution itself and a national sport. Militarism was formalised in high school when boys were required to do weekly cadets and rifle shooting practice. Girls did home economics and learnt to cook and sew.

### The Church

Barker (2009:49) expresses how religious discourse and/or beliefs have the 'paradoxical capacity for supporting both emancipatory and oppressive meaning-making'. This is particularly relevant to apartheid South Africa. The Dutch Reformed Church gave its support to the system of apartheid

and, as a result, religion became the foundation of an entire system of politics in South Africa. As a result, consciously or not, many Afrikaans soldiers believed they were serving not just their country but also the Divine. Sacred scripture, world mythology, and political belief connect the Warrior archetype to the Divine.

## Militaristic masculine identity

Using social constructionism and narrative therapy as frames of reference, it is argued that identity is not determined by biology or genetics alone but is shaped through the processes of socialisation and the internalisation of societal beliefs and values.

The South African Defence Force (SADF), a collective institution defending the government of the day, was itself influenced by the dominant ideology of apartheid supporting white South African life. Rees (2010) maintains that the young conscripts in basic training, on the Border and in service of the Defence Force, represented the apartheid ideal in 'a highly formalised, concentrated fashion. They had to be "real" men; rugged, masculine, rugby-playing, hunting, heterosexual men their fathers would be proud of' (Rees 2010:10). Masculinity in the military was policed by the military itself as well as by the state, which, according to Rees, 'prescribed ways of being a man in the military' (2010:14). The pressure to conform to a particular way of being normalised a blueprint of men as brave, aggressive, heterosexual, and heroic warriors.

## Silent stories

At the time of the border war, conscripts were required to sign non-disclosures, which regulated the sharing of combat experiences. This code of silence was mentioned by several of the veterans I encountered on this trip. Silent stories were also the result of unresolved trauma, feelings of guilt, moral injury, and anger at the lack of societal support after the change in government. This silencing wasn't without effects for soldiers and their families. One veteran<sup>5</sup> shared how he never spoke a word of what happened on the day of the military operation for almost 40 years. Another veteran shared how he had 'bottled' up everything.

### Effects of silent stories

The cumulative effect of the silence and of inadequate medical, psychological, and even spiritual care, created for some a reliance on unhealthy coping habits such as alcohol and substances.

### I drank a lot

One veteran spoke of drinking excessively:

'I drank a lot before 2008. I went through two marriages, totally unsuccessful.' (Male, veteran 1, age 62)

5. For ethical reasons, the names of the veterans have not been shared.

'I've been married twice and I've got divorced twice... I've also got a very short temper and I went through 20 jobs...in fact, 23. I had 23 jobs. I told many bosses "where to go".' (Male, veteran 2, age 61)

### Lack of debriefing

A third veteran shared:

'I carried it with me for a very long time. Because nobody really wanted to talk about it. I didn't talk about it to my parents. When they asked me questions about it – I didn't tell them the nitty gritty, the detail. I just said that we were there, we fought a war. I didn't tell them what I'd seen. ... I'd never spoken about my ordeal on Op Sceptic. And then I would wake up in the night with nightmares, I think every person does that. Even after Sceptic, I'm sure we woke up in the camps at night with nightmares – sometimes you heard the guys, you know. It was only later on in my life that I started speaking about it which really then brought me healing.' (Male, veteran 3, age 62)

### You've changed, you're hard

'I'll never forget my mom saying to me one weekend when I was on leave, "You're hard, your eyes, your whole features". I said mom, I've just fought a war. I've been shot at, I've shot, I've done ...' (Male, veteran 3, age 62)

### Asking for forgiveness

One of the veterans is a Methodist Minister. He shared:

'As a probationer minister, I struggled to be around black people. We spent a lot of our time in the townships<sup>6</sup> within the circuits.<sup>7</sup> The bishop at the time, he counselled me quite a lot. He knew what I'd been going through and he helped me. He started telling me that I needed to let it go and ask for forgiveness. I'll never forget, it was just before I was ordained in 2002, I stood up, in front of the Synod<sup>8</sup> and I said to them, please forgive me for hating you and being angry towards you.' (Male, veteran 4, age 64)

### Demons

A consequence of silenced stories was the emergence of 'demons'. This is a metaphor used by one of the veterans to explain the internalised effects of unresolved trauma such as guilt, fear, responsibility, and anger which, for some, played havoc with civilian life.

### Civvie Street<sup>9</sup>

Veteran 2 remembers that:

'After Operation Packer,<sup>10</sup> we drove back to Bloemfontein. When we got to Base they told us to leave the rifles and go. They didn't even give us chance to wash ourselves. Two days later, you walked back into work. I was scared to switch a light-switch on.' (Male, veteran 2, age 61)

6.'Township' refers to an area designated for black occupation by apartheid legislation.

7.A circuit in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa refers to a group of local churches.

8.Synod in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa refers to an annual gathering of clergy and Bishops for the purposes of decision-making and questions of doctrine.

