

OPERATION BRATSTVO – AN EPIC ADVENTURE IN RUSSIA

A Brief Despatch about a Visit to Russia in June 2014 by a Few Military Veterans from South Africa of the 1966-1989 Angolan and South African Border Wars

By Roland de Vries

“We did it”...These were the words uttered in exhilaration by Maxim Gladkov when he met with a few South African military veterans at the Sokolniki Holiday Inn in Moscow. Many of these veterans were accompanied by their wives. By Maxim’s side was Russian Angolan Veteran Igor Ignatovich. Both of them have become close friends of the South Africans in attendance. All of this had happened through the internet. The moment was enthralling and almost surreal!

Operation Bratstvo...Brotherhood... this was the name coined by Mike Beyl for our next operation, albeit not a traditional military one.

The plan by our small group to meet with our Russian fiends from the “Union of Military Veterans of Angola” had come together!

I thought to myself that the Dear Lord works in strange ways. That He showed us through this simple act of communion that we were and still are after all human and dependent on each other...that there truly exists a common bond of interdependence and mutual interests amongst soldiers, perhaps more so if they had been former foes. This strong kinship had been formed by the individuals themselves from South Africa and Russia alike. This was evident in the simple joy of fellowship radiating from our group when we met with our two Russian friends on Russian soil.

After all this was an unofficial visit brought about by the individuals themselves to talk about the Angolan conflict and South African Border War way back when. This particular bush war had lasted from 1966 until 1989. The mission was to transcend boundaries... to be serious about our fellowship, but to have fun as well...to strengthen the kinship already established, share our memories as former foes and to remember our fallen from the days of war!

Our epic journey took us from our respective home locations in South Africa, the UK, Middle East and Australia to Moscow. Then onwards along the Volga River on our Russian cruise ship Nikolai Chernyshevsky to St Petersburg. A grand old city in western Russia previously known as Leningrad.

The first four days that were hosted by our Russian friends in Moscow was a delight and a well-rounded experience of the Russian way of life. We found that the Second World War they referred to as the "Great Patriotic War" had had a profound effect on their nation, especially their unity, patriotism and pride.

Each morning our little group had a parade in front of the entrance of our hotel to the amazement and enjoyment of a few tourists and local onlookers. Aaaandag. Regs Rig...Nommer...Uittree! We were still very smart and felt the upshot of the esprit de corps that

still existed amongst us from the time of the South African Border War we had all participated in. Gerrie Hugo was appointed our parade commander and Leopold Scholtz was our "Merker". Tatiana Davydova, the wife of Igor, would later on look at one of the photographs taken and quietly remark: "They are still warriors!"

Roll Call: Garth Pienaar; Barry Fowler; Steve and Debra van Wyngaard; Gerrie and Bodil Hugo; Mike and Yvonne Beyl; Roland and Henriette de Vries all present and correct and ready to march.

On the 1st of June we set off with our guide and Igor Ignatovich to experience the Metro Railway System - the "Underground! It was enthralling to experience their national rail system that had been developed from 1933 onwards - even before the Second World War had started. It had served as bomb shelters during the war. This was a fun trip and we viewed the many beautifully decorated halls and stations in awe. The creation of this vast system and the building of its infrastructure was a monumental achievement, something Leopold Scholtz described as being comparable to "castles" beneath the ground.

The underground took us to the Military Museum in Moscow, which was another WOW to a force of ten! Leopold and I could pose for a photograph next to a Russian MiG-21. It was similar to those which had a go at us during the final throes of the Border War between the Lomba and Quito Cuanavale rivers in south-east Angola in 1987-1988. Better this way, this one was grounded.

We had a ball of a time darting in and out amongst the many military exhibits like children. It was fun to watch Mike Beyl and Steve van Wyngaard from the side. To see who of them could loot the most, with permission of course it needs to be said. Russian steel helmets, metal dixies, water bottles, forage caps decorated with badges etcetera-etcetera. Lunch was served to us Russian military style, complete with typical World War II era Russian military eating utensils Mk 1 inside a "camouflaged bunker". Pea soup, coarse bread and something else we did not recognise were dished up. No condensed milk or esbit.

