

**“Red Tabs”**

**Life and death in the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division,  
1943 – 1945**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis seeks to understand, first and foremost, what the members of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division in Italy during the Second World War experienced in their day-to-day lives on campaign. It is therefore primarily a social history.

Although an exhaustive analysis of the demographics of the division is beyond the scope of this study, an attempt was made in Chapter 2 to identify some of the characteristics of the volunteers and their motivations for enlisting. Recruitment statistics and other sources show that in the final stage of the war, volunteers were most likely to be school-leavers and university students.

Chapters three to eight detail the daily life in camp and on the road as the division progressed up the length of Italy. The main themes revolve around the necessities of life, recreation, leisure and ways of dealing with long periods of inactivity. The more controversial topics of sexuality, alcohol use, and battle fatigue are not avoided. Regardless of the capacity in which they served, all those attached to the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division experienced the country and its people. Homesickness, discomfort and the fulfilling of basic needs was the common bond.

Chapter nine examines the topic of casualties and what it reveals about the men and their experience. At first glance, it would appear that the casualty rate was exceptionally low for a front line division. However, on closer examination, the casualty rate was found to be in line with that experienced by other nations involved in the Italian campaign. As expected, it was found that casualties occurred mainly in infantry units, although accidents accounted for 25 per cent of injuries.

In the final chapter, the conclusions are presented and discussed in a theoretical context. Memory is used as a category of analysis. Scholars are in agreement that distortion and cleansing occurred due to the tendency of contemporary accounts to accentuate the positive. The needs of post-war society also helped to ensure that the language and experience of the front line soldier was overwhelmed.

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Key words:

6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division, Italy, Second World War, propaganda, censorship, social memory, Historical Recording Officer, everyday life, social history, military history.

## INTRODUCTION

### a) Aims and objectives

At the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division's thanksgiving parade near Milan on 4 May 1945, Major-General W.H. Evered Poole quoted the controversial General George Patton in his speech: "It is said that 'if you ride boldly enough at death it will get out of your way', and that you have done. You have played an absolutely major part in this final and complete rout and defeat of the arrogant Wehrmacht." General Poole then gave the campaign statistics regarding South African casualties: Killed – 711; wounded – 2,675; missing – 157; total – 3,543.<sup>1</sup> Without trivializing these supreme sacrifices, the number of 711 killed (including accidental deaths) can be considered to be negligible for a division of around 15,000 South Africans routinely assaulting mountain fortresses over a twelve month period.

The thesis seeks to understand, first and foremost, what these men experienced in their day to day lives on campaign. A secondary question which arises is: Who were these men and what motivated them? This is not a history from below in the true sense of the word as the sources emanate mainly from the more educated and affluent men who left documentary legacies. It is a social history, a history of everyday life.

Cleansing of the national memory began with the strict censorship of every report (official and unofficial) which came out of the theatre of war and continued with the official and popular histories. The language of the troops themselves did not convey their true experience. Therefore, although much use is made of letters from the front, a greater emphasis is attached to archival research.

The purpose of the study therefore, is to use humanity to explain South Africa's experience in the Italian campaign, to better understand the environment in which the soldiers of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division lived and died. Many of us know that our forefathers served "Up North" in WW II, but are ignorant about where exactly they went, and what they did when they were there.

### b) Hypotheses

Arising from the aims of the study, there are three main hypotheses:

Firstly, in answering the question about what it was really like, it is hypothesized that the experience of the front line troops has been reconstructed and cleansed in the national memory. This is partly due to wartime censorship and popular histories published in the post-war period. Furthermore, it is believed that another factor could be at work. Quoting Fussell, Lee suggests that there were two experiences: the home front and the combat soldiers:

Those undergoing the two experiences required different languages to cope with their different environments. When the soldiers returned home, their experience and language was overwhelmed by numbers. The home front's celebratory, pull-together-to-victory vision dominated.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> N.W. Smith Collection, Johannesburg, W.H.E. Poole, 6th SA Armoured Division Victory Parade, Address to the Div. by the G.O.C., 4/5/1945.

<sup>2</sup> W.E. Lee, Mind and matter – Cultural analysis in American military history: A look at the state of the field, *The Journal of American History* 93, 2007, p. 1137.

Furthermore, it is believed that the experience and language was also overwhelmed by those who were on active service in Italy but who never went into the forward areas. These rear echelon troops outnumbered the frontline troops almost three to one.<sup>3</sup> Possibly because people of that generation were more stoic or perhaps because no one was prepared to listen, veterans have to this day, remained largely silent about the trauma, anxiety and physical discomforts which they experienced.

Secondly, the unwillingness of the military and the general public to accept high casualties stems from the WWI experience and more recently, the annihilation of the 5<sup>th</sup> South African Brigade at Sidi Rezegh in 1941 and the loss of the entire 2<sup>nd</sup> South African Division at Tobruk in 1942. However, societal culture demanded that Tobruk be avenged, and when called upon, the men did what was asked of them. The overwhelming superiority of the Allies in terms of air power and artillery as well as the innovative tactics developed in the South African frontier wars, enabled the mountain defences to be breached with relatively few casualties.

Thirdly, it is hypothesized that it was largely cultural factors which motivated soldiers to join the infantry regiments which bore the brunt of the casualties. There may have been an element of “coercive volunteerism” due to social pressures as well as notions of honour and virtue. Patriotism appears not to have played a big part in the decision to join up. Although the desire to escape poverty may have motivated some to enlist, it will be shown that new replacements for the front line regiments were mostly school-leavers.

### c) Elucidation of the title

The title, “Red Tabs” – Life and death in the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division, 1943-1945” reflects the focus of the study, which is as much about everyday life as it is about death in war. This can be seen as a military history with a social slant rather than as social history within a military context, and as John Lynn has said, combat is what makes military history unique: “The life and death nature of war defines attitudes and practices within militaries, even in peacetime and even in elements of the military who are not directly in harm’s way”.<sup>4</sup>

Use of the name “Red Tabs” indicates that it is more about the people than the events. Red Tabs are the strips of orange scarlet, worn on the epaulettes to signify that the wearer had volunteered for service anywhere in Africa. In Afrikaans, they were called “Rooi Lussies”. These red shoulder tabs became the focus of ridicule and anti-war factions referred to them by a derogatory Afrikaans term – *rooi luisies* (red lice).<sup>5</sup>

Red Tabs became a commonly used nick-name for those who wore them. “Red Tabs” was also the name of a non-residential UDFI club for other ranks in Prato. The name was later changed to “Orange Flash Club”, but the new version was never used.

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<sup>3</sup> S. Monick, *A Bugle calls*, p. 324.

<sup>4</sup> J.A. Lynn, The embattled future of academic military history, *The Journal of Military History* 61 (4), 1997, p. 783.

<sup>5</sup> F.L. Monama, *The Second World War and South African society, 1939-1945: Preparedness and consequences*, p. 54 in T. Potgieter & I. Liebenberg, (eds), *Reflections on war*.

#### d) The envisaged contribution of the thesis

Why should one be interested in the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division? If one takes the time to visit the Commonwealth war cemeteries in Italy, or any foreign country for that matter, one might be surprised by the care and attention which is accorded the dead of the British Diaspora. The more curious visitor might wonder who these young men were, what paths they took to arrive in these foreign fields – how they lived and how they died. A worthwhile enquiry would be to simply understand what constituted their general experience, but this knowledge may be enhanced by an understanding of what motivated them and what dangers they faced. In a sense, it is an attempt to recreate the lives of the soldiers who fought in Italy. This is an approach which has been lauded by Michael Howard, John Keegan and others.<sup>6</sup>

Although, the so-called “new military history” first appeared almost a generation ago, and there have been some works about South Africa’s role in WWII published since then. It seems that local historians have skipped the “war and society” approach whereas internationally there has been little attempt to move “beyond battlefield analysis in order to concentrate on the interface between war and society” and subject the more humanistic side of this particular campaign to scholarly analysis.<sup>7</sup> There are clearly gaps in the body of knowledge and there is a need for a South African perspective from the present day. This will be the first history of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division written by the “next generation”. In the words of Leedy, it can be said that this is truly a “fertile field which has been left fallow”.<sup>8</sup>

The now-old new military history has focused on the more humanistic side of war: Who was in the military and what happened to them while they were there? These basic questions have opened up newer and more complex questions about values, motivations and expectations.<sup>9</sup> These questions remain unanswered, in part because the cult of the fallen soldier which existed after the First World War, was largely absent after the next war. According to Mosse, there was no quest for new literary or artistic forms after the Second World War.<sup>10</sup>

Being a monograph, this thesis cannot claim to be “complete-picture military history”. However, it will incorporate the key elements of the new military history, or history and society as well as cultural analysis. The focus will be on the narrow geographical and social aspects of a single division rather than on the broader campaign strategy. Previously neglected aspects of the campaign such as the sojourn in Egypt and the post-war peacekeeping task, will also receive attention.

An analysis of casualties was done throughout the campaign for immediate military use. However, for the last 65 years, these figures have been hidden in the archives. A breakdown

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<sup>6</sup> J.W. Chambers, The new military history: Myth and reality, *The Journal of Military History* (55) 3, 1991, p. 400.

<sup>7</sup> R.M. Citino, Review Essay, Military histories old and new: A reintroduction, *The Journal of American History* 112, 2007, p. 1071.

<sup>8</sup> P.D. Leedy, *Practical research*, p. 134.

<sup>9</sup> W.E. Lee, Mind and matter: Cultural analysis in American military history: A look at the state of the field. *Journal of American History* 93, 2007, pp. 1117.

<sup>10</sup> G.L. Mosse, Two world wars and the myth of the war experience, *Journal of Contemporary History*, (21) 4, 1986, pp. 504-506.

will be done of the casualties according to nature, cause and regiments concerned. When viewed in the context of historical time and historical space, this data reveals certain misconceptions.

#### e) Methodology, approach and procedure

It has been said that the historian's claim to reconstruct past reality rests on pretence. The illusion lies in the fact that the past is only imagined to be out there waiting to be discovered. In reality, it is an empty space waiting to be filled in by the historian.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless the terms "reconstruct" and 'recreate" are very much part of the new military history as will be explained in section (g) below.

Clarity is needed with regard to where this study is placed or located in historiographical terms, and what category of analysis will be used. In the words of Confino, "There exists in memory studies the danger of reducing culture to politics and ideology, instead of broadening the field from the political to the social and the experiential to an everyday history of memory".<sup>12</sup> This is therefore considered to be a social history which uses the history of culture, memory and *mentalities* as the main categories of analysis. This approach is more than compatible with the "new military history" which will be exhaustively explored below. It should be pointed out here that this is not a battlefield analysis. Certainly it is not a history of politics, ideology, ideas, nor is it intellectual history.

The French history of *mentalities* tended to view every historical problem as a psychological problem. The study of memory and the history of *mentalities* appear to share a common purpose and agenda as well as fashionableness. The history of memory has been defined as the history of collective mentality. According to Confino, the appeal and common link is its vagueness – it has been devalued by excessive use but has seldom been used with any sophistication.<sup>13</sup>

Another key concept in the interpretation, explanation, and method is culture – which also encompasses memory. Memory has come to denote the representation of the past and making of it into a shared cultural knowledge by successive generations in "vehicles of memory" such as books, films, museums, commemorations and others. The history of memory is a fragmented field, defined largely in terms of topics of enquiry such as repressed memory, the Holocaust, the French Revolution and memory of recent events – everything is a memory case, memory is everywhere. It describes (often in a predictable way) how people construct the past.<sup>14</sup>

In examining the extent to which the national memory has been cleansed, it is useful to juxtapose the text of letters written by a Natal Carbineer from the front, with the events which were unfolding at the time. The objective here is not to attempt what other scholars have failed to achieve. It is the social and experiential information which is extracted – being mindful that collective mentality may have reshaped the representation of the past. The

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<sup>11</sup> R.J. Evans, *In defence of history*, p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> A. Confino, Collective memory and cultural history: problems of method, *The American Historical Review* (102) 5, 1997, p. 1402.