9.A common phrase used to refer to civilian life.

10.Operation Packer – the name given to a SADF operation, which formed a part of the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. It took place from March to April of 1988.

### After the border war

Veteran 5 shared how:

'As time wore on, I suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I landed up being treated in Braamfontein for a period of eight months undergoing hypnosis and many an hour of psychological treatment.' (Male, veteran 5, age 62)

### You think you are invincible

Veteran 6 said:

'You know, it's a strange thing about Operation Sceptic, I think we were trained to believe that we were invincible. You know, all the training told us that the shape of the Ratel was one that nothing would damage, that it's all angles, everything would just bounce over it. I think we learned very quickly that we weren't invincible. We went into Smokeshell with the idea that it was going to be a mission and we were going to wipe out the enemy and come home. And suddenly on day one, when you're thirteen troops down, the Op didn't go according to what we were led to believe. Suddenly you realize that you're not safe – inside the Ratel. You're a lot safer outside the Ratel. And I think in later Ops, you certainly were more wary of that, this is not going to be a birthday party.' (Male, veteran 6, age 62)

### No recognition

Veteran 2 shared that:

'The one thing that still astounds not only me but plenty of others like me, is the fact that none of us were ever recognised for what we did, we were merely cast aside and left to pick up the pieces by ourselves, and our parents had to deal with their broken boys whose souls and spirits had also been broken.' (Male, veteran 2, age 61)

## Storytelling

Post-2000, after the lapsing on non-disclosure documents, many former South African Defence Force (SADF) soldiers started re-telling the stories of conscription and the border war.<sup>11</sup> These are being told both from personal lived-experiences, as well as from a viewpoint of history, strategy, and warfare. Some of these include Bothma (2011), De Vries (2013), Els (2000), Feinstein (2011), Holt (2005), Scholtz (2013), Thompson (2006) and Steenkamp (2016, 2020) and Steenkamp and Heitman (2016).

Baines (2014:22) suggests that it is the 'unflinching honesty of some of these recollections that leaves little doubt that national service and participation in the border war had a profound influence on white South Africans.'

For those who have not published memoirs, the significance has emerged through finding safe places and ways in which stories can be told with non-judgement and acceptance. Spending time with the group of veterans in Angola highlighted the following spaces in which storytelling has been a trauma release for them, namely belonging to veteran groups, attending reunions and memorial services, writing, and returning to the areas of operation in Namibia and

11.Border war is one of the terms used to denote the war fought by the Nationalist, apartheid government on the border of Namibia (previously known as South West Africa) and Angola between 1966 and 1990.



Angola. Trauma release is considered to be the methods used or the ways that support the release or processing of traumatic events.

### Membership of the brotherhood

If any single commonality emerged from the conversations with the veterans it was, without a doubt, the words 'brotherhood' and 'camaraderie'. The identity as a member of this brotherhood – not as a political group but as denoting a gathering of people sharing similar military experiences, is strengthened by the belief that only those who 'were there' will understand. It is evident that regular gatherings of veterans are vital for the sharing of the 'un-shareable', untold, and now politically sensitive stories in the company of fellow ex-soldiers who also remember the time and experiences. These gatherings take the form of belonging to veteran associations and attending memorial services, parades, reunions, and skouerskeurs.<sup>12</sup> The gatherings appear to validate shared experiences of trauma and collective experiences of unresolved trauma. In this way, the gatherings can be considered to be a form of trauma release.

### Connecting with veterans

One veteran shared:

'Only after 26 years did the true healing really begin, when I received that phone call from one of the soldiers inviting me to attend a memorial at the military base in Bloemfontein. I was reluctant to go at first, but after my wife suggested that I go. I went and will never regret it to this day.' (Male, veteran 1, age 62)

The veteran who organised the memorial adds:

'I started getting the group together from the combat operation we were involved in and I started talking about it to the guys who were with me, and then I realised, it [*talking about it*] was working. They understand my language. If we talk about it then it confirms it happened there – we understand the stories. We know, we were there. We can't "explain" it to someone else.' (Male, veteran 7, age 61)

Another veteran shares the same sentiment. He believes that:

'The Veterans Association is the best thing that could happen to all of us. Do you know why? Because we can talk and no-one's going to tell you that you're talking rubbish. In 2010 the first group of guys went to Bloemfontein, Smokeshell<sup>13</sup> guys, had a reunion. I think there were eight guys there, or nine. And it grew. It was the most brilliant thing to see your old buddies again.' (Male, veteran 2, age 61)

Someone else concurs:

'Suddenly you get together, and we talk about things, and the wives are there and their eyes are getting a bit bigger and they're learning a lot of things that, been married for 30 years, 33 years or 40 years, they never knew, and suddenly they feel part of that whole thing. I think the other thing that I found is that veterans are forgotten very quickly unless you have another war.' (Male, veteran 6, age 62)

12.The Afrikaans word used for the informal gathering of veterans.