A Russian media team from a local television station followed us all the way - like Ruth and Naomi to find out what the hell this trip was all about. It was like Koevoet or for that matter 101 Battalion tracking SWAPO. So we told them...! They would later on broadcast their version of the story to the Russian public about the trials and tribulations a few soldiers had experienced in a bygone war in southern Africa. None of the young members of the media crew knew about this war. They listened to our stories and were captivated by some of the accounts and the fact that "here we were", together as former foes. Still, the many thoughts about that particular war were uppermost in our collective minds and about the soldiers who had paid the highest sacrifice. Lest we forget!

We suddenly felt at home amongst our new found Russian friends. We captured some new ones as the hours rolled by and as we "fought" through from the one objective to the next. This was fun. Is that not what life is all about. Then it was back to base, the Holiday Inn. The one close to McDonalds. And a place where some of our wives bought a few leather jackets.

That evening we spent in the pleasant company of Maxim and Igor. It was easy to laugh and to joke. Gifts were exchanged. Maxim and Igor became the proud owners of the sought-after 61 Mech operational badge (61 Meg Balkie) bestowed on them by Mike Beyl. All of us experienced a rite of passage in a way - former foes became close friends and closer still! That was it! We did it. The programme was then coordinated in somewhat more detail. This time around it was a combined plan...fighting together to achieve togetherness. Not to make war against each other.

However, a plan is a basis for change and we were ready to adapt and have fun as the campaign strategy unfolded along the way. We had signed up for an epic adventure. Execute!

The next day, the second of June 2014 and counting. After breakfast and our morning parade our small combat team set off to discover the capital city of Russia. Moscow or bust! We were accompanied by the eloquent Sergei Karamaev. He still had to write an exam on strategic studies that afternoon as soon as he left us. "So what", he said..."your visit is important to us!" More so, this amazing man was fluent in Afrikaans. Above all, he loved Afrikaans folk songs and could jubilantly sing a few lines with us.

We later on found that the same applied to Maxim and Igor who had a fine collection of Afrikaans folk songs. Furthermore, we discovered that they all loved Afrikaans and could recite many of the words in our home language. Bliksem and donder and all that. They also loved 'Braaivleis' and the smell and feel of the African bush as we did. They were our kind of people, the robust kind! We could fight a "war" with them if need be.

We took in some of the iconic sights of the capital city of Russia; the heart of Moscow. The Red Square with St Basil's Cathedral and the famous red brick walls of the Kremlin. Within the Kremlin walls we visited the former residence of the Russian Tsars and also discovered the huge Tsar's Cannon and famous bell. There were artillery pieces as well captured from their war with Napoleon in 1812.

Moscow had been attacked by the grand army of Napoleon in 1812 and was surrounded by the German army during the Second World War. None of these armies could subdue the resolute Russian people and the cold winters which took its toll on the invading forces. The Volga River we would fare on later had also witnessed a number of ferocious wars fought through the ages.

I could see from the side Henriette observing the GUM adjacent to the Kremlin, a historic complex now converted into a massive shopping centre. All the brand names were there, Gucci and what have you. I thought by myself: "This is a good time to throw smoke and withdraw, stuit en onttrek nou..."!

Who could think in the seventies and eighties, with the bush war raging intermittently over our northern borders, that in June 2014 a few veteran soldiers and their wives from South Africa will be standing here on Red Square. Behind what was then referred to as the Iron Curtain.

To top it all Mike and Bodil laid a small cross bearing flowers and the emblem of 61 Mechanised Battalion Group at the walls of the Kremlin on behalf of our group and our people back in South Africa. At Alexandrovsky Garden home to the grave of the "Unknown Soldier". This was a poignant as well as a proud moment for all of us. Our small ceremony set free the emotions not only of ourselves, but of the other onlookers as well. There were other South Africans amongst them watching in awe.

I thought to myself: Politicians start wars for dubious reasons, whilst soldiers create better forms of peace after the dust and the cordite have settled.

That evening: D-Day...H-Hour was approaching fast now. This was why we were here, to meet with our erstwhile adversaries who stood against us in the struggle for the liberation of southern Africa. There were different political and military viewpoints then of course, but with the same objective, namely to create better forms of peace all round! We could not wait to meet the few Russian stalwarts who belonged to the "Union of Veterans of Angola"! Our new-found friends.

Our mission was accomplished when we closed in on their headquarters at about 19h00 in a bus not a six-wheeled Ratel combat vehicle! We did it! This was going to be something extraordinary for all of us. A few South African military veterans and their former foes from Russia coming together.

