



The National Service (Wales) Collection 1947-61/63) created by Age Cymru Dyfed, has been made possible thanks to The National Lottery Heritage Lottery Fund.

Date of interview: 11TH February 2026

Location: Ceredigion

Interviewer: Neil Davies

Camera: Hugh Morgan

Hendry McMahan
'South African Defence Force'
1974



Hendry's story of National Service in the South African Army was gleaned from a conversation which took place during a meeting in February 2026.

The Author has cross checked Hendry's recollections with additional sources of information as far as practicable.

The interview with Hendry was recorded on film. Occasionally the viewer will hear Hendry refer to one of the interviewer's 'by name 'Hugh', who can be heard asking questions.

The Author has summarized the content of the interview and at times quoted Hendry in this narrative to provide clarity. Factual information has also been added to offer some context to this narrative account.

Opinions and comments shared by Hendry in this account are accountable to Hendry alone. The sole purpose is to present Hendry's memories supported by a fact of his experience of undertaking National Service in the South African Defence Force.

**** Some material in this account relates to armed conflict at a period of time in South Africa that may upset the viewer. The reader is advised to exercise caution before viewing the film and narrative content.

Background

Hendry starts the interview commenting on his birth in January 1956 in an area of South Africa that is known as the East Rand. This is part of the Gauteng province that encompasses Johannesburg. He describes the town where he grew up, Boksburg. The town is known for the goldmining industry and perhaps is best known for hosting the world's deepest mines, with the 'Hercules' shaft reaching a depth over 3,500 metres.

Hendry goes on to describe the wider area around Johannesburg, explaining the word 'Rand', is a term adopted for larger areas, that follow the 4 directions of the compass. He also attempts to interpret the landscape for the viewer to understand.

At this point Hendry mentions the township of 'Soweto' which is southwest of the centre of Johannesburg. This township later plays a significant role, in the interview, when Hendry recounts some of his experiences serving in the SADF.



The area where Hendry was born and raised is illustrated in this map.

Image courtesy Wikipedia.com

He talks a little about his childhood.

“We were very naive growing up in South Africa, very naive.”

Clarifying this comment, Hendry explains that the newspapers were not allowed to publish the faces of people convicted of crimes. This sheltered children somewhat from the reality of the situation in Johannesburg.

He remembers the normality of living with uniformed soldiers in the community.

“Especially when I got to High school. When I was 13, we saw Army guys, soldiers in town. We thought it was cool.”

The boys would soon get to experience a closer look at the South African military, as cadet groups became part of the educational establishment.

“At school we had school cadets. You got a uniform and every Tuesday you’d have to put on your Khakis, brown shirts, trousers and a hat. From about 10am in the morning until midday we did square-bashing, learning how to march.”

With hindsight, Hendry reflects on the reasons behind the cadet’s presence in school.

“They were preparing us, you know for military service.”

As the boys came of age, whilst they were still at school, the system required each boy to submit to formal registration.

“When we turned 16, after assembly, all the boys of a certain age had to stay behind. That’s when they check your name and everything. That’s when they get you. You are going to be called up for the Army.”

Between the ages of 16 to 18, the boys continued with studying or moved into work. Hendry learnt Hairdressing, which was a skill that would eventually serve him well. Upon reaching the age of 18, boys became liable for compulsory military service.

“When you hit the age of 18, it’s a definite. Unless you go to University and you get an exemption for that time until you finish your course. But if you finish school and go for a regular trade, no, you are going to go and do your National Service.”

Hendry offers a candid account of the reality of their situation.

“It’s all very bravado and all that, But the day you get that letter and they tell you to be there on such a date at such a time, and a list of what you have to bring, that’s when it hits in.”

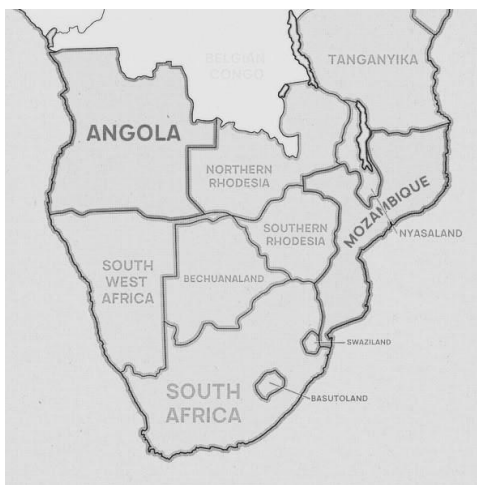
National Service

In the decade that Hendry served, the 1970’s, the southwestern region of Africa was governed by South Africa. It eventually became known as Namibia, when the country gained independence. South Africa exercised much influence in Southwest Africa and neighbouring countries, including Angola.