<sup>13</sup> A. Confino, Collective memory and cultural history: problems of method, *The American Historical Review* (102) 5, 1997, pp.1386-1389.

<sup>14</sup> A. Confino, Collective memory and cultural history: problems of method, *The American Historical Review* (102) 5, 1997, pp.1386-1389.

method used here is no more rigorous theoretically than to always revert to the archival documents in order to historicise memory.

The various aspects of day to day life are organized topically and chronologically within each topic. To gain further insight into the life and death experiences, casualty figures are analyzed according to unit, branch of service, action, stage of the war, nature of death (Battle Accidents or Battle Casualties). The resulting data will be used to shed light on various aspects of the campaign and understand the roles of various units in the division.

The question of the motivations and social standing of the volunteers cannot be answered in any one area of analysis. It is expected that the demographic profile will be revealed by sheer weight of evidence emerging from the study as a whole.

It may appear that the thesis neglects the experience of black soldiers of the Union Defence Force – some of whom did serve in Italy as non-divisional troops. However in no way should this be seen as a history of the subordinate classes and it is certainly not a “history of the vanquished”. Rather it is the history of everyday life, *Alltagsgeschichte* in German and *la vie quotidienne* in French which is viewed by some historians as “the only real history”.<sup>15</sup>

#### **f) Delimitations**

The study covers a period of approximately 20 months, from the formation of the Division in February 1943 until the end of 1945 – by which time, most people had been repatriated. Although the structure of the report is thematic and not chronological, the geographical delimitations include the training periods in the Union and in the Middle East. The experience of the division in Italy, during and after the campaign is the main focus.

The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division was only a small element of a much larger Allied force. This study is limited to the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division, but because they successively fell under command of the British Eighth Army and American Fifth Army and had regular contact with the New Zealanders and the French, there is mention of these as far as the interface is concerned.

Many South Africans died while on secondment to British units. Some of these men may have been serving with the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division, before being seconded, however for purposes of the casualty analysis, they are not included here. Other South Africans temporarily attached to the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division at the time of death are included. The non-South African units which formed part of the division, such as the Guards Brigade and Frontier Force Rifles, are not being researched but their story is interlinked with that of the South Africans. Rhodesians are considered to be South African although they sometimes kept their own identity.

The SAAF played a big part in the life of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division providing close air support. The air operations are only discussed as far as they relate to the 6<sup>th</sup> Division. Their casualties were very high but will not be analyzed here.

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<sup>15</sup> P. Burke (ed.), *New perspectives on historical writing*, pp. 2-20.

### g) International trends and prevailing schools of thought

There are three major groupings within military history. Firstly, the traditional, operational historians who analyze the “hows and whys” of actual warfare, strategy and battle. Secondly, there is the “war and society” school which began in the 1960’s and examines the nexus between armies and the societies which spawn them. Finally, there is the more recent approach which applies the history of memory and culture to the study of military affairs.<sup>16</sup>

The international trend in military history changed during the 1960s from the narrow field of operational history or battlefield analysis to the “new military history” in order to concentrate on the social composition of armies, civil-military relations, the impact of war on race, class and gender (and vice versa). It was sometimes said that this school is “interested in everything about armies except the way they fought, interested in everything about war except campaigns and battles”. John Lynn concurs that new military history liked armies in peacetime best and found war a confusing complication.<sup>17</sup>

John Keegan has said that battle history or campaign history deserves a “primacy over all other branches of military historiography. It is in fact the oldest historical form, its subject matter is of commanding importance and its treatment demands the most scrupulous care”.<sup>18</sup>

New in 1984 was a fascination with recruitment, training and socialization of personnel, combat motivation, the effect of service and war on the individual soldier, the veteran, the internal dynamics of military institutions, inter-and-intra service tensions, civil-military relations, and the relationship between military systems and greater society.<sup>19</sup>

Traditional military history not only focuses on the battlefield. It has long included politics, economics, logistics and social structure. The lessons from the “new” military history are now also being incorporated. The “new” military history was the chosen theme of the fifty-eighth annual meeting of the American Military Institute held 22-23 March 1991 in Durham, North Carolina. The predominant view expressed at the conference was that the “new” military history must not avoid the study of armed conflict – it should not try to “escape from war”. As a result there has been a renewed focus on “new” combat and “new” operational history integrating strategic, tactical and administrative military concerns into the analyses of economic mobilization, political and cultural influences.<sup>20</sup> In his address to the Society of Military History on 23 March 1991, Peter Paret defined new military history as “an expansion of the subject of military history from specifics of military organization and action to their widest implications, and also a broadening of the approaches to the subject and of the methodological approaches”.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> R.M. Citino, Review Essay, Military histories old and new: A reintroduction, *The Journal of American History* 112, 2007, p. 1071.

<sup>17</sup> J.A. Lynn, The embattled future of academic military history, *The Journal of Military History* 61 (4), 1997, p. 784.

<sup>18</sup> J. Keegan, *The face of battle: A study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> P. Karsten, The “new” American military history: A map of the territory, explored and unexplored. *American Quarterly* (36) 3, 1984, p. 389.

<sup>20</sup> J.W. Chambers, The new military history: Myth and reality, *The Journal of Military History* (55) 3, 1991, p. 405.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in R.M. Citino, Review Essay, Military histories old and new: A reintroduction, *The Journal of American History* 112, 2007, p. 1071.

This “new” school is no longer new but it is still relevant and popular today. However, the most recent trend is towards “cultural analysis” and the “history of memory” which can be described as the study of war and how people write about it. This approach has focused on three main areas of study: a) culture and violence, b) the motivations of soldiers to enlist, serve and fight and c) the role of societal culture on moulding military institutions.<sup>22</sup> There are many overlaps between the “culture” approach and the “war and society” approach. In fact, the “new” military history is sometimes called the “war and society” approach to military history. Military historians have followed the trend within the discipline from social history into the so-called cultural or linguistic turn.<sup>23</sup> There are also many similarities with the mainstream Annales School.

A cornerstone of academic military history over the past fifty years has been what Lee refers to as the “impossibly broad” category “war and society”. The overlaps between “war and culture and “war and society” are almost endless. Nevertheless he goes on to define the war and society studies as those which emphasize the connections between social organization, political institutions, and military activity.<sup>24</sup>

A cultural analysis of war entails much more than politics, it is an expression of culture and is often a determinant of cultural forms. Examining the military through a cultural lens, finding patterns in the behaviour of soldiers and the language they use. The method used by John A. Lynn in his book, *Battle: A cultural history of combat and culture*, was to analyse a society’s “discourse” on war and compare it with the army’s practice of war.<sup>25</sup> Although culture is often used to analyse strategy and method of waging war, Lee has said that cultural military history must “move beyond the institutions and the generals to ask how values, beliefs, and hidden assumptions both permeated the hidden decision-making environment and affected the behaviour of individual soldiers”.<sup>26</sup>

The determinative influence of societal attitudes, a key aspect of the “new” military history, is nowhere more evident than in regard to gender, race and class.<sup>27</sup> For this reason, it was considered relevant to examine the demographics of the division. This study emphasizes the interconnectedness of the stories of the home front and the war front and in particular how support from the home front sustained the men at the war front. It represents a more holistic approach combining organizational, individual and social factors with situational ones. Societal culture can be used to analyse behaviour and motivations both on and off the battlefield. It is applied here for that purpose, but also to shed light on South African attitudes to casualties.

According to Robert Citino, Professor of History at Michigan University, “Military History today is in the same curious position it has been in for decades: extremely popular with the

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<sup>22</sup> W.E. Lee, Mind and matter – Cultural analysis in American military history: A look at the state of the field, *The Journal of American History* 93, 2007, p. 1128.

<sup>23</sup> W.E. Lee, Mind and matter: Cultural analysis in American military history: A look at the state of the field. *Journal of American History* 93, 2007, pp. 1116-1117.

<sup>24</sup> W.E. Lee, Mind and matter: Cultural analysis in American military history: A look at the state of the field. *Journal of American History* 93, 2007, p. 1138.

<sup>25</sup> W.E. Lee, Mind and matter: Cultural analysis in American military history: A look at the state of the field. *Journal of American History* 93, 2007, pp. 1118-1119.

<sup>26</sup> W.E. Lee, Mind and matter: Cultural analysis in American military history: A look at the state of the field. *Journal of American History* 93, 2007, p. 1127.

<sup>27</sup> J.W. Chambers, The new military history: Myth and reality, *The Journal of Military History* (55) 3, 1991, p. 401.



public at large, and relatively marginalized within professional academic circles”. Its public profile continues to expand but its academic footprint continues to shrink.<sup>28</sup> Citino writes: “Whether in season or out of season, military historians continue to pursue a research agenda that in its breadth and sophistication takes a back seat to no other area of historical inquiry.”<sup>29</sup> He concludes that “military history that does not take into account all three schools (society, culture and the distinct imperatives of the battlefield) is by definition, incomplete”.<sup>30</sup> Lee concludes that “military history continues to deal with the hard-nosed realities of power, politics, imperial designs, weapons technology, and national resources, but the best scholars are injecting humanity into the story, and many are using that humanity to explain”.<sup>31</sup>

In 1997, Lynn wrote that academic military history was under attack and in danger of extinction. Partly because academics at the time were consumed by the “holy trinity” of race, class, and gender, military historians were seen as politically right wing, morally corrupt or just plain dumb. One humorist quipped that “military history is to history as military music is to music”.<sup>32</sup> Race, class and gender dominated the academic journals whereas the reshaping of the world by warfare was largely ignored. The approaches used by military historians are seen as lacking in theoretical complexity but by incorporating cultural history and memory into the field, military history can also be seen as “cutting edge”. According to Lynn, scholars like John Keegan and Peter Paret have practised the new military history without losing sight of combat.<sup>33</sup>

Michael Howard, more than any other scholar, has conferred academic respectability on the study of war. Howard was a veteran of the Italian campaign, having been a captain in the Guards Brigade (attached to the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division) and a recipient of the Military Cross. He also won the highest accolades in academia and pioneered “total history” during his tenure as Regius Professor of History at Oxford and Professor of History at Yale. He developed a distinct field of enquiry (war studies also known as security or strategic studies) which helped military history to attain new dimensions.<sup>34</sup> Brian Holden Reid, one of Howard’s successors, wrote in an essay on the life and works of his colleague:

He has been a major stimulus on serious thought about the place of war in Western societies. The scholarly credibility he confers on the “war and society” concept of military history would alone entitle him to a hallowed place among our number.<sup>35</sup>

Howard was often at pains to point out that he is not a military expert but a professional historian interested in the general problems which war raises for society. When advising

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<sup>28</sup> R.M.Citino, Review Essay, Military histories old and new: A reintroduction. *The Journal of American History* 112, 2007, p. 1070.

<sup>29</sup> R.M.Citino, Review Essay, Military histories old and new: A reintroduction. *The Journal of American History* 112, 2007, p. 1071.

<sup>30</sup> R.M. Citino, Review Essay, Military histories old and new: A reintroduction, *The Journal of American History* 112, 2007, p. 1081.

<sup>31</sup> W.E. Lee, Mind and matter – Cultural analysis in American military history: A look at the state of the field. *The Journal of American History* 93, 2007, p. 1141.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in J.A. Lynn, The embattled future of academic military history, *The Journal of Military History* 61 (4), 1997, pp. 778-780.

<sup>33</sup> J.A. Lynn, The embattled future of academic military history, *The Journal of Military History* 61 (4), 1997, pp. 782-783.

<sup>34</sup> B.H. Reid, Michael Howard and the evolution of modern war studies, *The Journal of Military History* 73 (3) 2009, p. 870.