Many of them had served as military advisers, specialists, supporting staff and interpreters in Angola. Many of their former comrades had spilled their blood in Angola. We all had something in common. We were all proud of our former careers as soldiers, we had lost dear friends in the war for southern Africa and still loved Africa dearly. So be it. Here we were today gathering as friends, also in remembrance of our fallen!

We were met at their headquarters by our amicable host and highly decorated Colonel (Retired) Vadim Sagatsjko. He was the chairman of the Russian Union of Veterans of Angola. Electricity coursed through the evening. We could feel the magical moment when we met for the first time as brothers in arms – a clash of friendship this time, not arms. Those who had fought against each other years before in Africa.

After the speeches and exchanging of gifts the fun started. Plaques from 61 Mech (Mike Beyl)...201 Battalion (Steve van Wyngaard)...South African Military Veterans Organisation of Australasia (SAMVOA - Garth Pienaar)...Special Forces (Barry Fowler)...and...The works were handed out. I could present another copy of my book "Eye of the Firestorm" to Vadim for their military museum. In return we received Russian military water bottles as gifts, ration packs, traditional Russian silk and woollen scarves for the men and ladies, badges and campaign medals from the Angolan war. Thank you for this wonderful gesture Russian veterans from Angola.

One of the members present at our gathering was a remarkable gentleman: Dr Andrei Tokarev, Head of the Centre for Southern African Studies at their Military University (Associate Professor, Institute for African Studies Academy of Sciences). Andrei had co-

authored "Bush War - the Road to Cuito Cuanavale" and knew what war in Africa was about. He was also a veteran from the operation in Angola the South Africans referred to as "Savannah". Later on a jubilant Gerrie Hugo came to me and exclaimed: "I found a Russian veteran from Savannah!" He had captured Andrei Tokarev without any shots being fired.

By the way, Garth Pienaar gave an exquisite speech eloquently and fluently in Russian, which reads as follows in English:

"Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen. It is a great pleasure for us ex-South African soldiers to be here in Moscow with the Russian/Angolan Veterans and we thank you for your hospitality and friendship. It is only proper that after many years of fighting that we, the last warriors of the Cold War now come together as friends and "brothers in arms" to honour the memory of our friends and comrades who died in the service of their country. So please stand and join us in a toast to FALLEN COMRADES - WE WILL REMEMBER THEM....."

After a quiet moment instant spontaneity and high spirits followed as if by signal...red over green...Go! Forming, storming, norming and performing. There were more exchanges of toasts and stories as the Vodka flowed. Excitement! Strength indeed lies in companionship and mobility!

Contact, contact, wait... A boisterous and over energetic former Russian airborne colonel (by the powers vested in him), now took command of Steve van Wyngaard and Mike Beyl and proclaimed them to be his sons. It need not be said that his gruesome threesome did not remain sane for the remainder of the evening. Fight through the objective not onto it was their motto. The three Musketeers did not have a patch on them. How were we ever going to create a clean break-away by the end of day? What the hell!

During a less rowdy moment Maxim said to Henriette: "If a Russian soldier can hang a scarf around the shoulders of a South African woman peace is indeed a reality".

The next day created its own set of memories as if by magic as Vadim, Igor and Tatiana accompanied us to the Russian Tank Museum south of Moscow. On arrival we could hear the staccato clatter of machine guns nearby, triggering instant soldiery memories of a bygone era. Once again we felt at home as we discovered an impressive array of armour from the days of yore. Gerrie's beloved Panhard (Eland)-90 was there as well!

Mike Beyl took the opportunity to drill the hell out of our group during a pause in "battle". Fun was had once again, smiles and laughter all round, surprised spectators gaping. We could still do a number of intricate drill movements and think back of the days when we were soldiers. Soon afterwards we could spend another quiet moment at a T-34 Russian tank that had become the grave of a Russian driver during the Second World War with the relief of Leningrad. His tank was recovered during the sixties from a watery grave where it had fallen through the ice. Salute to a fallen comrade! During those days the South Africans and Russians had fought together in Europe as allies against the German Wehrmacht. Amazing! Medical personnel from Russia had also supported the "Boers" against the British invaders during the Anglo-Boer War in 1899-1902.

We now boarded the river cruiser MS Nikolai Chernyshevsky to travel from Moscow to St Petersburg along the rivers, lakes and canals of Russia. This is undoubtedly one of the best ways to view the fascinating sights of these two great cities and to discover the spectacular interiors of Russia. We were taken command of by the beautiful and most professional Elena Koltsova, our tour leader and guide. We would have appointed her a combat group commander in the South African Defence Force at any time. Thank you Elena!