Hendry entered the system of conscripted military service in 1974.

Since 1972, South Africa faced increasing security issues both at the border with Namibia and internally in the large urban areas. The Apartheid regime was well established but there was growing opposition to the policy of racial separation. Tension was rising and there would eventually be outbreaks of large-scale disorder. By the time Hendry joined the Army, civil war in neighbouring Angola also seemed inevitable. South Africa had committed itself to support the UNITA faction of parties opposing change.

In order to support its objectives, the South African authorities required manpower. This need was addressed by conscription. 1974 saw a significant increase in young men entering the military for an initial 12-month period of service, with a part time commitment of 19 days per year. In practice, there appears to be some variation in how the initial 12 months service progressed. Hendry accounts for his own experience later in the interview.



This period map illustrates the situation in southern Africa that relates to Hendry's time serving in the SADF.

Image – Kaden Change Facebook

The interview progresses to Hendry talking about the rude introduction to military life. He reported to a reception area at an establishment called 'Witwatersrand' Johannesburg.

"You get there and you see hundreds of guys like you. All in their civvies with their mum's or girlfriends. In the background a couple of instructors walking around.

I was called up for the Artillery. We had a lot of Bombardiers walking around. Quite arrogant, two stripes, one stripe and this kind of thing.

We marched down about 2 miles to the train station. We get on this troop train. You don't know anybody, you can see the anxiety on these boys. They are only 18 years old.

After about 2.5 hours you pull into a siding that is on the Army base. The doors open and your ordered to stand and that's' where the fun starts!"

Hendry continues with memories of a tumultuous first few days in the Army. Especially how the recruits were treated by the training staff.

"They love punishing people. They walk around calling out 'Hello ladies' and 'You girls' that kind of thing and then they march you off and you come into the military base."

Training

Assigned to the Artillery, he joined a regiment named 14 Field (Horse) Artillery, which was based at Potchefstroom. This unit was responsible for training recruits enlisting into the regular army and also National Servicemen.

The South African Army followed a traditional and well-trodden path on how to turn civilian into soldier.

“At 4 o clock in the morning these instructors are up kicking you out. Then your taken first of all for a haircut. There are thousands of guys there, all for a haircut. Five, six Barbers in a line. They are awesome they do 2-minute cuts. From there you are taken to a place, where you fill in all sorts of forms. You have to make out a will. Then you go and have a medical, hundreds of boys standing in lines.”

The medical was an ordeal.

“Once that’s over, it’s an absolute relief. This takes a day, 2 days. They take you to where they dish out all the kit. They are still treating you with kid gloves.”

At this point in the interview Hendry reflects on the treatment that was to come for him and his 18-year-old companions.

“I very often think back to those days and wonder why they treated us so badly. They made us unpatriotic by treating us so badly.”

After kit issue, where the boys received amongst many other items, a rifle, they were taken to the accommodation.

“We lived in a tent town. There were between 6 and 8 of us in a tent. That’s where your ‘fun’ begins. You’d hear the generators starting around half past 3. The light came on and within minutes these Bombardiers are running around, cussing you. Some of these guys couldn’t get up, they were so unfamiliar with it. We had buckets around with sand and water. I’ve seen Bombardiers grab a 5-gallon bucket and throw it right over them in bed.

Another challenge the recruits faced was the change on diet and sanitary conditions. Very few recruits avoided stomach upsets. Hendry wasn’t one of them.

“The main thing they wanted was to chase you around. Wherever you go, you had to run. Then you go on obstacle courses and all of that. That is what you call conscription. We had between 3 and 4 months of that nightmare.”

The recruits were confined to the base for an extended period. This caused a lot of angst and resentment amongst Hendry’s companions. He decided to launch a secret bid for a small slice of freedom.

“Eventually, you’ve done your 12 weeks. You’re supposed to get a pass, but in all that time, I never got one. But I was a guy that used to think a lot. One night, I got out and I managed to get home. So, I was AWOL. My mother drove me back to Jo’berg and I caught a bus to Potchefstroom. I got back to camp, and no one knew I was AWOL.”

He'd got away with an unauthorised trip home but later in his service, he wouldn't be so lucky. He had a spell in the Detention Barracks. Hendry tells an interesting story about his stay in 'DB' later in the interview.

