

# **Out of Action: By Chris Cocks. Johannesburg: 30 Degrees South Publishers 1999; pp 278.**

*Reviewed by Tafirenyika Makombe  
Polytechnic of Namibia*

*“It is easy to blame our leaders, ‘the elders’, for everything. After all, Ian Smith, P. K. van der Byl, Robert Mugabe, Joshua Nkomo et al. – the architects of our little war – are either still alive, or have lived to a ripe old age, in comfort and financial security. The same cannot be said of their foot soldiers. Dead or alive, these are victims of their policies” (Cocks, 2008, p. 272).*

## **Introduction**

Chris Cocks’ (2008) *Out of action* is the sequel to his (1988) *Fireforce – one man’s war in the Rhodesian Light Infantry*. In *Fireforce* the writer narrates his life in the Rhodesian Light Infantry. In *Out of action* the twenty-one year old Cocks explains his double role as civilian and police reservist when he writes: “A few months before I had been Lance-Corporal Cocks. Now I was Police Reservist Cocks, attempting to begin a civilian career in agriculture” (Cocks, 2008, p. 24). In reality, however, there is no distinction between the two roles as a lance-corporal and police reservist because the Rhodesian police was militarised. In the army Cocks was a stick leader while in the police he is leader of a Police Anti-Terrorist Unit (PATU). The PATU was a paramilitary specialist unit in the British South African Police (BSAP) while a stick was a four to six-man unit or battle group in the Rhodesian Army. For both units their call was to respond to guerrilla sightings and engage them in combat.

The year was 1979 in war-torn Zimbabwe and jobs were hard to come by even for the supposed privileged white community especially youngsters like Cocks who knew only military life. He is the manager of Sabi-Limpopo Authority (SLA) Section 4 and his civilian duties as farm manager are basically to oversee the 1200 acres of irrigated cotton and wheat in South East Chipinge. A few days after assuming his duties as SLA manager he is made Chipinge North PATU leader thus essentially returning to military life as police reservist rather than as a soldier and beginning a new double life as a military and civilian leader. His experiences in Chipinge during the war and in Harare after the war constitute the essence of the content of his 2008 autobiographical *Out of action*.

## **Structure**

### **Part One**

The autobiography is divided into two main parts. Part One is from 1979 to 1980 and narrates Cocks’ military activities mainly against ZANLA guerrillas. Each chapter is prefixed by his 1995 experiences in post-war Zimbabwe’s capital Harare

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Tafirenyika Makombe is a lecturer at the Polytechnic of Namibia. E-mail: [tmakombe@polytechnic.edu.na](mailto:tmakombe@polytechnic.edu.na)

as a psychiatric patient at Michael Gelfand Clinic from Tuesday 21 February 1995 to Sunday 26 February 1995, then the Intensive Coronary Unit of Parirenyatwa Hospital from 13 March 1995 to 17 March 1995 and finally the Medical Centre, Leopold Takawira Avenue from 25 March 1995 to 28 March 1995. Each of the chapters begins with insights into his mind in these various medical institutions before the narrative shifts back to 1979 and 1980 and zeros in on Cocks' military and civilian Chipinge activities in the two years. Not surprisingly the bulk of the Chipinge narration focuses on his military life in the Chipinge North PATU as the Rhodesian war is coming to end marking the demise of white minority rule of Ian Smith and ushering in the new black majority rule of Robert Mugabe in the transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe. The medical parts are some kind of flash forward which demonstrate the psychological scars left on the young white psyche of Smith's foot soldiers by the Rhodesian bush war/Zimbabwe's war of liberation. This is a parallel of the effect of the liberation war on the black guerrillas – a situation captured in various writings by black Zimbabwean writers of the war and its aftermath (cf. Alexander Kanengoni's (1997) *Echoing silences*, and Shimmer Chinodya's (1989) *Harvest of thorns*).

### **Part Two**

Part Two of the autobiography narrates Cocks' broken existence from 1980 to 1995 as a fulltime civilian in independent Zimbabwe under black majority rule – his own attempts to deal with the war nurtured demons in his head and the “harvest of thorns” Zimbabwe has become. The narrative is linear in nature and is a painful fifteen year journey up until Cocks migrates to South Africa. The narrator's life in independent Zimbabwe is characterised by ghosts from the war, alcohol and drug abuse, and harm both to the self, family and friends. The ride is bumpy as he moves from job to job with various degrees of success and failure, from financial success to financial ruin and from love gained and to love lost, and from building to breaking down families, a twenty-one day stint in police detention in Bindura for trumped up war weapons charges all spiced with brief excursions into Mozambique as a businessman.

### **Contesting white perspectives of the war**

The book also explores the Rhodesian war from two contrasting white perspectives: the older white male Rhodesian and the younger white male Rhodesian. For the older generation of white Rhodesians it is a war to preserve white British culture, civilization and progress brought to this corner of the “heart of darkness” whereas for the young white generation it is a senseless unwinnable war taking away their youths and future. The latter group puts the full blame on then Prime Minister Ian Douglass Smith and see him as a senseless war monger while the older Rhodesian perceives Prime Minister Smith as a hero. In a story told by the younger generation the war is depicted as largely meaningless. This view is captured in the various contacts by the PATU, which except for the final one all involve the unnecessary killing of civilians in large part while the combatants remain largely unhurt. Very few guerrillas or PATU personnel are killed. This meaningless killing of civilians is highlighted by juxtaposing it to the unnecessary killing of animals – dogs, ducks, geese, quelea birds and horses. The post-war era provides further evidence of how meaningless the war was as the former white combatants roam aimlessly in the new Zimbabwe and they are haunted by the war and need psychiatric treatment if they are to lead a normal life. Like Cocks the former white combatants

are jobless and without a meaningful future hence the ultimate migration to South Africa.

### **White Rhodesian women**

It is of importance to highlight that the autobiography portrays white females as mere passive victims of the war with no meaningful contribution to make. They are largely presented as playing a minor supporting role to the white combatants through providing tea, biscuits and whisky as the PATU members await combat action. The white female is conveniently shunted into the background from where she occasionally emerges to make comments that their men folk ignore in contempt. The picture is of a group of people who seemingly had no role to play during the brutal war.

### **Conclusion**

All in all the book's importance lies in that it gives the reader a window through which he/she can view the Rhodesian bush war/Zimbabwe's war of liberation differently. It is the view of young white boys who, through a call up system, found themselves battling against all odds to win an unwinnable war as Smith's soldiers and policemen against ZANLA and ZIPRA guerrillas. It is the story of their bitterness, despair and ultimate betrayal by politicians. It shows the pervasive nature of how war affects the ordinary combatants – a story told from the young white combatant's perspective. It is a must read for all who seek a better understanding of Zimbabwe and its war of the seventies.