<sup>35</sup> B.H. Reid, Michael Howard and the evolution of modern war studies, *The Journal of Military History* 73 (3) 2009, p. 903.

graduate students on the choice of a topic, he emphasized the political and social content as it would enhance their employability in a liberal academic environment. Early in his career, Howard did receive criticism from his superiors for “dabbling in the social sciences, international relations, and especially his journalism”.<sup>36</sup>

There appears to be long-standing and widespread antagonism between “official” military historians and academic military historians. This fault line seems to be partly due to the immediate and present nature of the official studies and partly due to access to classified material. The academic school remains suspicious of whether or not their government-employed counterparts can maintain a scholarly independence.<sup>37</sup> The two schools have been referred to as traditionalists and modernists.

Another long-running feud of varying intensities exists between military historians and their colleagues in academia. It appears that military historians have always had to justify their interest in the subject and defend their scholarship. As one historian wrote in 1971, most academic historians were revolted by the idea of studying war. However, this did not seem to deter students from specializing in this field.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> B.H. Reid, Michael Howard and the evolution of modern war studies, *The Journal of Military History* 73 (3) 2009, pp. 875-877.

<sup>37</sup> R. Spiller, Military history and its fictions. *The Journal of Military History* (70) 4, 2006, p. 1087.

<sup>38</sup> J.K. Mahon quoted by R. Spiller, Military history and its fictions. *The Journal of Military History* (70) 4, 2006, p. 1088.

## CHAPTER 1: RELATED HISTORIOGRAPHY

### a) Review of the available sources

Existing literature on the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division comes in two main categories: i) Campaign histories and ii) regimental histories, most of which were written shortly after the war by people who were present at the time. Some personal memoirs were also written shortly after the war and there are also a number of general histories of South Africa in the Second World War with brief references to the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division.

In the past twenty years, the offerings have been limited to the popular history or “Battle Books” mainly of overseas origin. South African contributions to the literature during this period have been scarce whether it be of the popular or academic variety.

Lambert agrees that “Historiographically, neither Afrikaner nor English-Speaking South African academics paid much attention to the war in the second half of the twentieth century leaving the field to military and popular historians”. He does acknowledge the work of Louis Grundlingh, Albert Grundlingh and Niel Roos but maintains that there is nothing on the experience of white English-speaking South Africans as a group.<sup>1</sup>

Katz sums up the situation: “The quantity and quality of military historical work on the participation of South Africa in the Second World War, with few exceptions, namely that of a few significant contributions over the last decade, lags appreciably compared to the plethora of titles offered on all aspects of the war in the buoyant international market.”<sup>2</sup>

Whereas military history has flourished elsewhere in the world, secondary sources in South Africa virtually dried up at various stages after the war. The latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw revisionary-type history emerging that took advantage of the declassification of primary documents and the passing of major personalities. These trends were largely ignored in South Africa and in the words of Katz, South African historiography has been “trapped in a vortex of nation building and nostalgia either being used to meet political goals or largely being ignored for political reasons thus suffering an arrest in development”.<sup>3</sup>

Making reference to the writing of Giliomee, Katz concludes that the history of South Africa’s participation in the war was sacrificed in the face of Afrikaner nationalism and their desire to build an Afrikaner nation. It was in this political climate that South Africa’s efforts to construct an official history were prematurely terminated. Afrikaner nationalists saw the UDF’s participation in the war as largely irrelevant, and despised those Afrikaners who took part.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour: English-speaking South Africans in World War II. *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, pp. 60-61.

<sup>2</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa’s participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, p. 280.

<sup>3</sup> D. Katz, A Case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa’s participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, pp. 285-286.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Nationalist government attempted to unite English and Afrikaans speakers against a common enemy. This period saw a belated attempt through various government-sponsored, semi-official histories to rekindle a sense of South Africanism in the increasingly beleaguered white population.<sup>4</sup> Examples of these are the works of James Ambrose Brown, Neil Orpen and H.J. Martin.

Orpen and Brown were appointed by the South African War Histories Advisory Committee to continue the work of the Union War History Section (UWHS) and complete the history of South Africa's participation in the Second World War. It is apparent that Orpen simply transcribed large sections of the UWHS narratives with no credit given to them.<sup>5</sup> Neil Orpen, a veteran of Tobruk, was especially prolific and wrote no less than five regimental histories. All have the same formula and draw on the narratives of the UWHS and as such do not contribute significantly to the body of knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

In the early 1990s the Nationalist government again sponsored semi-official histories invoking UDF participation in the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War. This time, the reason was to draw the attention of the western powers to the contributions made by South Africa's loyal white minority. The mediocre product of this was the Ashanti series which sought to elicit western sympathy on the eve of a negotiated settlement with the black majority.<sup>7</sup> Most of the authors were journalists or lay historians and were probably unaware that they were working on a government-funded project.

### i) Campaign histories

The official history of the campaign, *Victory in Italy*, was written by Neil Orpen in 1975 as part of a six volume history of the South African forces in World War II. He was assisted by a 25 member advisory committee, many of whom were veterans of the campaign. It is quite comprehensive but contains some mistakes with place names and dates. Most subsequent histories quote him extensively. Orpen has also written regimental histories of the Cape Field Artillery, Cape Town Highlanders and Prince Alfred's Guard.

In 1992, Jack Kros produced *War in Italy: With the South Africans from Taranto to the Alps*. It is one of the "South Africans at War" series. This is more of a "history from below" but because it covers all the branches of the service, there was no room for proper analysis or interpretation of the campaign fought by the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division. It could be called "popular history" or "anecdotal history" and as such, it creates memory as opposed to history. Jack Kros has chapters entitled "The Great Race: A win for the Boks" and "Sole: A spectacular win for FC/CTH".<sup>8</sup> It is this type of language which can contribute to the reconstruction of the social memory.

The official histories of the campaign from the British and American points of view were written by Eric Linklater and Chester Starr respectively. Both men were attached to the

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<sup>4</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa's participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, p. 284.

<sup>5</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa's participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, p. 295.

<sup>6</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa's participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, p. 296.

<sup>7</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa's participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, p. 285.

<sup>8</sup> J. Kros, *War in Italy*, pp. 126 & 271.

armed forces in Italy and were in charge of recording the history as it was happening. Both men went on to have distinguished academic careers. Their work was essentially events-led and is of little use as a reference for a social history.

The Rhodesian histories of the Second World War are more general in that they relate to the war as a whole and not just the Italian campaign. Nevertheless, J.F. MacDonald's *Lion with tusk guardant* (1945) and *The war history of Southern Rhodesia* (1950) are important as there were many Rhodesians serving with the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division.

## ii) Regimental histories

Although the writing of regimental histories was largely carried out free of government interference, it must be pointed out that the purpose of such a regimental history is to glorify the deeds of the regiment - even if this means justifying a reverse or protecting the reputation of an individual.

In the 1950s while the Nationalist government actively ignored the military achievements of the recent past, English-speaking historians produced a number of regimental histories – mostly written in the “drum and trumpet” style of that era. It was a time when the citizen force units, especially those with an Imperial flavour, were under threat and these regimental histories were an attempt to preserve their contribution for posterity.<sup>9</sup>

By August 1945, some regiments had already started making arrangements for writing the histories of their units. For example, Major L.G. Murray MC had already been delegated to write the history of the First City/Cape Town Highlanders (FC/CTH) – which, although sadly lacking, was promptly published in 1945. The narrator of the Natal Mounted Rifles/South African Air Force Regiment (NMR/SAAF) history was to be Lieutenant J.H. Selfe. The history of the Royal Durban Light Infantry (RDLI) was entrusted to Captain R.V. Tungay and Captain L.O.V. Gander, both of the *Daily News* in Durban, but neither of these planned histories was published by the intended authors.<sup>10</sup> In 1972, Eric Goetzsche brought out a worthy history of the Natal Mounted Rifles with an element of social history relating to the Italian campaign.

Regimental histories typically cover the history of a particular regiment from its inception to the present day. It is therefore only possible to devote a small section to the Italian campaign. These books are usually commissioned by the regimental associations and therefore devote an inordinate amount of space to the officer corps and are inclined to emphasize the role and accomplishments of their own regiment. One refreshing regimental history which is not top-down, is the history of the Witwatersrand Rifles, *A bugle calls* by S. Monick. The histories of the First City/Cape Town Highlanders and the Natal Carbineers, respectively written by L. Murray and A. Hattersly, are particularly meagre and uninformative considering the leading roles played by these two regiments.

Serving under command of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division were a number of non-South African regiments including the Scots Guards, Grenadier Guards, Coldstream Guards and 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles which was Indian infantry with British officers. The histories

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<sup>9</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa's participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*, (40) 3, 2012, p. 284.

<sup>10</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, letter from Div Recording Section to Lt A.E.G. Trollipe, Historical Records, 2/8/1945.

of all these regiments have been published, and also cover their time under South African command. *The history of the Frontier Force Rifles* was written by W.E.H. Condon and the history of the Coldstream Guards was co-authored by the eminent Michael Howard. He also contributed to *No dishonourable name* edited by D.C. Quilter. The latter contains vivid descriptions of the battle-scarred country through which the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division passed. Howard's final work was *Captain Professor: The memoirs of Sir Michael Howard*, which is required reading for students in military history at some universities. The chapters on the war are based on his letters home and he provides some valuable insights into the attitudes of that era.

### iii) Memoirs and published diaries

Orpen and other ex-military officers turned historians are seldom critical of their own kind. In the regimental and campaign histories, there is no mention of any internal conflict, bungling or inefficiency. The authors have only praise for the officer corps. Memoirs which are published long after the fact are often prone to distortion but a refreshing and valuable contribution to the subject is Douglas Baker's *War, wine and valour* (2005). It is self-published and it is brutally honest about everyday life, battle and morale in the Natal Mounted Rifles in both in North Africa and in Italy. He is less complimentary of the officers and is particularly edifying about morale, alcohol and sex. Yet his is not a "good-general-bad-general" type of book, it is a diary interspersed with explanatory notes and comments.<sup>11</sup>

Eric Axelson was the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Arm'd Division's historical recording officer. In addition to ensuring that each unit kept a war diary, he kept a running record of the activities of the division. In his review of Axelson's book, *A year in Italy: An account of a year as a military historian with the South African 6<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division in Italy, 1944 – 1945*, Ian van der Waag identifies the theme of conflict between the true historical record and the public relations machine of the military.<sup>12</sup> This work is further discussed below under the heading of social history because of the valuable contribution which it makes in this field.

Although personal accounts from surviving veterans should be subjected to external and internal criticism, they tell the human side of the story from trench level and can be a very useful contribution in a social history. These anecdotal accounts can be found in copies of *Springbok*, the journal of the S.A. Legion and in certain compilations such as *From Sicily to the Alps* by Glynn Hobbs.

It is more useful to consult some of the older, personal accounts which were written during or immediately after the war (literary sources). These include: *With the 6<sup>th</sup> Div* and *Shifty in Italy* – both of which appeared in 1945. The former was written by W.L. Fielding, a staff officer with an eye for detail. The latter was written by Sampie de Wet, of the South African Women's Auxiliary Services (SAWAS). As such, it provides a unique female perspective. Both of these can be classified as primary sources as they are memoirs with diary extracts included.

One published diary which is well-worn by historians but is an unadulterated primary source from which fresh perspectives can still be gleaned, is *War in Val d'Orcia* by Iris Origo.

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<sup>11</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> I. van der Waag (Review), *A year in Italy: An account of a year as a military historian with the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division in Italy 1944-1945* by Eric Axelson, *The Journal of Military History* 68(3) 2004, pp. 1004-1005.

Another diary which has been published as a narrative is *Naples '44* by Norman Lewis. Both of these books give an insight into conditions among the civilian population.

#### iv) Popular and general histories

Some of the best histories of South Africa's involvement in the Second World War were brought out by The Union War Histories Section (UWHS) under J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton.<sup>13</sup> Although these "first histories" do not relate directly to the Italian Campaign, they do form an important part of the historiography of the Second World War. Other more general and pictorial histories such as those by Hartshorn, Keene and Mervis do touch on the Italian campaign and the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division.<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that very little use was made of these popular and general histories in the writing of this thesis – apart from background reading.