After basic training ends, the soldiers receive postings to different units.

"Once you've done that 12, 14 weeks you get what is called your mustering. Some guys were going to be Truck Drivers, or you were going to become a Gunner, or a Chef. You just do what you are told to do."

Hendry was told to that he was to be a gunner in the Royal Artillery.

The National Servicemen were now soldiers in the SADF and committed to certain terms of service. In addition to the 9 months full time service, there was a reserve commitment.

"After you complete your military service, you are still eligible to be called up every other weekend and 3, 4 months at a time every year."*

*Hendry is referring to the initial period of regular service, which included training.

There is an interesting paradox, which many National Servicemen in the UK can relate too.

"You hate it so much. But the moment you get on your pass, and you get home, eventually you meet up with your mates. They are all serving in the Army and they have their pass. You meet in the local pub and all you can talk about is the Army! You love it and it's unbelievable."

14 Field (Horse) Artillery

New soldiers joining the regiment were introduced to the artillery guns by experienced Gunners. This signalled a new phase of training, with new soldiers learning how to become 'Artillery Gunners'.

"The Gunners took us down to start us off. 25 Pounders, an awesome gun. World War 2 25 pounder."

Hendry was struck by the capability and engineering of the smaller artillery piece that the SADF used in the 1970's. He describes the weapon and ammunition in detail. The sound of the gun firing left an impression on him.

"When it shoots, it has that perfect sound of Bam!"

However, when later deployed on operations, Hendry was in fact destined to work on a different artillery piece. This was the BL 5.5-inch medium artillery gun, which at the time was over 30 years old, but still a formidable weapon. The longevity of its operational life is testament to its design and effectiveness on the battlefield. The SADF deployed it with field regiments during operations in Namibia and Angola during the conflict known as the 'Border War'. This was also known as the 'Bush War'.

“I was on the big guns, the 55’s .The gun that I was on was gun number 7, never forget it. Every time, gun number 7 and you got the same gun crew. Our gun was built in the UK in 1942. The most awesome piece of machinery you’ve ever seen.”



The BL 5.5 Field gun. This is a Canadian gun. Hendry operated a variant that was very similar to this example.

Image: Wikimedia Commons

“My job was a number 2 Gunner, which means I pulled the lanyard, boom. You had a rope around your shoulder, and you leant in. All you saw was the gun coming back with the recoil. When you open the breach, you can’t help it and you get a gulp of the cordite smoke that comes out. That stays with you all night.”

After this crash course on artillery guns, Hendry’s training came to an end.

“It went on and on and on. When we finished our training, you clear out.”

‘Clearing out’ actually meant, with training complete, he was free to return to his civilian life and await the call for deployment. This wouldn’t take long. Hendry’s experience of training and then being sent back to their civilian life under the constant ‘threat’ of call-up, was in direct contrast to National Servicemen in the UK who have been trained by the Army or RAF, would then serve their full two years before being demobbed to return to civilian life. Whilst placed on the Reserve list, the vast majority of National Servicemen in the UK, were never called up again to serve in the British Armed Forces.

“I was out the Army for 6 months. I went back into my hairdressing trade. After 6 months I got a Telegram ‘ You need to report to...you’re going back to the operational area for 3 months.’ They could say 3 months but say, ‘Oh we got bad news, we’re keeping you for another month.”

The Telegram meant Hendry was going to do his part in ‘The Border War’. He explains what he understood at the time to be the ‘Operational area’.

“The Operational area was the north of Namibia. There was a thin piece of land called Ovamboland. That is where the war was.”

This was indeed a warzone. Armed conflict was taking place between the South African Defence Forces and the armed wing of SWAPO*, known as PLAN**. However, the SWAPO forces had suffered considerable setbacks in the conflict and had resorted to what became known as ‘Guerilla tactics’, gaining increasing success using land mines and ambushes. World opinion was changing and there was widespread opposition to South African rule in Southwest Africa. In fact, the United Nations had mandated

against South African rule, reflecting the growing opposition to the policy of apartheid. Hendry, in common with his countrymen, did not have the luxury of choice. They were conscripted to obey orders and perform their duty. As Hendry explains in this interview, the penalty for ignoring conscription was heavy. Therefore, whatever the readers view on this troubled period in African history, young men such as Hendry, found themselves placed in a very difficult and at times precarious position.

