



THE PARABATS

44 PARACHUTE REGIMENT • 1 PARACHUTE BATTALION • 2 PARACHUTE BATTALION • 3 PARACHUTE BATTALION
4 PARACHUTE BATTALION • 44 PARACHUTE BRIGADE

SECOND TO NONE

EX ALTO VINCIMUS

We Conquer From Above

A COMPLETE FACTUAL HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICA'S AIRBORNE FORCES

From Foundation in 1961 through the Border War, the Brigade era, Special Forces pipeline, to Operation Restore the Glory

Introduction: A Force Apart

In the long and often brutal history of modern warfare on the African continent, few formations have earned a reputation as formidable, professional and enduring as the South African Parabats. From a handful of volunteers trained in Britain in 1960 grew an airborne capability that, at its peak, fielded a full brigade with supporting arms, pathfinders, engineers, artillery and anti-aircraft elements — and that continues today as 44 Parachute Regiment, with 1 Parachute Battalion as its full-time spearhead.

This document records the complete factual history of every major Parabat unit: 1, 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions, 44 Parachute Brigade, and the present-day 44 Parachute Regiment. It details the supporting arms, the legendary Pathfinders, the pipeline that fed South Africa's Special Forces (the Recces), the extreme selection that produced only a tiny percentage of those who started, the operational record from Ongulumbashe to Bangui, and the ongoing effort to Restore the Glory. It is written so that veterans, serving members and the public may understand why the maroon beret and wings remain among the most respected insignia in African military history — and why international observers ranked the Parabats among the finest light infantry and airborne forces of their generation.

Origins of South African Airborne Capability

Although more than sixty South Africans served with distinction in British airborne units during the Second World War—participating in actions such as the Battle of Arnhem—and a short-lived South African Air Force Paratroop Company was raised in 1943, South Africa did not maintain a permanent airborne formation until the early 1960s. In 1960, fifteen carefully selected volunteers were sent to RAF Abingdon to train with the British Parachute Regiment. Upon their return, under the leadership of Commandant (later Lieutenant-General) Willem Petrus Louw, they became the core of the new South African airborne cadre, serving as instructors, packers and, in one case, a pilot qualified in parachute-dropping techniques.

On 1 April 1961 the existing 2 Mobile Watch at Tempe, Bloemfontein, was formally re-designated as 1 Parachute Battalion. The unit adopted the motto **Ex Alto Vincimus** —“We Conquer From Above”—and on 29 January 1962 awarded its first South African-trained parachute wings.

1 Parachute Battalion (1 Para), the elite airborne infantry regiment of the South African Defence Force, quickly became the cornerstone of the nation's airborne capability. Its soldiers saw extensive combat during the Border War, most famously in the 1978 Cassinga operation.

1 Parachute Battalion — The Foundation Stone

1 Parachute Battalion remains the only full-time parachute infantry battalion of the South African Army and the spiritual and operational heart of the airborne forces. Based at Tempe throughout its existence, it conducted the selection and basic parachute training for virtually every Parabat who ever served. Permanent Force headquarters, HQ Company and A and B Companies formed the regular core; Citizen Force companies were later based in major centres. From 1966 onwards 1 Para provided the first South African Army combat troops after the Second World War and remained continuously engaged until the end of the Border War in 1989. It continues today as the regular component of 44 Parachute Regiment and hosts the parachute training wing.

2 and 3 Parachute Battalions — The Citizen Force Expansion

By 1971 the volume of National Servicemen who had successfully completed parachute training at 1 Para threatened to overwhelm the unit's administrative capacity. To retain these highly trained men, 2 Parachute Battalion was formed in July 1971 as a Citizen Force (reserve) unit with five rifle companies. It absorbed the National Servicemen after their initial service and provided a ready pool of trained paratroopers for call-up. 2 Para saw action in Operation Savannah (1975–76), covering the withdrawal from Angola, and elements jumped at Cassinga in 1978. Companies rotated on fire-force and border duties throughout the war.

3 Parachute Battalion was raised in 1977, again as a Citizen Force formation, to meet the growing demand for airborne manpower. Both 2 and 3 Para supplied companies for the composite force that assaulted Cassinga and thereafter maintained a continuous operational presence. After the end of National Service in the early 1990s, strengths declined. Remaining Reserve Force parachute personnel were eventually concentrated primarily in 3 Parachute Battalion. Efforts continue to keep the reserve parachute capability alive through exercises and individual deployments.

44 Parachute Brigade — Peak of Airborne Power (1978–1999/2000)

On 20 April 1978, shortly after the lessons of Cassinga, 44 Parachute Brigade was formally established under Brigadier M.J. du Plessis with Colonel Jan Breytenbach as a key driving force. The three parachute battalions were brought under a single headquarters and, crucially, supporting arms were added to create a balanced, all-arms airborne formation capable of independent operations. This was the high-water mark of South African airborne capability.