Old and new accounts of particular battles such as Salerno, Cassino and Anzio from an American or British perspective are plentiful. One of the latest of these is *Day of battle*, by Rick Atkinson, the Pulitzer Prize winning author. Although this and others like it, do not relate directly to the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division, and are typically "Battle Books" they put the South African contribution into perspective and contain useful descriptions of the environment which all the Allies in Italy experienced. It is important not to forget the interface between the Allies and the suffering of the Italian civilians resulting from the German occupation. One new account which includes the experience of the German army and the Italian civilians as well as the Allied soldiers is James Holland's 2008 book called *Italy's sorrow*. The abovementioned popular histories were all published abroad.

#### v) German and Italian literature

Three local histories of Italian towns were found which mention the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division. Naturally, one of these is the town of Castiglione dei Pepoli which has an attachment to South Africa through the cemetery which is there. Another is Imprunetta, south of Florence. These provide an insight into what the experience was for the Italians and their interaction with the South Africans. The most recent and most important of the Italian histories pertaining to a particular region is that of Raffaele Moncada who in 2011 brought out a detailed history of the battles around Celleno and Bagnoregio.<sup>15</sup> On the German side, a regimental history has been found of the 16 SS Division which opposed the South Africans for four months and was responsible for some of the worst atrocities in Italy during the war.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton & L. Turner, *Crisis in the desert, May-June 1944*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1957; J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton & L. Turner, *The Sidi Rezegh battles, 1941*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1957.

<sup>14</sup> J. Keene (ed.), *South Africa in World War II*, Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1995; H. Klein, (ed.), *Springbok Record*. South African Legion of the British Empire Service; J. Mervis, *South Africa in World War II*. Times Media Ltd, Johannesburg, 1995. E.P. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk*. Purnell & Sons, Johannesburg, 1960.

<sup>15</sup> R. Moncada, *Un Lungo Anno di Guerra, Alto Lazio luglio 1943 – giugno 1944*, Libreria Militare Editrice, Milano, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Truppenkameradschaft (Hrsg.) *Im gleichen Schritt und Tritt. Dokumentation der 16 SS-Panzer Grenadier division 'Reichsführer-SS'*. Schild-Verlag GmbH, München, 1998.

## vi) Social histories

Neil Roos' book *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and social injustice* falls into a category of its own and is one of the few works which allows for discussion by putting forward a point of view. This work will explore Roos' view that it was "the spectre of poverty, poor whiteism and *verkaffering*" which prompted enlistment in a predominantly Afrikaner fighting force. Roos admits that those who joined later in the war were better educated but concludes that "the act of volunteering added layers of duty, obligation and privilege to the social contract that they, like their fathers before them, were negotiating with the state."<sup>17</sup> Historiographically, Neil Roos locates his work *Ordinary Springboks* within the broad school of radical social history.<sup>18</sup>

Lambert seems to accept Roos' argument that some of the working class Afrikaners who volunteered, may have done so for economic reasons, but insists that other reasons have to be examined since so many of the men were neither Afrikaans nor working class.<sup>19</sup> It will be argued here that the replacements for the fighting units of 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division were largely highly motivated and that it was societal culture and tradition which motivated them.

Although not directly related to the campaign, Jennifer Crwys-Williams' *Mood of a nation: A country at war 1939-1945* contains extracts of diaries, letters and oral evidence relating to the campaign. It also provides a useful social background and touches on the interface between war and society.

Perhaps the most important social history of the campaign is *A year in Italy: An account of a year as a military historian with the South African 6<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division in Italy, 1944-1945* by Eric Axelson which has already been discussed above. It provides valuable insights into day to day life as well as the work of the historical recording section. Axelson obtained his doctorate at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1938 and became head of the history department at the University of Cape Town in 1962. His work in Italy is discussed at length in 1 (b) (i) below.

## vii) Academic works and articles

Journal literature and academic dissertations are, according to Katz, an important exception to the dearth of material on South Africa's involvement in the Second World War.<sup>20</sup> Until recently, there has been little academic work which relates directly to the Italian campaign.

There is an unlimited volume of theoretical work on social history, history of mentalities and memory studies in general – a small sample of which is shown in the bibliography. Similarly, there is a large body of work in the international journals concerning all aspects of the Second World War, however, only those articles which were found to be highly relevant to the 6<sup>th</sup> Division will be mentioned below.

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<sup>17</sup> N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and social injustice*, pp. 42-49.

<sup>18</sup> N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and social injustice*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour English-speaking South Africans in World War II. *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa's participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, p. 308.



The *Military History Journal* of the South African Military History Society has been in existence since 1967 and yet from a review of the index page, there are no more than four or five articles directly relating to the Italian campaign and the personalities involved.<sup>21</sup> The South African Military History Society was formed in 1966 in Johannesburg by a group of amateur historians with the purpose of studying and promoting military history.

There are numerous articles pertaining to new military history in international academic journals, especially *The Journal of Military History*, but the only article relating to the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division in particular is Ian Van der Waag's review of *A year in Italy: An account of a year as a military historian with the South African 6<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division in Italy 1944 – 1945* by Eric Axelson in the *Journal of Military History* 68(3), 2004. This is discussed below together with other representative sources.

A valuable source is *The Journal of American Military History Foundation* which first appeared in 1938. The stated objective was “the stimulation and advancement of historical study of all that relates to war with appropriate emphasis on American history”. One of the journal's first contributors, Alfred Vagts, contributed an article on casualties as early as August 1945.<sup>22</sup>

Although other historical journals contain articles of a military nature on occasion, the most important academic journal specializing in South African military matters is *Scientia Militaria*. Only a small number of articles relate specifically to the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division and most of these are on the subject of operations. One very recent example of a battlefield analysis is entitled “The First South African Armoured Battle in Italy During the Second World War: The Battle of Celleno – 10 June 1944” and is written by E. Kleynhans.<sup>23</sup> Much of what has been written on the war in Italy is not specific to the 6<sup>th</sup> Division. The experience of South African Prisoners of War is a popular topic.<sup>24</sup>

Louis Grundlingh has written extensively on the role of black South Africans in the UDF during the Second World War.<sup>25</sup> However, John Lambert has been a lone voice on the English identity and the contribution of English South Africans to both the First and Second World Wars. In an article entitled “Their finest hour”, he contrasts and compares Afrikaans and English speakers with regard to their support for the war effort and their willingness to enlist.<sup>26</sup> Lambert's findings will be discussed later but it can be mentioned here that there is broad agreement with the hypothesis stated here. Having said this, Lambert did not look specifically at the 6<sup>th</sup> Division which was even more of an English entity.

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<sup>21</sup> Military History Journal, <http://rapidtp.com/milhist/journal.html>.

<sup>22</sup> R. Spiller, Military history and its fictions. *The Journal of Military History* (70) 4, 2006, p. 1086.

<sup>23</sup> E. Kleynhans, The first South African armoured battle in Italy during the Second World War: The Battle of Celleno – 10 June 1944, *Scientia Militaria*, (4) 4, 2012, pp. 250-279.

<sup>24</sup> A. Delpont, Changing attitudes of South Africans towards Italy and its people during the Second World War, 1939-45, *Historia* (58) 2013, pp. 157-190.

<sup>25</sup> L. Grundlingh, Soldiers and Politics: A study of the political consciousness of black South African soldiers during and after the Second World War, *Historia* (36) 2, 1991, pp. 351-365.

<sup>26</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour: English-speaking South Africans in World War II. *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, pp. 60-84; J. Lambert, Munitions factories: Turning out a constant supply of living material: White South African elite boys' schools and the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. *South African Historical Journal*, 51, 2004, pp. 67-86.

A number of monographs (mainly master's dissertations) have been sourced. Some of these are social histories covering small segments of the war, such as the South African Defence Force Institute (SADFI), entertainment groups, nursing or sporting activities in the war years. These are social histories but narrower in scope than this study. A few dissertations have also been found which relate to a certain unit or a single a battle. Only two directly relevant doctoral theses were sourced. These were by L.W.F. Grundlingh and W.R. Hoods. They relate to the participation of black and coloured soldiers in the war. Nevertheless, reference was also made to some recent studies of the Anglo-Boer War and other dissertations in the field of social and military history.

### viii) Primary sources

For the purposes of this thematic synthesis, there was no primary source which was more important than the collection of more than three hundred and fifty letters written by John Hodgson to member of his family during the period 1943 to 1945. Hodgson's letters were always extremely neat. He only wrote in pencil if there was no alternative and his parents kept him supplied with good quality writing material.<sup>27</sup> In particular, it was the unbroken sequence of letters which provide a narrative thread from the training period right through to the post-war period.

Hodgson was a prolific writer but there were others who like him, averaged a letter a day. What makes this collection especially valuable is that unlike most of his platoon, Hodgson remained with the Royal Natal Carbineers for the duration. Because these letters are part of a private collection and unlikely to be made available to other researchers, it was considered appropriate to quote from them more liberally than is generally done in a monograph of this nature.

The continuity of the letters allows one to observe his changing circumstances and state of mind. Although sentiment and imagination have no place in the writing of military historiography, Keegan considers the outlet of emotion to be essential for the truthful writing of military history. We should allow ourselves "some exploration of the combatants emotions, if not the indulgence of our own". The ideal way of doing this is to allow the combatants to "speak for themselves".<sup>28</sup>

A number of other primary sources were obtained which, to date, have remained in private hands. Examples of such primary sources include the diary of Gunner P. Johnston, campaign notes from Gunner E. Cormack, letters and cuttings from the collections of Private G. Easton, Private L. McNicholas, Captain E. Rivett-Carnac, Sergeant O. Sangster, and Corporal L. Wulfsohn. It is not unusual to find that family members have kept only one or two letters of particular importance to them. However, two families who are related to soldiers who were killed in Italy and are buried there, have made available extensive records, including scrap books and various correspondence relating to the deaths. To some researchers, these private letters might be considered to be literary artefacts.

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<sup>27</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 7/6/1943; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 24/10/1943; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 26/11/1943; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 28/1/1944.

<sup>28</sup> J. Keegan, *The face of battle: A study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984, pp. 31-32.

Contemporary letters, and even more so, genuinely private diaries (if such exist) are a much more reliable source but should be used in the right way. At worst, according to Keegan, they are used to produce anthologies of eyewitness accounts and at best they serve for what is not much more than anecdotal history. Keegan hastens to add that anecdote should not be despised, let alone rejected by the historian. It should be used together with reports, accounts, statistics, map-tracings, pictures, and a mass of other impersonal material. Moreover, he should “get away from papers and walk around his subject wherever he can find traces of it on the ground”.<sup>29</sup>

A wealth of original documents is to be found in the South African Department of Defence Documentation Centre (SADDDC) in Pretoria. For a thematic study of this nature, the Divisional Documents (Div Docs) are of the most relevance but the Union War Histories Section (UWHS) also contains a remarkable body of work. The War Diaries would have more bearing on a narrative report but they also contain supporting documents which portray the day-to-day experiences of each regiment.

The Union War Histories collection contains narratives and documents from all the theatres of war but the Italian campaign is particularly well represented containing documents relating to all units and sub-units of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division as well many documents captured from the enemy.

In South Africa, the historical recording section was headed by Captain J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton, a professional historian who had a stormy eighteen year relationship with the University of Pretoria.<sup>30</sup> Some modern-day historians now recognize that Agar-Hamilton was perhaps the most underrated and unappreciated academic historian of his era. He had a reputation for meticulous accuracy but was accused of cramming too many facts into his work. His colleagues at the University of Pretoria were critical of his abilities and the students were openly hostile – ostensibly because of his inability to lecture in Afrikaans. With the rise of Afrikaner nationalism at the university, his position became unbearable. It therefore came as a great relief when the war broke out in September 1939 and he immediately volunteered for service.<sup>31</sup> The lack of academic freedom and emphasis on *volksgeskiedenis* which Agar-Hamilton encountered at the University of Pretoria had its corollary in the suppression of his wartime work.