*SWAPO: South- West African Peoples Organization

**PLAN: Peoples Liberation Army of Namibia

Conflict

“The Police department handled the SWAPO thing very well. When they first went there, they had no equipment. They were the ones that really fought SWAPO. Our boys were thinking ‘What the hell are we doing there?’ We should have stayed within our boundaries of South Africa. That’s where our problems were. They were smuggling weapons in and bomb making equipment.”

The SADF commitments spread across different campaigns was high. Consequently, the burden would fall on the nations National Servicemen to plug the gaps and populate the various units and regiments.

“We got called up continuously.”

Jumping forward in his account to many years later, Hendry mentions taking the situation into his own hands to avoid the cycle of call ups. For he was liable to call-up up to the age of 65yrs!

“I emigrated with my wife and 2 kids. I was supposed to go on another camp, but we emigrated. I remember taking great pleasure in sending them a letter and telling them I’m away.”

Returning to his recollections on deployment with 14 Field Regiment, Hendry recalls meeting some soldiers from Great Britain, who were in South Africa in the 1970’s.

“I remember being at a place on my last camp. I remember coming to an area and I heard a British voice. There were some Green Berets instructing South African troops. Usually everything is in Afrikaans, but these were all British guys. They went up into the border areas as well.”

The South African Army was equipped with a lot of equipment made in the UK.

“ We had all the embargos and that but most of our stuff was all British. All our vehicles, Bedford’s and Land Rovers. Eventually we got American stuff, the Jeeps and Gladiators. All our guns were World War 2 British guns. Beautiful working instruments.”

The interview moves on to 1976 and Hendry recalling how the country seemed to become more unstable, as incident of domestic strife and violence, particularly in the Townships, became more frequent.

“In 1976, the real crap hit the fan in South Africa. The Trade Unions had started up, and they started off with the Soweto riots. They were saying that the new curriculum that the government had put through the schools was in Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor. Instead of the government saying, ‘Choose any language you want’, they stuck to it. Then we had the Soweto riots.”

Hendry took part in a pivotal moment in South African history. On the 16th of June 1976, students led a mass protest against the language policy. The authorities responded in an uncompromising manner, resulting in many injuries amongst the crowd. Unfortunately, a 13-year-old boy was killed and this tragedy sparked off riots in several Townships. Eventually June 16th would become known as ‘Youth day’. This tumultuous day would have repercussions for the young National Servicemen serving in 14 Field Regiment. The conscripts were deployed alongside their regular colleagues, caught in between warring political factions.

“One riot led to another riot in many, many Townships. Then we were called up again, to drive through the Townships. They were throwing petrol bombs and ‘Molotov Cocktails’. It was a nightmare. We’d go in there with our military vehicles ‘Mercedes Unimogs’ that were open on top and had thick plate (along the side). We’d all sit down low.”



A South African Army variant of the Unimog, pictured conveying troops in 1974. Variants were used in the ‘Border War’ and “The Townships”.

Image courtesy Facebook ‘South African Defence Industry and Military related’

The Apartheid regime would eventually fall in South Africa, and the country began to strive for a better future, with a new leader, Nelson Mandela. However, in those early days when the protest movement began to grow rapidly, young men like Hendry, were thrown into a cauldron of hate, where danger was ever present. Conscripts had no freedom to opt out. As Hendry earlier explained, in his experience, they were called to duty or sent to jail.

Whilst the civil unrest was ongoing, the border war continued.

“Even in the Operational Area, we call it our ‘Border War’, we had many, many contacts. Half an hour before sunrise and half an hour after sunset. That is the time we would come under attack. We’d dig trenches or lie down flat, and they’d throw Mortar’s at you. One night we came under heavy fire. They were shooting at us in the bush 3, 6 and 8 feet above us. There were thousands of tracer rounds flying!”

Barbering

Earlier in the interview, Hendry mentioned that he trained and worked as a Hairdresser before he was conscripted. As the interview reaches its final stages, he explains how his military service was materially affected by a chance encounter one day.

“What happened was that we were going into the bush for 3 and 4 months at a time in Northern Namibia. You couldn’t even get a wash. Our helmets we called a ‘Fire bucket’ and we’d fill it with water and wash with that. You couldn’t get a haircut. Anyway, I would take my Scissors, Comb and a Cutting Gown along. I’d cut my mates hair and one day this (Officer) comes to me and says ‘The OC (Officer Commanding) asks if you don’t mind coming along and cutting his hair. I said ‘Absolutely’ and that changed my life! He said to me ‘Come every 2 weeks to cut my hair’. I said ‘Absolutely what time!’”

