

Tracking Column

THE WAY OF TRACKING © KYT WALKEN

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Africa: War and Conflict in the Twentieth Century, London: Routledge, 2018.
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1. *Behind your academic background, are you a passionate Tracker on field?*

No, I am not a tracker. During the 1980s, when I was an infantry officer in the Canadian military, I had a very brief exposure to tracking as part of reconnaissance training and realized that the army had very little expertise in the area. Many years later, as an historian of war and society in Africa, I observed that academic and popular book and other works on counter-insurgency campaigns in Africa mentioned tracking as a central activity but did not discuss specific training or tactical doctrines around its use. The British officer Frank Kitson, who served in Kenya during the 1950s and later commanded land forces UK, called it the most important skill to deploy during counter-insurgency operations as a way to locate and eliminate elusive insurgents. This is what led me to conduct a research project and write a book on how tracking was used during wars that took place in Kenya in the 1950s, Rhodesia in the 1960s and 70s, and Namibia in the 1970s and 1980s.

2. *How the Art of Tracking happened to become one the most powerful resource for guerrilla?*

Tracking was and still is one of the most important resources for both anti-guerrilla and guerrilla forces in what we now call asymmetrical warfare. In what the Chinese leader Mao understood as the guerrilla phase of revolutionary warfare, the guerrillas represent a much weaker military force than the state security forces they are opposing. As such, they have to be elusive using the environment to conceal themselves while they engage in politicizing the masses and conducting hit-and-run attacks on enemy weak points. While counter-insurgent forces then use tracking to try to locate guerrillas, the guerrillas can use anti-tracking techniques in attempting avoid detection.

3. *Please name us the most skilled Unit of Tracking, according to your opinion and studies.*

Of course, this question is controversial and any answer will be contested. With reference to conflicts in late 20th Century Africa, I suspect that the South West African Police Counter-Insurgency Unit also known as Koevoet that fought in South West Africa (now Namibia) in the very late 1970s and 1980s has a good claim to that title. They combined excellent tracking knowledge and skills, mostly from among the Ovambo people, with mechanized vehicles and really effective close air support. The environment of northern SWA was also important in enabling Koevoet to bring all these elements together but certainly they became extremely efficient in using tracking to quickly locate and kill insurgents. At the same time, their enemies, the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO) insurgents, responded by becoming highly skilled in anti-tracking and many of them were also from the Ovambo community so they had the same skills. As I explain in my book on the subject, the conflict in northern Namibia in the 1980s largely became a trackers' war with each side trying to out-track or out-counter-track the other. It is also important to recognize here that given the nature of this conflict, Koevoet became a highly controversial force accused of human rights abuses. But in terms of tracking, they have a claim to the top spot. Some Koevoet veterans went on to conduct tracking or other operations in more recent counter-insurgency campaigns as private contractors.



4. *Considering the current times, why Tracking can be still efficient, tactically speaking?*

Tracking will always be relevant to counter-insurgency/insurgency operations. Conventional armies always seem to forget about it after such a conflict and then have to suddenly try to re-discover it when faced with guerrilla warfare. While technologies such as drones, night vision, heat sensors etc are excellent in terms of locating elusive insurgents, sometimes these are rendered ineffective by dense terrain like forest so then the basic art of visual tracking makes a return.

5. *Are African young generations acquainted with this Art?*

While it depends on the location and circumstances, in general tracking is a dying art in Africa as it is elsewhere. Much of the African population lives in cities where this and other wilderness skills are not relevant. Africa has experienced a huge amount of urbanization since around the 1940s and the process has accelerated in more recent decades. Tracking is only practiced by a few people in rural or wilderness areas who engage in hunting or are employed in the safari industry or by wildlife departments including anti-poaching units where it is very important. It is very rare to find a skilled tracker which is part of the problem counter-insurgency forces have always faced.