The Second World War was largely ignored in a Nationalist-led South Africa only to be resuscitated via sporadic sponsored, semi-official histories that served some political purpose rather than add substance to the nation’s collective memory. These semi-official histories, mostly lacking in original research and relying heavily on the work of the UWHS, have added very little to the general body of knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

Academic journals and dissertations represent the mainstay of South African military historiography over the past fifteen to twenty years. Much of this advanced research has built

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<sup>29</sup> J. Keegan, *The face of battle: A study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa’s participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, p. 289.

<sup>31</sup> N. Southey & F.A. Mouton, “A *Volksvreemde* historian”: J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and the production of history in an alien environment. *South African Historical Journal*, (44), 2001, pp. 67-86.

<sup>32</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa’s participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, p. 308.

on the work of the official histories. Katz has noted that in South Africa, interest in the Second World War is mostly limited to the academic community. Wars that were fought on South African soil attract wider interest.<sup>33</sup>

It should be pointed out that virtually all the first histories, regimental histories and even later academic articles owe their existence to the work of the historical recording section, and in particular, to Axelson and Agar-Hamilton. The challenges of collecting and preserving these primary sources will be discussed at length below.

## **b) Keeping of the historical record and first histories**

### **i) Historical recording officers**

The keeping of war diaries was regulated by “The Field Service Regulations”. The purpose and function was said to be “for effecting improvements in training, equipment, organization and administration”. Commanders of all grades were encouraged to include in the war diaries, “opinions and recommendations based on factual experience in regard to weapons, equipment, tactics, organization and inter-service cooperation, which may be of benefit for short-term research in the army, as well as material likely to be of value later for the history of the war”. The historical recording section recognized that operational commanders might find it a chore to keep these diaries, especially in times of stress – but the importance of the diary as “a living story, the record of individual and corporate achievements, a pledge of its future recognition in the annals of the war effort of the UDF” was emphasized to all units.<sup>34</sup>

Some units were more serious about the war diaries than others. The General Officer Commanding (GOC), General W.E. Evered Poole, found it necessary to admonish certain diarists for not providing sufficient information, writing in pencil and not binding the reports properly.<sup>35</sup>

The content of the war diary was to include important orders, reports, messages or dispatches received and issued and decisions taken. A detailed account of operations, exact hour of important occurrences, factors affecting operations, weather, topography, daily location, movements, casualties as well as anything of historical interest was to be recorded daily. Any documents such as maps, correspondence and newspaper clippings were to be included in the appendices and many items of historical interest were preserved in this way. The narrator was given *carte blanche* as far as literary style was concerned and some were more conscientious and creative than others. As the diary was a secret document, no information was considered too secret to be included. Some regiments recorded their present location only as a grid reference.<sup>36</sup>

The historical recording section produced a document entitled: “Union War Histories Narrative of the Italian Campaign”. This was based on Eric Axelson’s narrative, written in February 1945, which was condemned by the military hierarchy who then requested his successor to complete the work. Possibly due to the criticism which he received, Axelson

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<sup>33</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa’s participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*, (40) 3, 2012, p. 304.

<sup>34</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 204, 14ADW/18 Vol 1, War Diary Correspondence, 3/1/1943.

<sup>35</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1, 6 SA Armd Div Routine Orders 31 (CMF) 23/10/1944.

<sup>36</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 204, 14ADW/18 Vol 1, War Diary Correspondence, 3/1/1943.

published nothing about the campaign in his lifetime. His own personal log was published by E.H. Walton Packaging in 2004.

Generally, relations between the senior divisional staff and the historical recording section were poor. Despite the fact that Axelson oversaw the writing of the war diaries of all units in Italy, including his own unit and himself produced a detailed narrative of the campaign, (in a matter of months) it appears he received no credit from official military sources. The GOC (General Poole) “disliked his narrative intensely” and disapproved of the policy of collecting individual statements from all ranks. Senior staff officers complained that the narrative was not authoritative enough and demanded that it be rewritten by Axelson’s successor, Lieutenant R.V. Davis – much to his (Davis’) horror.<sup>37</sup>

The British historian, Eric Linklater, relied mainly on war diaries but found it essential to use interviews as well. He found that too much reliance could not be placed on generals. “A general cannot get out of his head his intentions”. As Linklater told Axelson, one could not place too much reliance on the private soldier either as his account will be “narrow and exaggerated”.<sup>38</sup>

It is understandable that diarists wrote so positively about their commanding officers and the army in general, considering that the diaries had to be submitted to the commanding officers for approval. The potential for friction between HQ staff and the historical recording section was foreseen as early as 1943:

Then Recording Officer will be called on to exercise a great deal of tact. Many of the documents in which he is interested, fall within the scope of other members of HQ staff, and he should refrain from any action which may seem officious.<sup>39</sup>

Axelson noted the difficulty of accurately recording an event even if he had personally witnessed it: “Madden and I, comparing accounts, often found that we were confused as to the details, sequences and times. We now appreciate the difficulty experienced by members of the division when they make statements to the historical recording section.”<sup>40</sup> In January, Axelson spent three days reading the account written by Major Shepperd of the Eighth Army advance to Florence. He found a number of inaccuracies, especially when intentions were accepted as being fulfilled.<sup>41</sup>

In late July 1944, Linklater paid the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div recording section a visit and remarked tongue-in-cheek, that he had heard the most disturbing news – how they were “looking at the war from the wrong end of the telescope, how they wanted to see it with the forward patrols, instead of from a proper perspective.” He was still busy with his general history of the Italian campaign but he also had instructions from the army commander to create some good publicity, to raise the profile and hence the morale, of the British soldier. He was especially interested in the relationship between the Guards and the South Africans.<sup>42</sup> Linklater planned to be accurate and truthful but did not intend to blacken characters. He planned to slur over the bad and play up the good.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, Div Recording Officer – E. V. Axelson, 11/6/1945.

<sup>38</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, Duties of Divisional Recording Officer, 5/4/1943.

<sup>40</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 36.

<sup>41</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 160.

<sup>42</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 54.

<sup>43</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 121.

Memory is created to a large extent by the images of the war as provided by public relations (PR) photographers. On 16 June 1944, Axelson witnessed PR photographers faking action shots with a borrowed tank and phosphorus bombs to set the tank alight. The fire was extinguished but two of the crew were badly burned. The head of the PR photographic unit was unrepentant. He explained that his unit was not concerned with the historical truth. According to him, war is not photogenic, and for his propaganda purposes he had to resort to “reconstructing”.

More than the lack of truth, Axelson lamented his own lack of proper equipment, staff and transport in comparison to the PR unit.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately the photographic equipment supplied to Axelson and Roger Madden (the photographer) was often unserviceable and the historical record relies mainly on the images carefully chosen by the public relations people.

Fussell notes that in all collections of photographs and pictorial histories, American bodies are notably intact and suitably clothed. Modern war and high explosive causes the most hideous disfiguration and dismemberment. “One may hear of *fragments*, but one is not shown them in images deemed suitable for public viewing.”<sup>45</sup> Agar-Hamilton saw the benefit in photography as a visual diary which would summon up events in days to come in a way that no written account could do. Even though war might not be photogenic, Agar-Hamilton encouraged Axelson to keep on doing what he was doing, but he too was squeamish about taking graphic pictures.<sup>46</sup>

The South African photographer of the historical recording section was specifically instructed to take photographs which illustrate some specific point, not of the type that “wins prizes in amateur competitions”. Posed photographs were to be avoided and when taken, they should be indicated as such. “Accuracy in recording is the first consideration and must not be sacrificed to imaginary aesthetic considerations.” The following subjects were especially approved of:<sup>47</sup>

- a) Operational photographs and action records of the activities of South African troops.
- b) Terrain and localities of operational importance and historical interest.
- c) Any matters of interest from the point of view of training.
- d) Engineering works and achievements: Our own and the enemy’s.
- e) Characteristic conditions of life of the South African forces.
- f) Portraits of individuals who have distinguished themselves in any way and of different types of South African soldiers.

It is not surprising that personal photographs also failed to portray the reality of war. Although, “unofficial” photography was authorized by the American Fifth Army (and therefore also by the South African 6<sup>th</sup> Division), it had to be confined to subjects of a personal nature, such as individuals, groups or views. Particular attention had to be paid to backgrounds to ensure that subjects which could be of interest to the enemy were not included. In any case, cameras, films and exposed prints were not permitted to be carried into a battle zone and no photography was permitted within the area of divisions which were in the line. Films could only be processed by commercial photo-finishers who had been

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<sup>44</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 49.

<sup>45</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behaviour in the Second World War*, p. 270.

<sup>46</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 234.

<sup>47</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, Duties of Divisional Recording Officer, 5/4/1943.

investigated and approved by the American Fifth Army HQ. The names and addresses of approved shops in Florence, Lucca, Pistoia and Montecatini were provided. Undeveloped film could not be sent out of Italy and prints being sent in the mail were subject to censorship.<sup>48</sup>

Further images of the war were supplied by a group of official war artists. From the art which has been published, it appears that their favourite subjects included engineering works and bomb damage. When the division was on the outskirts of Florence on 29 July 1944, it was asked why not one of the five South African war artists had visited the division since Rome. “How can they, sitting in Rome, or on the shores of Lake Trasimeno, illustrate the progress of the Division?”<sup>49</sup>

In a letter to Axelson written on 27 March 1945, Agar-Hamilton, at GHQ demonstrated an uncanny perception of the kind of information historians of the next generation would find valuable:

From the historical point of view, the log will have immense value later on, as enabling the historian to recapture something of the day to day changes in sentiment, opinion and such like, in the Div, as well as all those details which never get into official document but which are so important in building up the narrative. Even the weather notes will make an impression which all the meteorological material in the world would never produce.<sup>50</sup>

Ever thinking of ways to present an accurate picture of the campaign and to preserve the truth, Axelson obtained 3,000 prints of aerial photographs from the divisional air photo interpretation officer. His wanted to use these to construct a model relief map of Italy to show exactly the ground over which the division had been advancing. On this map, he intended to mark the true impact of the division’s contribution:

Div boundaries; flanking formations; notable events and dates; and such information. Only by such a means can the progress of the Div be seen in proper perspective. We should then be able to see for how long the Div was the spearhead of the Eighth Army. Otherwise, we may be led into the same error of thinking that the Div liberated Italy; in the same way that the South African press led us to believe that the First South African Division had liberated Abyssinia.<sup>51</sup>

On 22 September, Axelson paid a visit to Siena where Allied Armies Italy (AAI) had virtually taken over the whole town. There he found a huge contingent of officers and men with vehicles whose mission it was to keep an archive and collect information to be used in writing the history of the campaign:

The Americans had a very big historical set-up at Fifth Army and Corps HQ. The NZs have seven men in their div. The Canadians have an officer at corps...and another with fair staff at each division. The Poles are also so extremely nationalistic in their outlook that they are intensely historically conscious. They have a very big set-up...the French also have an historian. Only the British divs are without.<sup>52</sup>

The American army historian had six officers and sixteen other ranks under him. The staff included professional draughtsmen and artists. By January 1945, they had already produced six volumes, beautifully printed and bound (in Italy) with high quality maps and photographs. The histories were still top secret but had nothing to do with public relations. Furthermore,

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<sup>48</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 7/45, 17/2/1945.

<sup>49</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 65.

<sup>50</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 242.

<sup>51</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 65.

