

The Sowti Squad by Ray Kane
(www.thesowtisquad.com, paperback,
£7.99).

Review: Capt David Greaves REME

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AS RAY Kane hitch-hiked through Africa on his way to commission into the British Army, he never expected to be mistaken for a mercenary by the Sudanese authorities. He was. And the officer-turned-writer's subsequent deportation is just one of the many experiences that influenced his debut novel.

Set on the post-colonial African continent, *The Sowti Squad* is an action-packed tale of profit-seeking mercenaries recruited, trained and paid for by the South African Government.

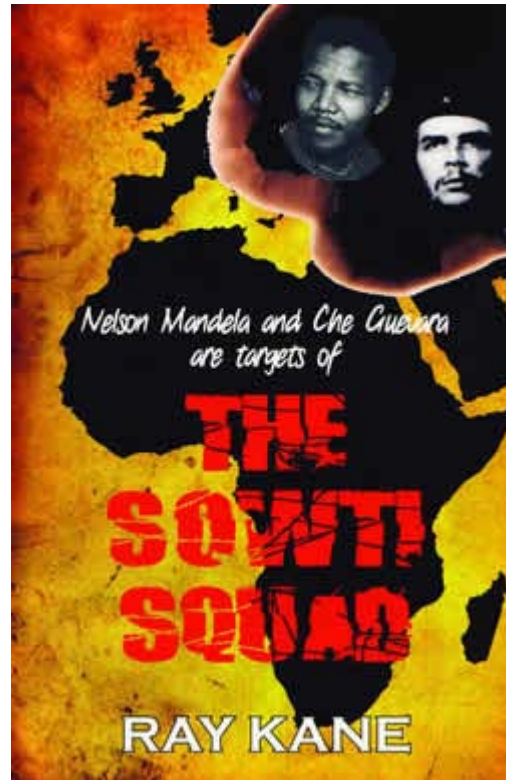
The bloody and brutal initiation of these soldiers of fortune sets in motion a chain of events that sees them tasked by the CIA to kill communist revolutionary Che Guevara, before returning to South Africa and attempting to spring Nelson Mandela from incarceration on Robben Island.

Mercenaries were very much a part of the landscape in Africa during the 1960s and Kane, who completed a short-service commission in The Duke of Edinburgh's Royal Regiment after a brief spell in the South African Police Service, remembers the period well.

"At that time there were a lot of opportunities for someone wanting to get into that line of work," the novelist told *Soldier*. "You could leave the South African police and be training with mercenaries in a very short period of time. Plenty of people did."

Kane's own time in a police uniform provides much of the background to his book, with the novel's title being just one of the many personal memories he has committed to print.

"Sowti was something you were called if you were white but not an Afrikaner," the former British Army officer remembered.



Out of Africa: Cuba's revolutionary hero Che Guevara (currently being played on the silver screen by Benicio Del Toro in *Che – Part One/Part Two*, below) is the target of an assassination plot in the debut novel of former officer Ray Kane



“It was meant as a derogatory term, but like most of these things you ended up wearing it like a badge of honour because it set you apart.”

In a case of art imitating real life, this sentiment is seized upon by one of *The Sowti Squad*'s main protagonists, Oregon O'Connor, who applauds the adoption of the name for the small band of highly irregular soldiers.

O'Connor, an American, is just one disparate individual in the eclectic group assembled by Kane.

“The idea that one particular type of person makes a good soldier is nonsense,” explained the author, who spent the bulk of his British Army career stationed in Germany and later served as an officer in The Desert Regiment of the Omani Army.

“The sowti squad is made up of a host of different nationalities, all with different priorities and persuasions, brought towards one common goal – making money through mayhem. They soon come to realise that nobody loves a mercenary, other than his mates.”

The proxy Cold War battles fought by east and west in post-colonial Africa provide a very real battleground for Kane's fictional band of brothers. The African bush is an arena that has generally been by-passed by modern authors and *The Sowti Squad* does something to redress the balance by telling the story of the violence and suffering that was endured by the continent and its people during the Cold War.

Kane draws attention back to a time when much of the current state of Africa was decided and admits his driving force for doing so was his love for “the ordinary, working people of Africa”.

His passion makes for an impressive literary debut. Kane writes of the violence meted out and experienced by the squad with such graphic detail that it is impossible not to keep turning the book's pages. This reviewer will certainly be among the first in the queue to buy the three follow-up titles planned by this imaginative and exciting new author.

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