4 June 2014 was another day to be recorded in the annals of our journey. Before departing the river cruise passenger terminal on 5 June we were invited to visit the datsja (summer house) of Maxim and Svetlana Gladkov on the outskirts of Moscow. This was an extreme honour bestowed on our small group of South Africans. We had a "Braai" of course, played darts and Ladi-Da and laughed and talked whilst we cemented our friendship. Intimacy is at the heart; the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

Russian-Angolan Veteran Andrei Karamaev was there as well. What a wonderful story teller he was. One of his larger-than-life tales was a hilarious one shared with us in good humour. During the eighties he was with a small group of Russian advisers at a specific trouble spot in the southern part of Angola. The South African forces were attacking nearby whilst the Russians anxiously awaited a catastrophe to happen. They were poised on a few unserviceable Russian Military vehicles it may be added. One of the trucks, declared "beyond local repair", had been placed on blocks. Escape by lorry was therefore not an option and they only had Lady Luck to rely on. "Will the South Africans pass us by Dear Lord? Fortunately the small clan of Russian advisers were spared an embarrassing moment on this particular day in war torn Angola. In the words of Andrei: "If the South Africans found us like this they would have killed themselves laughing!" This was Africa where our Russian friends soon learned that the Angolan Army was not too well-disposed of maintaining their military equipment. So be it. Take that Russians!

Eventually we had to return to the Chernyshevsky by nightfall. On the way our mini-bus came to a sudden halt whilst the driver high-tailed into a nearby shopping centre. Only to re-appear a few moments later with a drab-green wooden rifle box containing a glass AK-47 rifle filled with Vodka. How the hell was Steve van Wyngaard going to get his excess baggage, surplus military kit, memorabilia and Debra with her leather coat through customs and back to Dubai?

On arrival at the passenger terminal the high-spirited Mike Beyl (self-proclaimed stay-behind party) remained behind to say farewell to our bus driver and Leopold Scholtz, the latter who was returning to his hotel. Allegedly (circumstantial evidence later to be confirmed at his "court martial") Mike vanished into a nearby forest in search of a "Lilly" (army style urinal). He probably turned around at some time and lost his bearing for a while. In the meantime back on the Chernyshevsky his bereaved wife Yvonne and myself were searching for him, but alas it was all in vain. We eventually declared him missing in action. It was later on confirmed that Mike had somehow crossed the Volga River twice before returning to the cruise ship just before stand-to at First-Light. Welcome back Mike; court martial pending as well as a snap course in navigation.

For friendship in abundance and for hosting us in Moscow we need to thank our new found Russian friends from our hearts. What can we say Vadim, Maxim, Igor and the many others we had the fortune to meet. Thank you for the many precious experiences shared which will echo in eternity. Salute brothers and sisters!

Ship ahoy! Battle design: We set sail on 5 June and were set to arrive at St Petersburg on 11 June.

Each day we had a wakeup call and a friendly good morning over the ship's intercom. What followed then...cruising, dining, sight-seeing, optional excursions and many-many memorable moments also on the after-deck? Netso Gerrie Hugo!!!! Any questions?

On 6 June our voyage took us to the historic town of Uglich on the Volga River, first documented in 1148. The town's historical significance was due to the suspicious death of Dmitry Ivanov, son of Ivan the Terrible. Dmitry was exiled to Uglich in 1584, but was found dead in questionable circumstances seven years later. The church of Dimitri on the blood was built in his memory.

On 7 June we visited the ancient city of Yaroslavl, founded in 1010 by Yaroslavl Mudri (Yaroslavl the Wise). That afternoon we were treated to a typical Russian tea ceremony.

“Make sure you put on comfortable shoes for the next day”, it resounded over the ships bullhorns. This was to be our excursion to Goritsy, a tiny village settlement on the edge of the White Lake. The main attraction was the Kirrillo-Belozerski Monastery founded in 1397.

Then we were ready to set sail for the island of Kizhi located on Lake Onega. The island had been made famous by its collection of wooden churches. The centrepiece being the twenty-two domed church of the Transfiguration, built completely without the use of nails. The island had been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site and was one of the many highlight of our tour. Dinner that night on the Chernyshevsky was a pirate theme. The true colours and heritage of Garth Bloody Black Beard Pienaar came to the fore! Har-har and a bottle of Vodka.