<sup>52</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 120.

the chief historian, Major Chester Starr, was quite happy to share any information which Axelson might require.<sup>53</sup>

The UDF Historical recording section was under-equipped by comparison and Axelson bemoaned his lack of resources. At one point, his 15 cwt Fordson truck had “given up the ghost” and he was reduced to driving a temperamental Fiat. Shortly after the battle of Catearelto Ridge, he had the opportunity of going over the battlefield with the company commander to get the full story, illustrated with photographs – if only he had a Jeep. Instead he wrote in his log: “No Jeep, no story. No story, no history.”<sup>54</sup>

## ii) Propaganda, censorship and historical recording via the news media

As can be seen in the bibliography, much use has been made of newspaper reports. Although such material can be considered a primary source, it must be borne in mind that the press was subject to censorship and was used to influence public opinion. Newspaper reports capture attitudes of the day but did not tell the full story.

Fussell asks how it is possible that events which were commonplace in the war are known only to those who had direct experience of them. The answer lies partly in human nature which avoids dealing with information that is in conflict with ethical, political or psychological assumptions and that which is likely to cause distress. The most important reason however, is that the media kept quiet about these things on behalf of the war effort.<sup>55</sup>

In 1977, John Steinbeck confessed that journalists aided and abetted the war effort. “By not mentioning a lot of things, a correspondent could give the audience at home the impression that there were no cowards in the service, no thieves and rapists and looters, no cruel or stupid commanders”.<sup>56</sup> Even Ernie Pyle, well known as the infantry’s friend and advocate, as an accredited (civilian) correspondent is said to have revealed only one third of the actuality and like the other journalists fuelled all the misconceptions.<sup>57</sup>

Not only were the reporters wearing rose tinted spectacles, but their editors further sanitized the reports. One South African journalist by the name of Harry O’Connor who described the harsh conditions, casualties and hardships at Monte Vigese, was sent a packet of newspaper clippings from home. He noticed that all Union papers, except the *Volkstem*, had cut out anything “suggesting that the Springboks were having a hard time”.<sup>58</sup> The Rhodesian reporting seems to have been more graphic than what South African editors would allow. Under the headline “6<sup>th</sup> Division in grim fight”, the report leaves the reader in no doubt about the severity of the fighting in the Chianti hills south of Florence. Simply because the usual exuberance of the war correspondent’s language is lacking, the reader can deduce that all was not well.

The Rhodesian newspapers were also prepared to tell the truth about the severity of the weather and the fighting throughout October. Under the headlines “General Mud the victor in Italy” and “Sun buoys up spirits of the Sixth”. One reports states:

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<sup>53</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 161.

<sup>54</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 129.

<sup>55</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behaviour in the Second World War*, p. 285.

<sup>56</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behaviour in the Second World War*, pp. 285-286.

<sup>57</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behaviour in the Second World War*, p. 287.

<sup>58</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 147.



The Springboks have stood up to one of the most severe endurance tests to which the South African troops have ever been subjected – a test in which the unsurpassed ferocity of the enemy resistance, appalling weather and necessity to negotiate extremely difficult terrain combined to impose a most gruelling strain on the fighting man.<sup>59</sup>

After the three assaults on Monte Stanco, the headlines read: “S. African’s stiff mountain action – advance in face of bitter opposition”, “Big infantry attack by Springboks” and “Springbok’s grim work in Italy”. Although the reports lacked any detail which might be considered upsetting, they were essentially truthful about the miserable weather conditions, the tenacity of the enemy and the set-backs suffered in the first two attempts to take Monte Stanco. The reports contained nothing about the human suffering other than the statement that “the casualties were not light, but they were not excessive in proportion to the size and difficulty of the operation”.<sup>60</sup>

It is no secret that news, propaganda and publicity were closely related during the war. The British Ministry of Information had direct control over news and censorship at home and overseas. It saw its function as one of keeping up morale and made use of publications, films and broadcasting. It conducted surveys on home morale and public opinion and ultimately polls on satisfaction with the government and their running of the war.<sup>61</sup> One British gunner officer commented in his diary that the newspapers often gave a tremendous boost to morale. “You don’t realize how well you’re doing until the *Daily Mail* tells you!”<sup>62</sup>

There is evidence that some in the South African military did not understand the difference between propaganda, publicity and historical recording. Military intelligence was closely involved in the historical recording and it was suspected that mail between Axelson and his superiors in Pretoria was tampered with. It was insinuated that Colonel E.P. Hartshorn, because of his “questioning attitude”, might have been responsible. In a letter dated 3 July 1944, Agar-Hamilton wrote to Axelson: “...it might ease Colonel Hartshorne’s mind if the essential difference between the historian’s job and the propagandists’ were made clear.”<sup>63</sup>

Propaganda was directed at the enemy in what was called “political warfare” by the British and “psychological warfare” by the Americans. It was a war against the minds of the enemy to break the morale of the enemy and their will to fight.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, all forms of media were directed at bolstering morale at home and at the front.

The military, including the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division, published propaganda of its own in the form of *Eighth Army News*, *Union Jack* and the *The Sable*. In Italy as in Egypt, these publications projected an image of strength by focusing on events such as the division’s birthday parade. John Hodgson, a private in the Royal Natal Carbineers, sent home a copy of *The Sable* which contained pictures of the first birthday celebration of the division in Egypt.

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<sup>59</sup> SADDCC, Sixth Division, South Africans and Rhodesians in Italy, 30/10/1944. Press cuttings donated by W.R. van der Riet.

<sup>60</sup> SADDCC, Sixth Division, South Africans and Rhodesians in Italy, 14/10/1944. Press cuttings donated by W.R. van der Riet.

<sup>61</sup> M. Balfour, *Propaganda in war, 1939-1945*, pp. 70-80.

<sup>62</sup> J. Swaab, *Field of fire, diary of a gunner officer*, p. 352.

<sup>63</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 231.

<sup>64</sup> M. Balfour, *Propaganda in war, 1939-1945*, p. 101.

Hodgson wrote that “it was a very posh affair” and speculated that it would soon appear on the “African Mirror”,<sup>65</sup> which was a South African newsreel and a useful propaganda tool.

The wireless was also used by all for disseminating propaganda, and while the South African government had concerns of its own, the British had more to cope with in the form of air raids and rationing. The SABC was used as a tool in the same way as the BBC was used, to manipulate public opinion while avoiding outright “perversion of the truth”.<sup>66</sup> News of the flying bombs over London created useful propaganda and incensed even Hodgson on the front lines in Italy:

These flying bombs seem to be doing more damage than they try to make out. Over the wireless this morning they gave a list of the number of casualties, and I must admit they are much worse than I thought. One and a half thousand killed, and five thousand wounded. I am sure that it will not be long before we get things taped. One can more-or-less get a rough estimate of the casualties in Berlin – there they would not deal in thousands, but in millions.<sup>67</sup>

Clearly, the news media influenced the content of letters from the front which in turn were subject to their own forms of distortion. It was a serious offence to breach the censorship regulations but some soldiers interpreted them liberally. The division arrived in Italy in March and early April and it was only on 10 May 1944, that Hodgson and the rest of the division were permitted to tell their families that they were in Italy:

I suppose you have been wondering why your letters have been taking so long to reach me, and mine to you; well at last I can explain the reason for all this; you will notice there is a change in the last line of my address, the reason for this is easily explained – I am in Italy; I suppose this is quite a surprise for you or was it? This also accounts for the distinct lack of news in all my letters of late, this is due to the censorship only just being lifted.<sup>68</sup>

Up until this time, Hodgson had refrained from telling any news whatsoever for fear of breaching the censorship regulations. Now that he was allowed to reveal that he was in Italy, he unwittingly or intentionally made the mistake of divulging his exact location by mentioning the name of the local newspaper – duly removed by the censor: “I have got through quite a few good books of late. We get the [REDACTED] each day (this is a local publication). So we are well up in all the news; which at the moment I think is very good”.<sup>69</sup> One British officer in Italy commented in his diary about the tremendous battle between his skill at censorship and the deep cunning of the men in dropping the unnoticeable hint.<sup>70</sup> South African soldiers were equally creative.

Fussell believes that the sullen contempt which was expressed by the troops indicates that they knew at the time that their experience was being suppressed by the morale-building publicity to the extent that they would never be able to communicate the truth.<sup>71</sup> Hodgson is an extremely positive personality but on 20 May 1945, he grumbled about the censorship that was still in place. He was aching to tell his parents that he was at the foot of the Alps in Turin but wrote: “I still leap to the regulation of the Jockey Club”.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 1/2/1944.

<sup>66</sup> M. Balfour, *Propaganda in war, 1939-1945*, p. 87.

<sup>67</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 14/7/1944.

<sup>68</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 11/5/1944.

<sup>69</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 2/5/1944.

<sup>70</sup> J. Swaab, *Field of fire, diary of a gunner officer*, p. 148.

<sup>71</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behaviour in the Second World War*, p. 268.

<sup>72</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J. B. Hodgson – W.A. & M.V. Hodgson, 20/5/1945.

In addition to the war correspondents and the historical recording section, there was also a bureau of information which was well equipped with cinematographers and dark rooms. There was even a “radio observing sub-unit”. They had no equipment but took people to Rome to record. They had an editor to put the piece together and they had twelve to fourteen minutes per day for beaming it to the Union.<sup>73</sup>

Self-censorship also contributed to distortion of the historical record. The period 18 to 26 July 1944 was one of the toughest for John Hodgson’s unit (Royal Natal Carbineers). The letter which he wrote to his mother on 18 July was in a serious tone – different to his usual cheery style, but it was a lie nevertheless: “I hope you are not worrying about me as I can assure you I am quite alright. We have been having a very easy time and there is no reason why we shouldn’t carry on doing so as he [the enemy] gets more beaten up every day.”

While it is true that the majority of men were having a relatively easy time behind the lines, in November 1944, John Hodgson’s regiment had just come through what is often described as the most stressful period in its history. The commanding officer of the RNC (Lieutenant-Colonel Comrie) had to be invalided home and Hodgson’s own company had lost two company commanders in succession. Nevertheless, Hodgson was still insisting that the press was exaggerating about the danger and discomfort: “As for the newspapers they really annoy me as there is so much exaggeration in them – the utter nonsense in them most of the time gets my goat...”<sup>74</sup>

From the front, it was impossible to communicate the truth in letters because of the censorship. The cartoonist, Bill Maudlin wrote: “It’s hard to compose a letter that will pass the censors when you are tired and scared and disgusted with everything that’s happening.”<sup>75</sup> But there was also a lot of self-censorship as men did not want their families to worry.<sup>75</sup>

Just as the mail system played a vital role in the life of the soldiers, so censorship regulations affected every aspect of the mail system. The only authorized channels for communications originating in or destined for the theatre of war were those controlled by the military. These included the army postal service (APS), approved telephone, telegraph, cable or radio systems. It was forbidden to use civilian postal facilities or to have private mail posted outside the theatre of war. Any correspondence with Italian civilians was forbidden.<sup>76</sup>

Censorship prohibited the disclosure of any information which might be of use or comfort to the enemy or detrimental to the war effort. As can be seen from the following specific exclusions, all but the most banal information was prohibited. The following list indicates some subjects which were prohibited or which could only be discussed after careful consideration:<sup>77</sup>

- Information concerning military, naval or air forces of the Allies.
- Military, naval or aircraft armament, equipment or designs – until publicity had been given in the press.
- Descriptions of billets, bivouacs, or camps, locations of groups of soldiers.

<sup>73</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 107.

<sup>74</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J. Hodgson – M.V Hodgson, 14/11/1944.

<sup>75</sup> M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 269.

<sup>76</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 32/44, 16/7/1944.

<sup>77</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 32/44, 16/7/1944.

- Specific information as to the names or numbers of deserters or casualties. (Numbers are of value to the enemy and names may distress relatives).
- Mention of deserters or casualties in private correspondence before the elapse of 60 days after the casualty or desertion occurred.
- The military status of any person in transit or the fact of his movement. (Possible future military operations might be revealed by identifying an individual known for a specialized activity).
- Reference to the presence in this theatre of any officer of the rank of full colonel or higher.
- Unauthorized or false reports or misleading statements.
- Troops of units in actual combat were permitted to describe purely personal experiences providing that no reference was made to specific units or geographical locations. Unit censors were held responsible for an intelligent interpretation of this rule.
- The exact geographical location of any unit or individual.
- Plans and forecasts or orders for future military operations.
- The effect of any action of the enemy prior to the official publication of such information.
- Unit or force strength, arrival or lack of reinforcements.
- Reports of atrocities unless released by the appropriate authority.