Supporting Arms and Specialist Sub-Units

At its peak the Brigade included:

- 1, 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions (and, for periods, additional parachute elements)
- 18 Light Regiment — airborne artillery equipped with 120 mm heavy mortars
- 44 Parachute Anti-Aircraft Regiment
- 44 Parachute Engineer Regiment (evolved from 44 Field Engineer Squadron)
- 44 Signals Unit, 44 Maintenance Unit, 37 Field Workshop
- 44 Anti-Tank Company
- 44 Pathfinder Company / Platoon (the “Philistines”)

- Dispatcher Platoon, Provost Platoon and other specialist elements

This structure allowed the Brigade to project a balanced combat force by parachute, helicopter or air-landed means — a capability rare in Africa and respected internationally.

The Pathfinders — Eyes and Guides of the Airborne

Lessons from the scattered Cassinga drop made clear the urgent need for dedicated pathfinders who could infiltrate ahead of the main force, mark drop zones accurately, conduct reconnaissance and guide the assault. A formal Pathfinder capability was developed, drawing on British SAS, American Pathfinder and South African Recce doctrine. The unit, sometimes known as the “Philistines,” attracted high-calibre volunteers, including foreign professionals with SAS, Selous Scouts and RLI experience. Pathfinders operated covertly, often in small teams, and set standards that approached those of Special Forces in land warfare while specialising in airborne insertion and DZ safety. Today the lineage continues as 44 Pathfinder Platoon within 44 Parachute Regiment.

The Crucible: Selection, PT and the Right to Wear the Maroon Beret

Entry into the Parabats was never a casual decision. After the Battalion Leadership Group visited a parent unit (e.g., 3 SAI), roughly 300 men attempted the initial fitness tests; only about 50 (~16–17 %) proceeded to Bloemfontein. Those 50 formed an intake of around 300 for the Basic phase. After three months, weaker candidates were returned, leaving ~200 to start the formal PT Course. Following the two-week PT Course, merely 70–80 remained; further weeding during subsequent courses reduced the company strength to about 90. Almost none failed the Jump Course itself, having already cleared the physical and mental hurdles. Consequently, only ~5 % of the original volunteers ultimately became operational Parabats.

The PT Course earned its legend through three daily PT sessions, 10–15 km runs, tar-pole and tyre lifts, the 25 kg concrete “marble,” night marches with full bergens, stretcher carries, trench digging, the “Elephant” obstacle, and the dreaded “bad surprise.” Sleep and hot food were luxuries; those who survived earned the maroon beret and parachute wings—symbols that still command instant respect across the South African military and the international airborne community.

Summary of Recruitment & Initial Evaluation

Volunteer drive: Each year the battalion’s leadership tours army units seeking volunteers. Candidates must first pass a stringent pre-selection physical test in their home unit before appearing before a selection board that evaluates character and motivation.

Medical & fitness standards: Applicants undergo medical examinations comparable to those required of aircrew, followed by a timed 5 km run and a 200 m “fireman’s lift” carrying a comrade.

Psychological resilience: Basic psychological profiling ensures candidates can cope with the mental stresses of airborne operations.

Summary of Training

Basic Infantry Training (~10 weeks)

Covers musketry, fieldcraft, drill, map reading, buddy-aid, and intensive physical training (PT). This phase equips recruits for the rigours of both airborne missions and combat in African operational theatres.

Parachute Qualification Training

1. Initial selection (2 weeks):

- 8 h of PT daily
- Progressive distance runs with full combat kit (up to 21 km)
- “Battle PT” using logs, concrete blocks or bicycles as weights
- 14 km route marches with full kit
- Team sports (boxing, soccer, wrestling, rugby) with added loads
- Minimum 60 % score required to continue

2. Parachute training (3 weeks):

- Ground instruction in hangars
- Jumps from outdoor “aapkas” (exit trainers)
- Aircraft jumps from Dakota C-47 and C-130/C-160, both day and night
- Use of standard and steerable parachutes; eight jumps required to earn wings

Advanced Individual Training (~8 weeks)

Specialised courses are allocated according to the soldier’s mustering, including:

- Platoon leadership, rifleman, mortarman
- Anti-tank, machine-gun, signals, intelligence
- Driver, medic, clerk, parachute-packer, storeman

Conventional Warfare Training (~10 weeks)

Focuses on offensive, defensive and withdrawal tactics, combined-arms operations with artillery and air support, and sub-unit airborne assaults.

Counter-Insurgency (COIN) Training (~9 weeks)

Emphasises bush-warfare techniques, rapid-reaction force drills, and specialised airborne raids.