Indeed, a stroke of good fortune! Having met Hendry and experienced a decent haircut, a deal of sorts was struck and the OC ensured that himself and his soldiers would maintain as smart appearance as possible.

“He said to me this one day ‘I want you to go around this whole area and find everyone who needs a haircut. Tell him they have to come to you for a haircut, and you charge them 1 Rand.’ That’s what happened. Eventually they were queuing up.”



Hendry’s friend was a Cartoonist and made this sign for Hendry to ‘advertise’ his hairdressing service. Hendry has kept the drawing as a fond reminder of his flourishing ‘bush’ business

The Hairdressing led to Hendry becoming known throughout the regiment. It also led to favour when certain duties arose.

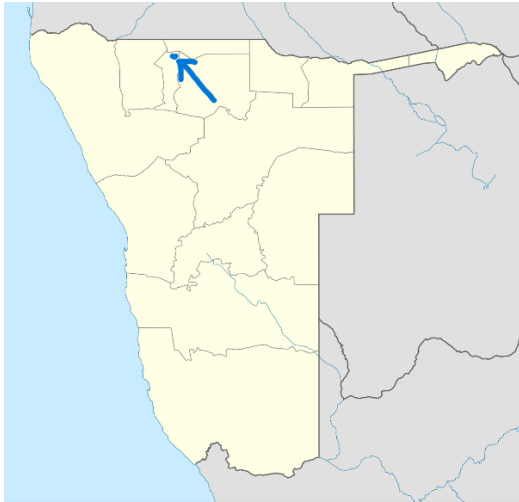
“One day our Officer Commanding said to me ‘Listen, we are sending some vehicles to our Headquarters in Ondangwa. We need a protective element. Make sure you get yourself on that vehicle. You’ll be able to get back to base, have a shower, wash your clothes.’ I said to my mate we got to get on that thing and we did. It was fantastic.”

The hairdressing bonus continued to pay dividends for Hendry.

“We never went on anymore patrols. We were able to say ‘Listen, the Officer Commanding has told me “no”. I was able to go on these protective elements, and I was able to phone my girlfriend on a Satellite phone. I was able to go to the pub!”

Hendry’s frequent sorties out of the bush, back to HQ, began to draw some attention.

“Once the boys realised, people came with lists and money. They mostly wanted booze and cigarettes.”



This simple map of modern-day Namibia shows where Hendry was deployed in the ‘Border War’. The blue arrow points to Ondangwa, where 14 FA HQ was based in the north of ‘Southwest Africa’. South Africa itself is further south, near the bottom of the highlighted area.

Image courtesy of Wikipedia

As the interview enters its final few minutes, Hendry once again reiterates the compulsory nature of conscription.

“You were conscripted and if you didn’t ‘pitch up’ they send the Military Police out straight away. You go to jail. Some guys refused to do it, and they go to jail for between 5 and 10 years. There’s no getting out of it.”

Before the interview ends, Hendry refers back to ‘Detention Barracks’. He mentioned this period of his service, earlier.

“I went to DB for 28 days. Myself and a guy called Robbie had been in there a few days and suffered. It was a World War 1 prison with 4-foot-thick walls in Wynberg, Cape Town. There was this guy that had been AWOL for 65 days and the MP’s caught him that night. He broke free from the Detention Police and they caught him. The next day he had to go to the hospital. They put myself and Robbie outside, to tend the garden outside the walls. They brought him back and he broke free again and ran. For some unknown reason, myself and Robbie ran after him. Robbie caught him and then I arrived. The DP’s arrived and we got him back.”

Hendry continues with this story and tells how catching the escapee resulted in an unexpected release from Detention.

“The following day the OC of the Wynberg DB called us up and said ‘You guys did a very good job yesterday by capturing this guy. Tomorrow you guys can clear out.’ I’d served 12 days and when I got back to my base in Cape Town our Sergeant Major was very upset, because they wanted to make an example of me!”

So, the interview comes to an end with another win, which rather mirrors Hendry's National Service experience, which eventually ended with him aboard a civilian airliner, bound for the United Kingdom.

Footnote

This narrative account preserves the memory of service to the nation of South Africa, by a person who subsequently emigrated to live in the UK and settled in Wales. This account provides an interesting comparison to the experience of National Servicemen who were conscripted into the British military.

The account, accompanied by a video recording of the interview, is located in the Hendry McMahon collection at 'The National Lottery Heritage Fund National Service' collection' in the West Wales Veterans Archive on the Peoples Collection Wales website.

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- Wikipedia
- Facebook - Various


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