13.Smokeshell was a name used for Operation Sceptic.

A second form of trauma release for the veterans is through writing.

### Writing

According to Madigan, writing campaigns help people to 're-remember lost aspects of themselves' (2011:117). Many of the co-researchers shared that writing their stories of trauma and combat was a way to release some of the 'bottled up' aspects which had been silenced. Batley (2008), in her seminal studies of South African Border War poetry, declares that this witness-bearing or remembering of war literature, including poetry, has a restorative significance, 'it allows for the expression of trauma that could not be negotiated at the time of the experience described' (2008:157). The veterans shared their thoughts on writing as follows:

### Writing it all down

Veteran 6 remembers:

'When we returned to base after Sceptic, we all had to write our stories which were handed in. I've often wondered what happened to these. They would have made interesting reading and I'm sure a book could've been put together with them.' (Male, veteran 6, age 62)

### Writing my story

One of the veterans shared the experiences of writing out his experiences of the operation:

'I wrote my Smokeshell story of what happened to me and what happened to us, through my eyes, and it was amazing how it felt. The first person to read it was the General and, when I gave it to him, it felt like I had three dustbins of stuff taken off my back. You know what, it's getting a weight off your shoulders. You've got these stories, you've got these stories in your head for forty-odd years that you've lived with, you haven't told anyone, and they sort of go into the back of your mind but they're always there. They're always there.' (Male, veteran 2, age 61)

Another agrees:

'Writing this story of Smokeshell, has made me feel a whole lot lighter. A weight has been lifted off my shoulders.' (Male, veteran 5, age 62)

For yet another of the veterans, a war correspondent at Smokeshell, it was writing poetry that helped to release the trauma of that day:

'I wrote four poems about the border. The first one, about Smokeshell, helped to heal me.' (Male, veteran 8, age 83)

A third form of trauma release explored in the research was that of returning to the site where combat had taken place.

### Effects of returning to the operational area

Knowing that one of the veterans had returned to the border region before this trip, I was curious to know what that trip back was like for him. He shares:

'I've only been back once. I went on that 2018 tour. It was the final release of emotions, memories, meeting the enemy. On that tour ... every little town we came to there was a waiting committee for us and had a very nice meal laid out for us, and at the same time there was a platoon of soldiers standing there, old men like us, from SWAPO<sup>14</sup> and FAPLA<sup>15</sup>. But we walked through those platoons, shaking each guy's hand, and they were our enemies, and that was the end. And the meeting on the bridge [at Cuito], was very emotional. Angola rebuilt a new one, but we all stood on the old one and it was very emotional. There was a Russian guy there that fought against us on that day, as well as a whole lot of FAPLA and SWAPO soldiers and we were all mingled on the bridge, and everyone on that bridge was crying. Everyone. It was crazy. And when I walked off that bridge, I said to myself that's it, it's done, no more, get over it.' (Male, veteran 2, age 61)

This would, in fact, be the start of sharing stories with the wider world through the publication of a book about this return trip called 'Die Brug: Na die Hel en Terug in Angola' (The Bridge: To Hell and Back in Angola) by Deon Lamprecht (2020).

Someone else concurs:

'It felt like there's a mountain from your shoulders. I'm feeling much better that we were there and we say goodbye and we ... It was always a burden and I think, being there, helped to relieve it, definitely. I think I'm feeling better within myself. People don't want to go back to negative things. But I think, in major trauma, this is the way to go. Go back, talk about it.' (Male, veteran 1, age 62)

## Conclusion

The research found that storytelling has significantly lifted the burden of silence, grief, guilt, and trauma for the white border war veterans of Operation Sceptic. Three ways were highlighted through which stories are being re-told in safe, accepting environments. Firstly, belonging to veteran associations and groups invites story telling at gatherings (such as memorials and reunions) and among those who share similar or resonant stories. Secondly, the research found that writing experiences and memories down, whether as a published memoir, poetry or as unpublished memories on a group, gave voice to untold experiences and placed them in the domain of collectives and archives of accounts. Thirdly, as per the objective of the fieldwork, returning to places where combat and trauma took place seemed to offer some of the veterans a way of 'laying down' stories of trauma in the soil it occurred on and leaving the sites feeling somewhat 'unburdened'. There is something about the practice of remembering and storytelling that starts to minimise the hold of some of the long present trauma and 'demons', offering ways of rehumanising the once enemy and presents the means to forge forgiveness, repentance, and hope. I close with these words, from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa's Report (1998):

14. The abbreviation for the South West African People's Organisation, a former liberation movement.

15. FAPLA refers to the armed wing of the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola.

However painful the experience, the wounds of the past must not be allowed to fester. They must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured on them so that they can heal. This is not to be obsessed with the past. It is to take care that the past is properly dealt with for the sake of the future. (vol. 1, ch. 7, Point 27)

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## Authors' contributions

N.D. was the primary researcher and J.M. the supervisor.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

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