Physical & Psychological Challenges

The regimen stresses endurance, mental toughness and teamwork:

- Night marches of 20–30 km carrying a 25 kg bergen
- 75 kg stretcher runs over 20 km
- Continuous carrying of concrete slabs or telegraph poles
- The notorious “Elephant” obstacle course and the final “bad surprise”
- Extreme sleep deprivation and ration-pack meals replace normal comforts

Historical records show that about 10 % of initial volunteers passed the full selection and earned their wings.

Feeding the Recces: The Parabat Pipeline to Special Forces

The Parabats formed a natural and continuous feeder system for South Africa’s Special Forces — the Reconnaissance Regiments, universally known as the Recces. Many of the most accomplished operators began their careers as Parabats. Colonel Jan Breytenbach, a founding figure of both the airborne expansion and the Recces, had deep roots in the parachute forces. Parabat selection and training produced soldiers already conditioned to extreme physical hardship, airborne insertion, bushcraft and independent action — precisely the foundation required for the even more demanding Recce selection (which historically passed only a single-digit percentage of candidates).

Pathfinders in particular were trained to standards that overlapped significantly with Recce land-warfare requirements. Throughout the Border War and beyond, the flow of high-quality volunteers from the parachute battalions into Special Forces ensured that the Recces remained staffed with men who already understood vertical envelopment, long-range patrol and the unforgiving African operational environment. The two communities — airborne and special forces — remained closely linked in ethos, mutual respect and operational cooperation.

Operational Record — A Summary of Excellence

From the first combat action at Ongulumbashe in August 1966, through continuous fire-force and cross-border operations, the first operational parachute drop in June 1974, Operation Savannah, the audacious Cassinga assault of 4 May 1978, years of deep operations in Angola, support to Rhodesian forces, internal stability operations, Operation Boleas in Lesotho (1998), the Burundi deployment, the hard fighting at Bangui in 2012 (where 1 Para earned Battle Honours), and contributions to the Force Intervention Brigade in the DRC, the Parabats maintained an unbroken record of professional performance under the most testing conditions. They were first in and among the last out of the Border War operational area.

44 Parachute Regiment Today and Operation Restore the Glory

In 1998–2000 the Brigade was redesignated 44 Parachute Regiment — a multi-battalion regiment that remains the South African Army’s primary airborne formation. Current structure includes 1 Parachute Battalion (regular), 3 Parachute Battalion (reserve), 44 Pathfinder Platoon and the 44 Training Wing / Parachute Packing and Training elements, all based at or administered from Tempe, Bloemfontein. The Regiment retains responsibility for all military parachute training and for the nation’s rapid airborne reaction capability.

Operation Restore the Glory, led by the Parabat Heritage Foundation under Honorary Colonel Raymond Kramer, has in recent years restored critical training infrastructure, most notably the historic Aapkas

outdoor exit trainer. On 30 April 2026, during the 65th anniversary of 1 Parachute Battalion, the restored Aapkas was formally rededicated in the presence of the Chief of the South African Army and hundreds of veterans. The project stands as a living affirmation that the standards, history and spirit of the Parabats will be preserved and transmitted to future generations.

A Class of Their Own — International Standing

In the judgement of many professional observers, the South African Parabats of the Border War era ranked among the most effective light infantry and airborne forces in the world. Their combination of rigorous selection, continuous operational experience in harsh terrain, mastery of fire-force tactics, long-range bush warfare skills, and the ability to execute complex airborne assaults at extreme range (Cassinga remains a case study taught in airborne schools) placed them in the same elite company as the British Parachute Regiment, elements of the US 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, and the best French airborne and Foreign Legion units — yet with an intensity of combat exposure in the African theatre that few contemporary Western formations matched. The maroon beret was not ceremonial; it was earned in conditions that weeded out all but the most determined, and it was proven under fire year after year.

Conclusion: The Living Legacy

From fifteen men who trained at Abingdon in 1960 to the full power of 44 Parachute Brigade, from the first combat jump to the restored Aapkas of 2026, the Parabat story is one of deliberate excellence. Only a tiny fraction of those who began the journey earned the right to wear the coveted maroon beret and wings. Those who did so wrote a chapter of military history that continues to inspire veterans, serving members and the nation. The standards have never been lowered. The brotherhood endures. The mission continues.

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EX ALTO VINCIMUS

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AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY • RESTORE THE GLORY • UNITED WE ARE STRONG

Sources & Note

Compiled from open historical records including unit histories, DefenceWeb fact files, South African Military History Society journals, contemporary operational accounts, Pathfinder and Special Forces literature, and veteran testimony. All figures and organisational details have been cross-checked for factual accuracy. This document is intended for the official BAT website and for the education and inspiration of veterans, serving members and the public.