Strict rules were also laid down regarding enclosures and the contents of parcels. The following items were restricted: Foreign currency or stamps – except in small quantities, newspaper clippings from local newspapers, military documents, maps, orders, private diaries, drawings, sketches, music manuscripts and paintings, studio type portraits unless the studio trademark and address had been excised. Objects could not be wrapped in newspaper. Naturally, photographs and picture postcards could easily violate military censorship regulations. All films, negatives and prints had to be approved by the censor or they would be disposed of. Correspondence with the press was forbidden under censorship rules and it was also forbidden to send home any publications or news bulletins published by serving units or formations smaller than “army” as they had not been “press censored”.<sup>78</sup>

For letters relating to private or family matters, a soldier could make use of the “Green Envelope” or “Privilege Air Letter”. To protect the person from possible embarrassment, these letters would only be censored at base. The writer would sign a certificate on the reverse side of the letter stating that it only contained matters of a personal nature. Any misuse of the “Green Envelope” was regarded as a serious offence. Incoming mail was not censored unless an individual was specifically being watched. Unit censors were advised to use scissors or a razor blade to delete offending passages – except in the case of air mail cards which had to be obliterated with ink. Under no circumstances were censors allowed to write comments.<sup>79</sup> Although these rules were often ignored, the law did have teeth. Trooper R.H. Bell (RDLI) was found guilty of two breeches of censorship and was sentenced to undergo 21 days field punishment.<sup>80</sup>

When restrictions were lifted concerning a certain subject, the censorship release would be announced in the Routine Orders. For example, a routine order (RO 50/44) dated 17

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<sup>78</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 32/44, 16/7/1944.

<sup>79</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 32/44, 16/7/1944.

<sup>80</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 35/44, 4/8/1944.

November 1944 (10 weeks after the fact) states: “Troops may mention in correspondence, participation in the breakthrough of the Gothic Line, including participation in the battle for Florence”.<sup>81</sup> In one of his first letters from Italy, Hodgson wrote “There is not much more I can tell you about this place as yet, but as soon as the censor gets more lenient and they let us say more I will be able to tell you of the places I have seen, etc.”<sup>82</sup> In a letter to his parents written on 13 May 1945, Hodgson wrote: “There are many details of considerably more interest but the censor would not allow them to pass, not for the present at any rate.”<sup>83</sup>

Despite the under-resourcing of the historical recording section and in spite of the criticisms levelled at them by the military hierarchy, Axelson and his team accomplished a great deal. Although Axelson’s personal log was only published six years after his death in 1998, he was largely responsible for preserving the volumes of war diaries, documents and photographs of this campaign which today can be found in the military archives. The censorship restrictions which were placed on him, particularly with regard to photography, may have contributed to the ignorance of the general public but in other matters, he had an uncanny perception of what sort of materials would be needed by future historians to reconstruct the experience.

Newspaper articles which tended to emphasise the positive, and letters from the front which were prone to self-censorship, are valuable components of the historical record. However, in reading the correspondence of John Hodgson and others, it is necessary to take into account the identity and background of the author, the intended readerships, the conditions under which the texts were written, the cultural attitudes of the time and social relations which influenced the writer and readers. The answer is to always revert to the archival documents in order to historicise memory.

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<sup>81</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Orders 50/44, 17/11/1944.

<sup>82</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 17/5/1944.

<sup>83</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 13/5/1944.

## CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND TO THE CAMPAIGN

### a) Formation and composition of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division

At the battle of El Alamein, South Africa helped turn the tide of the war – and incurred 734 casualties in the process. Starting on 13 October 1942, the battle lasted twelve days. Apart from their romp through East Africa in the Abyssinian campaign of 1940/41, Alamein was South Africa's first real taste of victory. The words of Winston Churchill's "end of the beginning" speech at this juncture were totally relevant to South Africa's contribution. The 1st SA Division was then pulled out of the line.

When the 1<sup>st</sup> Division was shipped home after Alamein, the plan was that South Africa would re-form two divisions to be sent back for further operations in North Africa, but this was not possible due to manpower shortages.<sup>1</sup> In a speech to the 1<sup>st</sup> Division on 22 November 1942 at Quassasin, Egypt, Field-Marshal J.C. Smuts revealed to the officers and men that there would be a "pause" during which the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> divisions would be transformed into 'tank divisions'.<sup>2</sup>

Amid much controversy, the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division was disbanded and reformed as the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division. The demise of the proud SA Tank Corps in particular, caused much bitterness. However, in terms of men, machinery and composition, the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division was far removed from the amateur armies that took the field in East Africa and North Africa. In fire power, it was four times greater than the 1<sup>st</sup> Division had been at its strongest.<sup>3</sup>

The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division was officially formed on 1 February 1943 at a conference at Defence Head Quarters in Pretoria. The first divisional parade was held at Zonderwater on 13 February. General W.H. Evered Poole wore the new divisional flash (a yellow triangle superimposed on a larger triangle of blue) the next day at a wings parade at Waterkloof when carrying out his first official duty as General Officer Commanding (GOC).<sup>4</sup> The divisional emblem was a Sable head which in turn was selected as a tribute to the Southern Rhodesians serving as an integral part of the forces.<sup>5</sup>

The renowned military theorist, Karl von Clausewitz, wrote: "The order of battle is that division and combination of the different arms into separate parts of the whole army, and that form of disposition of those parts which is to be the rule throughout the whole campaign or war."<sup>6</sup> However, by the end of the year, the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division's order of battle was very different to that originally envisaged.<sup>7</sup> The order of battle was to change a number of times during the course of the campaign. Appendix A shows the order of battle and battle strength as at the end of May 1944 at the beginning of the advance on Rome. Appendix B shows the composition as at 15 April 1945 just before the final offensive.

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<sup>1</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-1945*, p. 231.

<sup>2</sup> R.W. Tungay, *The Fighting Third*, p. 364.

<sup>3</sup> E.P. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk*, p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> A.B. Theunissen, Major-General W.H. Evered Poole, CB, CBE, DSO: 1902-1969 Personal Retrospects, *Military History Journal* 9 (5), 1994, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *The Sable*, Lee R.W. & Wale L.S., Editorial, August 1943.

<sup>6</sup> K. Von Clausewitz, *On war*, p. 245.

<sup>7</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939- 1945*, p. 235.

The division was made up of desert war veterans as well as new recruits sometimes referred to as “Tobruk avengers” who had answered General Dan Pienaar’s call to arms. There were also those who had been in uniform since the start of the war but had not left the Union. Of these, some were volunteers who had been kept out of active duty because of age; some were career soldiers who had spent the war thus far in a training role. In the words of Joel Mervis, it was a “mixed bag”.<sup>8</sup>

A large percentage of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division veterans did not make themselves available to fight outside the continent of Africa and declined to take the new General Service Oath. Regiments therefore had to be amalgamated to be brought up to strength. Each one of the artillery regiments in the division was an amalgamated one, but some infantry and tank regiments maintained their individual identity. The Royal Natal Carbineers (RNC) was one regiment which retained its identity, however it converted to infantry. Trooper Hodgson became Private Hodgson and informed his mother: “The organization of the regiment has been changed a lot; as you can see by my address we are no longer in squadrons but companies, which is the proper thing for the infantry.”<sup>9</sup>

South West Africa contributed its fair share of men, but Southern Rhodesia’s men in particular had volunteered with alacrity when the war broke out. Of the 9,187 white men in the forces, 6,520 served outside the colony. They were to suffer 228 casualties and earned nine decorations in the Italian campaign. White Rhodesian casualties in all services would total 913 men and 3 women killed in action or died during service. The total white population at the time was between 70,000 and 75,000. The Rhodesian Armoured Car Regiment was absorbed into the Pretoria Regiment (PR), Prince Alfred’s Guard (PAG), and Special Service Battalion (SSB). A particularly large group of Southern Rhodesians joined the First City/Cape Town Highlanders (FC/CTH). In total, 1,400 Southern Rhodesians went to Italy with the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division.<sup>10</sup>

Some units contained separate Rhodesian squadrons, batteries or companies complete with their own officers, and an attempt was made to keep them as purely Rhodesian as possible.<sup>11</sup> These were:

3/17 (Rhodesia) Bty, 1/6/ Fd Rgt  
1/22 (Rhodesia) A/Tk Bty, 1/11 A/Tk Rgt  
“B” Sqn PAG  
“C” Sqn SSB  
“A” Sqn PR  
“B” Coy FC/CTH

When Rhodesians were posted to the Special Service Battalion (SSB) during the reorganization of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division, the newcomers initially objected because of the humble origins of the regiment. The SSB was formed in 1933 in response to the poor white problem and unemployment during the great depression. The first recruits

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<sup>8</sup> J. Mervis, *South Africa in WWII*, p. 68.

<sup>9</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J. B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 5/10/1943.

<sup>10</sup> J. Kros, *War in Italy*, p. 42; According to H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-45*, p. 224, there were 800 Rhodesians posted to the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division.

<sup>11</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 183, Rhodesian Volunteers in UDF, File Signal to DECHIEF, 6 SA Armd Div, 4/11/1943.

were of poor farming stock but the officer corps, partly British Army, was always first class. Training was initially standard infantry training but in the Second World War it became a tank regiment. Their commanding officer during the Italian Campaign, Lieutenant-Colonel C.E.G. “Papa” Brits, became a legend for his strong leadership and caustic comments.<sup>12</sup>

In June 1943, the strength of the division was given as approximately 12,000 Europeans and 7,000 Cape Corps.<sup>13</sup> Reinforcements continued to arrive throughout the year. From the transit camp at Hay Paddock in Pietermaritzburg, the RNC shipped out during September 1943 on the *Stratheden*.<sup>14</sup> The RDLI conducted its own recruiting campaign in the Durban area. Initially, it was not going to be given a “second innings”, however, after an unintentional three months of embarkation leave, the regiment sailed on 27 November 1943 to join the division.<sup>15</sup>

The artillery was controlled by divisional HQ in order to obtain maximum efficacy, while the infantry were organized into motorised brigades. Clausewitz explains that a brigade typically numbered between 2,500 and 5,000 men, this being the number which can be directly commanded by one man, as all can be within the range of his voice.<sup>16</sup> A motorised brigade is infantry in the context of an armoured division. At first there was one infantry brigade – 12 South African Motorised Brigade which consisted of:

First City/Cape Town Highlanders (FC/CTH)  
Royal Natal Carbineers (RNC)  
Witwatersrand Rifles / Regiment De la Rey (WR/DLR)

Immediately after the Battle of Monte Cassino, on 28 May 1944, 24 Guards Brigade came under command and stayed with the division until February 1945. In addition, to their own support personnel, their infantry consisted of:

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, The Scots Guards  
3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, The Coldstream Guards  
5<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Grenadier Guards

When it became known that the Guards Brigade would be passing out of command in February 1945, the division underwent a reshuffle and the 13<sup>th</sup> South African Motorised Brigade was formed. They included some experienced regiments and some newly arrived from the Union. They would consist of:

Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment (ILH/KimR).  
Natal Mounted Rifles/South African Air Force Regiment (NMR/SAAF).  
Royal Durban Light Infantry (RDLI).  
15<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment, SAA (15 Fd Rgt).  
Regiment Botha/Regiment President Steyn (BPS).

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<sup>12</sup> N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 79, File MA 133/1. Message from van Reyneveld to Col Reitz, 5/6//1943.

<sup>14</sup> A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer – A history of the Royal Natal Carbineers*, p.116.

