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EXCLUSIVE

# End of an era for the Recce battalions

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**CONTROVERSIAL** Recce battalions — South Africa's elite military Special Forces — have been disbanded.

The SADF says the action is not politically motivated and is a cost-cutting move in line with continuing cuts in military expenditure.

It says, too, that there have been no wholesale resignations from the units because of the move, nor any recruitment of disgruntled recce "operators" by the right wing.

Troops from the battalions — based in Durban, Phalaborwa and Langebaan — have been absorbed into the newly formed 45 Parachute Brigade. With the established 44 Parachute Brigade, the new unit will form the basis of the SADF's "rapid deployment forces", according to the Deputy Chief of the Army, Major-General Bertie Botha.

Military observers rate the Recces — probably no more than 1 000 of whom have been granted "operator" badges and numbers in the 22-year history of SADF Special Forces — as among the

best in the world, and comparable with Britain's Special Air Service or America's elite troops like the Green Berets and Rangers.

The Special Forces reputation was tarnished, however, by the CCB scandal. That organisation, which was chaired by successive Special Forces commanding generals like Eddie Webb and Joe Joubert, had its origins in the Special Forces apparatus.

In an exclusive interview at army headquarters General Botha said the former Special Forces headquarters at Swartkops, near Pretoria, has closed and its facilities are being used by Northern Transvaal Command. The existing three battalion bases will continue to be used by 45 Para.

Command of the new unit falls under the Army, whereas in the past Recces were the sole responsibility of the office of the Chief of the SADF.

General Botha was adamant that the move to disband the Recces was not politically motivated or to protect Recce members from retaliation under a future government.

The ANC and its allies and a number of SADF critics have argued for many years that Special

Forces were the "dirty tricks" arm of the military and should be reined in.

Rationalisation, in line with the defence budget cuts, was the "trigger" for the disbanding of Special Forces, said General Botha.

He explained that the SADF's continuing assessments of probable threats and its future role led planners to conclude that there was no longer a need for a distinct special forces unit, and that rapid deployment units would be the priority in future. Such units would help emphasise South Africa's position as a regional power by "showing we can look after ourselves" and by being able to "project power", said General Botha.

The general would not comment on Recce strengths or past operations. It is known that the units, who attracted many ex-Rhodesian soldiers from the Selous Scouts and SAS, were extensively used in the Angola and Namibian conflicts and may have been deployed elsewhere in southern African during the "total onslaught" years.

Captain Wynand Du Toit, captured and imprisoned by the Angolans after a mission, was perhaps the best known of the Recce operators.