

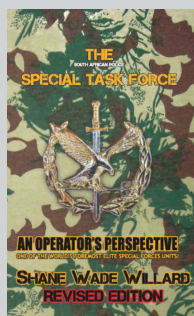
# A peak inside the secret world of the South African Police Special Task Force



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The South African Police Special Task Force: An Operator's Perspective

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## Author:

Shane Wade Willard

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## Review Title:

A peak inside the secret world of the South African Police Special Task Force

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Since the early 2000s, quite a number of publications contributing to the historiography of the South African Special Forces have appeared. Sadly, during this period no similar publications describing the origins, training and operations of the South African Police Special Task Force have been forthcoming. With *The South African Police Special Task Force: An Operator's Perspective*, Shane Willard has attempted to slightly lift the veil on the existence of this once secretive special operations element of the South African Police Service (SAPS). Having been a serving operator in the Special Task Force (STF) for 10 years (1993–2004), Willard writes with authority on this unit, from its fledgling years up to the time he left the STF. He highlights what the tough selection and training to become a 'Takie' entails and relays a number of hair-raising anecdotes of operations conducted by the STF over the years.

The STF is reckoned as one of the best and most successful hostage rescue outfits in the world. Since its formal inception in 1976, it has been involved in countless operations, both inside and outside the borders of South Africa. These operations range from counter-insurgency tasks to countering cash-in-transit robberies. According to Willard, the criteria that allow the STF to be classified as a special forces unit is the fact that it is an all-volunteer unit with a rigorous selection and comprehensive training cycle, which includes air, land and sea capabilities. The regular conduct of realistic training and actual execution of military-style special operations forms part of these criteria. The STF's primary function is the handling of high-risk situations, which cannot be dealt with efficiently by ordinary members of the SAPS. It also includes the handling of hostage situations on land, sea and air. The skills and expertise of each member of the STF place them among the elite of the world. Although this publication has already appeared in 2020, it offers a significant contribution to literature on the South African Police (SAP) and SAPS<sup>1</sup> in general and the STF in particular. Apart from Jonathan Pittaway's *Koevoet: The Men Speak*,<sup>2</sup> published in 2016, and which briefly discusses the successful involvement of the STF in the Silverton Bank Siege of 1980, as well as its participation as part of the notorious SAP counter-insurgency unit known as Koevoet, no other publication has appeared as yet on the history or activities of the STF.

The book will appeal to the broader public, especially those interested in this elite outfit and the history of the SAP/SAPS. Apart from drawing on his own experience in the unit, Willard has also conducted numerous interviews with senior former members of the STF and has consulted a number of SAP publications, as well as newspaper and magazine articles. The book does, however, lack archival research and any form of in-text referencing, which could have given it more depth and credibility. Willard narrates the story of the STF from a third person's perspective, however, lapses into the first person every now and then. Although this establishes Willard's credibility as someone who can write with authority on the STF, it unfortunately also contributes towards diminishing the overall style of the book.

The first four chapters are an overview of the STF's origins, aim, functions and background to the unit's heraldry. Some of this information is, however, repeated a number of times and certain parts over-emphasised. Chapters five and six are very interesting and deal with the rigorous selection process and advanced training conducted by all prospective STF candidates. There are unfortunately numerous language and grammatical errors in the text, and it would have been advisable to do a thorough technical review before publishing the book. A positive aspect, however, is the previously unpublished photographs that are included. These lend authenticity to the overall story of the STF. Seeing the faces of the STF operators reminds the

1. Willard explains in his book how the SAP was renamed to the SAPS after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994.

2. J. Pittaway, *Koevoet: The Men Speak* (Durban: Dandy Agencies Publishing, 2016), 167.

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reader that these operators are normal human beings, and not supermen, who undergo the harsh training cycle and undertake difficult and dangerous operations.

Chapter seven addresses the technical specification of the tools of the trade of the STF. This includes a variety of South African and foreign small arms, assault and sniper rifles, machine guns and grenades. It also briefly lists the vehicles and some of the specialised equipment for diving and parachuting. The majority of the statistics related to the weapons and vehicles used by the STF are arranged in tabular form and disrupt the flow of reading. Most of this information is also available in numerous other military publications and does not contribute to the overall story of the STF. A further distraction is the motivational quotations that are used randomly throughout the book, as it does not serve any purpose. Chapter eight contains a two-page summary of the rank structure, both formal and informal, used by the SAPS and STF. It could have been incorporated with other chapters as it does not warrant a chapter on its own.

The crux of the book lies in chapter nine, as it gives a historical summary of some of the significant operations of the STF. Most of these operations were conducted to counter crimes like farm attacks, hostage dramas and transito robberies, events that are everyday occurrences in South Africa and to which the South African readers can relate.

One almost struggles to believe that the men of the STF face such dangers on a daily basis. It would have been advisable though to group all operations per decade and discuss them more in depth, especially the operations of the 1970s and 1980s. In the final chapter, the reality of the dangers of the training and work done by the STF is brought home with the photographs of all the fallen STF members that are displayed.

In terms of introducing the STF to the broader public, Willard was successful. While it must be taken into consideration that a big part of the story is from Willard's own perspective, it would have been interesting to read more about the culture and traditions of the STF, what the major challenges were that the STF faced through the years or even if there had ever been any mission failures. The achievements of unit members with regard to possible decorations for bravery could have also contributed further to the story. Unfortunately, Willard leaves the reader thinking that the special forces element within the STF had ceased to exist after 2004 (the year that he left the unit) because, according to him, the standards had been dropped and the esprit de corps gone. This statement is unfair towards the current serving STF operators. Despite this, the STF continues to play a crucial role in combating violent crime in modern-day South Africa, and its members remain the cream of the SAPS. One could only hope that this book would encourage other ex-STF operators to contribute further to the historiography of this still proud elite unit.