10 June 2014 was a special day to be remembered by all of us. We enjoyed a visit to the historic village of Mandroguï gracing the shores of the River Svir. The village is a representation of traditional Russian life with wooden bridges, a vodka museum and craft centre. The same evening there was a Russian talent show which took place after dinner. The South Africans performed Jan Pierewiet to the enjoyment of all those on board!

However, prior to the festivities that evening our small group performed a special intimate in-house ceremony on board the cruise ship, as the Volga flowed beneath us. Garth Pienaar was selected as our parade commander and master of ceremonies and he performed eloquently once again - thank you Garth. Miniature wooden crosses were pitched overboard into the Volga in remembrance of our fallen: By Mike Beyl for those of 61 Mech during Operation Smokeshell on 10 June 1980; Gerrie Hugo for Operation Savannah in 1975-1976; Garth Pienaar for the South African and Russian Veterans who had fallen in the many wars they had

fought in...The ode by our Master at Arms: *"At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them...."*!

On the 11th of June we arrived at St Petersburg, ready to explore this wonderful city previously called Leningrad. The tour took in some of the most famous historical sites including the exchange, Palace square and the magnificent Winter Palace, St Isaac's Cathedral, Cathedral of the Saviour on the Spilled Blood, Peter and Paul Fortress and Nevsky Prospekt, the City's main thoroughfare. That afternoon we headed for the world-renowned Hermitage museum founded in 1764.

I took a photograph of a large painting of the Battle of Borodino for my friend Prof Abel Esterhuysen back home where he teaches at the South African Military Academy. This battle is one of his favourites. Unfortunately Abel we did not have the time available to visit the site located 120km west of Moscow.

At the Battle of Borodino between the French Army of Napoleon and the Soviets on 7 September 1812 there were 74,000 casualties in one day. The final count were French: 30,000 killed or wounded; Russians 44,000 killed or wounded. It was at Borodino where Russian general Mikhail Illarionovich Kutuzov had decided to make a stand against the invading French Army of Napoleon. The Russians were able to stage a withdrawal after a series of vicious frontal attacks were launched by Napoleon. It is interesting to note that in the first three months of the invasion of Russia, Napoleon lost a third of his force to hardship and disease. After the Battle of Borodino the French occupied Moscow, but the Russians' refusal to surrender led to a nightmare winter retreat from which Napoleon never recovered.

12 June saw us visiting the Lower Park at Petrodvorets (Petershof). Later that day many of us took optional river and canal tours and some made ready to visit the Military-Historical Museum of Artillery, Engineers and Signal Corps the next day. This is the oldest military museum in Russia.

A raid on a Russian military surplus store by Mike, Gerrie, Garth and Barry followed in the wake of the aforementioned visit. Fortunately they found this treasure trove as Yvonne and Debra were the navigators and not Mike. That evening on board of the cruise ship we held a stand-to inspection to view all their goodies. How the hell was Steve going to fit all of this into his suitcases (more than three by now)? He promptly took possession of Debra's suitcases as well. In the adjacent cabin Henriette was subtly fitting her range of Matroyshka dolls bought for our grandchildren into my lone duffel-bag. Yours' is not to wonder why Roland, but to do or die....Okay that happened during the charge of the light brigade. Enough said!

On 13 June Henriette and I had the chance to visit the Catherine Palace at Pushkin located 29 km south of St Petersburg. On the way we passed the position of the German front when they invested Leningrad during the Second World War. The siege took place from 8 September 1941 to 27 January 1944. The location was appropriately marked by two Russian anti-tank guns, now quietly bearing witness to a confrontation long ago of the worse kind. They were probably Soviet 76mm anti-tank guns with a range of 13,000km. The Soviets incurred around

800,000 dead during this epic battle in western Russia, which saw the defeat of the Germans. Once again the resolute Russian people had made their stand.

Our journey ended on high note here in St Petersburg. What an amazing adventure we had. To my mind maintaining a kinship such as ours and revelling in the magical patterns and connections bestowed on us in life necessarily contributes to the quality of living. Thank you my friends for teaching us these simple traits of life and for touching our souls.

There is after all purpose and vigour in our lives and in all of the above-mentioned get-up-and-go happenings that we do for the pure fun thereof in friendship and closeness. Strength lies in doing extraordinary things and in observing faith!

Let us keep up the good work in setting a wonderful example to all. Of building bridges and in fostering remarkable relationships for the benefit of mankind.

I herewith salute all the instigators and maintainers of Bratstvo!