<sup>15</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-45*. p. 234.

<sup>16</sup> K. Von Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 248.



There was in fact, only one brigade which was “armoured” in the true sense of the word, and that was the 11<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Brigade. This comprised three tank regiments working in cooperation with infantry:

Pretoria Regiment (Princess Alice’s Own) PR (PAO).

Prince Alfred’s Guard (PAG).

Special Service Battalion (SSB).

The Natal Mounted Rifles/South African Air Force Regiment (usually referred to simply as the NMR rather than the NMR/SAAF) were employed as armoured reconnaissance and operated independently from the brigade groups as did the RDLI.

The Frontier Force Rifles (affectionately known as “The Rif”) was infantry from India which came under command of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division in August 1944, after the rest period at Siena. The commanding officer and many other officers were British. They were under-equipped and lacking transport. Certain support personnel such as signallers were supplied by the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division. The 4/13<sup>th</sup> FFR bore their full share of the fighting from September to February 1945, when they went to rest at Lucca.<sup>17</sup>

Full-time components of the division also included engineers, signals, field ambulances, quartermaster “Q” services, workshops, military police and divisional and brigade head quarters. In addition to 24 Guards Brigade and 4/13 FFR, various other units, mainly non-South African, flowed in and out of the division as dictated by the tides of war. One of the more permanent attachments was 166 (Newfoundland) Field Regiment.

The Non-European Army Services (NEAS) included coloured and black troops. Many served in Italy and some are buried there, but only the Cape Corps played a role in the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division.<sup>18</sup> In the ranks of non-European units (in Egypt and at home), there was unhappiness and frustration, partly due to unsympathetic officers and long periods of absence. It appears that the biggest grievance among the coloured community was that they were not being used in a fighting role. There had been some rioting and mutinous behaviour, more-so in the case of the Cape Corps than in the Native Military Corps (NMC).<sup>19</sup> In addition, according to H.J. Martin and N. Orpen, “there had been an increase in cases of crime by individuals, including attempted rape, insolence, a growing disregard for discipline and a rapid falling off of morale”.<sup>20</sup>

The South African Air Force (SAAF) and South African Engineer Corps (SAEC) had been using black troops in Italy, before the arrival of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division and major problems were being encountered as they were faced with all the temptations and emotional stresses generated in Europe at war. For this reason, the 6<sup>th</sup> Division decided in 1943, not to use the Native Military Corps outside of the country and they were replaced by men of the Cape Corps which had absorbed the Indian and Malay Corps.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 140, Col D.H. Ollemans, Notes on 4/13 FFR; SADDCC, UWH, Box 140, Brigadier Palmer, personal account of actions in CMF in which Indian and South African troops jointly participated.

<sup>18</sup> J. Keene, *South Africa in World War II*, p. 161.

<sup>19</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-45*, p. 164.

<sup>20</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-45*, p. 246.

<sup>21</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-45*, pp. 224-252.

The 5,000 (approximately) Cape Corps personnel were scattered throughout the division. The highest number were in “Q” Services but many were attached to fighting regiments. Some of the Cape Corps had been gunners in the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Field Regiments SAA, but had been replaced by whites when they went overseas. Initially, a “dilution policy” was introduced whereby there were two CCs in each field gun or anti-tank detachment and four ammunition bearers per battery, but in a document marked “Most Secret” General Poole, who was a liberally-minded man, stated his reasons for needing 277 more white artillerymen. This singular document can be considered to be a textual artefact and is reproduced in its entirety:

I request modification of the dilution policy in respect of C.C.’s serving in gun detachments.

- a) On active service, the European gunners have to live and eat together with C.C.s for months on end. This is very much resented by the Europeans.
- b) Trg is more complicated by having mixed gun dets. The problem is not only social but also mental. The C.C. is naturally slower and requires a great deal more trg. It is therefore not possible to train them together.
- c) In the event of casualties, the two C.C.’s, although normally used as ammunition numbers will have to man the gun as either loaders or layers. This will decrease accuracy and efficiency.
- d) To summarise the above, the inclusion of C.C.s in dets does just NOT work in practice. The same difficulty was experienced in 1 SA Div, which fact can be corroborated by Brig. C.L. Du Toit, who was for a very long time the C.R.A. of that Div. What happens in practice is that the Europeans man the guns shorthanded. This is an unsatisfactory state of affairs for the Div and I consider the change essential.<sup>22</sup>

Each CC (Cape Corps) member was rated “A”, “B”, “C” or “D” according to his “Character Classification”. It is not clear what these classifications signify and they appear to be arbitrary. For example in the FC/CTH there were 229 CC troops of whom 155 were given an “A” classification. The RNC and WR/LDR on the other hand gave no “A” classifications, preferring to give mostly “B” ratings.<sup>23</sup> European troops were not given these ratings, but on demobilization everyone was allocated one of the following character assessments: (i) exemplary, (ii) very good, (iii) good, (iv) fair, (v) indifferent, (vi) bad and (vii) very bad.

## **b) Recruitment and replacements**

### **i) Enlistment – an overview**

Out of South Africa’s population of approximately 10,000,000 (of whom 1,116,500 were whites), a total of 345,324 men and women enlisted.<sup>24</sup> Numbers vary according to the source, but citing the official yearbook of the Union of South Africa, Roos calculates that of the 570,000 men who were eligible for service, between 190,000 and 250,000 enlisted during the war. Approximately 150,000 white women and 80,000 black men also joined up.<sup>25</sup>

The reluctance of South Africans to serve seems to have been overstated. Taking into account that about fifty per cent of the white population was Afrikaans speaking, many of whom were ideologically opposed to the war, and many others were key-men in industry, it is not surprising that recruitment slowed to a trickle. Field-Marshal J.C. Smuts himself stated in

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<sup>22</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 196, File AQ 23/1 (V1) WE Tables Secret, Dilution Policy-C.C.’s, 28/5/1943.

<sup>23</sup> J. Keene, *South Africa in World War II*, p. 161; SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 183, File AQ 16/26, 6 SA Armd Div, C.C. Character Classifications.

<sup>24</sup> J. Kros, *War in Italy*, p. xiii; H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-45*, p. 347 puts the number of enlistees at 342,692.

<sup>25</sup> N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and social injustice*, p. 26.

March 1944 that the European population had responded magnificently to the call to arms. “South Africa has only 570,000 European males between the ages of 20 and 60. The fact that so many of them have volunteered for full-time service, is a response which has not been surpassed by any of the Allied nations at war. It means that almost one out of every three males between the ages of 20 and 60 volunteered for full-time service.” In the same statement, the number of non-Europeans on service was put at “over 100,000”. The combined strength of the Union forces was therefore 300,000 – ten times stronger than it had been in 1939. These figures did not include the 60,000 already discharged from service.<sup>26</sup>

It appears that there had been an initial wave of enthusiasm to enlist, but in the latter stages of the war, the flow of volunteers became restricted to a particular demographic group. Monick writes that the amalgamation of battalions in World War Two is a clear indication of the fact that “the edge of the enthusiasm which had marked South Africa’s contribution to the Imperial cause in World War One had been blunted”. This did not apply to the Natal regiments who maintained their numbers throughout. By contrast, in the Transvaal battalions, two years of service appeared to be the limit of their front line capability.<sup>27</sup> It is enlightening to note that only one third of all volunteers ever left the Union.<sup>28</sup>

There was a shortage of manpower – but it did not pertain to the military as a whole. The SAAF and non-combat units in the army were over-subscribed. According to one source, the UDF had 5,000 reserves stationed in Italy. Of these, it was estimated that 3,500 were fighting men (as opposed to support troops) of whom only 2,000 were fully trained. This represented an effective reserve force of ten per cent of the division strength – which is below the recommended 40 per cent which a fighting division should immediately have available. It was not unheard-of for a particular unit to have 60 per cent casualties.<sup>29</sup>

The subject of enlistment is a vast one and no attempt is made at an exhaustive analysis. A short general discussion is followed by an examination of the few sources which relate to the UDF and the 6<sup>th</sup> Division in particular. The pertinent question here relates to the motivations and backgrounds of those men of enlistment age who declined to serve.

## ii) Volunteering

An omnipresent question in new military history relates to what motivates men to volunteer to fight. South African examples are few and far between compared to the work which emanates from the United States and elsewhere. Much work has been done on the motivations for enlistment during the American colonial period and the American Civil War. Karsten has found two sorts of studies on the motives of those who joined up – those that stress the ideological and patriotic motives for enlistment and those that find economic and less lofty motives. Karsten is clear that economic motives are inadequate for understanding enlistment motives.<sup>30</sup> The more theoretical arguments relating to motivation will be discussed in the final chapter.

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<sup>26</sup> *The Nonqai*, 35, March 1944, Foreword by Field-Marshal the Rt. Hon. J.C. Smuts.

<sup>27</sup> S. Monick, *A bugle calls*, p. 303.

<sup>28</sup> F. Oosthuizen, *The demobilization of white defence force soldiers during and after the Second World War*, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> J.F. MacDonald, *The war history of Southern Rhodesia*, p. 598.

<sup>30</sup> P. Karsten, *The “new” American military history: A map of the territory, explored and unexplored. American Quarterly* (36) 3, 1984, p. 393.

It may be argued that motivations will differ from country to country and according to the type of conflict, but masculinity is one factor which transcends national differences and allows for a more general discussion. In order to understand the motivations to enlist in the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division, it is useful to make reference to other “citizen’s armies” where the army is a voluntary one, as was the UDF in the Second World War. The existing United States Army is one such army.

In a series of in-depth interviews with 115 first-term army enlistees at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in 1978, it was found that decisions to enter the army are influenced by a variety of push-pull factors. For males, particularly the youngest enlistees, the primary motivation is either a desire or a need to escape an unsatisfying or troublesome environment. For older males, the army is viewed as an opportunity to continue formal education or to develop career skills. Other reasons found in the study by Gottlieb were: “Defence of one’s country and an interest in mastering complex weaponry”. Whereas, “a sense of obligation to the nation, or a perception of an external threat to the United States were not, for the vast majority of respondents, salient variables associated with the enlistment decision.”<sup>31</sup>

Lee refers to studies from the American colonial period and the American Civil War where it was found that volunteers were most likely to be young men of respectable backgrounds who were “temporarily mobile” and driven by notions of family honour. Coercive volunteerism is a common theme which extends to the Vietnam War where it was found social and legal forces were inherent in coercive volunteerism.<sup>32</sup>

First World War veterans made up a surprisingly large contingent by volunteering to fight again in the next war. It may have been that they remembered the security, purposefulness and companionship which the army gave them. Moss refers to the myth of the war experience arising from the spirit of 1914, the war as a test of manliness, the ideal of camaraderie and the cult of the fallen soldier. These are the attitudes which helped men confront and accept this unprecedented experience and informed many of the literary, artistic and political perceptions after the First World War. Those who had fought in the First World War were seen (by themselves and others) as “men apart”. Whatever opportunism prompted enlistment, the spirit of 1914 played a role in their volunteering to fight again. Many regretted missing out on the war and the spirit of 1914 addressed a need and articulated the ideals felt by many young men. The ideal of camaraderie and fraternity in battle, whether actually experienced or transfigured in retrospect as part of the myth of war, transcended national differences and partly explains the desire to enlist.<sup>33</sup>

As far as the UDF in the Second World War was concerned, Martin & Orpen state that towards the end of 1944, when victory was assured, a large number of men over 25 admitted that they had signed on primarily to secure demobilization benefits.<sup>34</sup> This is contradictory since only small numbers (approximately 100 per month) were joining up at this stage. Roos concurs that motives differed from person to person. Some volunteers identified pecuniary need as their main reason while others mentioned patriotism and peer pressure.<sup>35</sup> These

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<sup>31</sup> D. Gottlieb, *Babes in arms*, pp. 27 & 91.

<sup>32</sup> W.E. Lee, Mind and matter: Cultural analysis in American military history: A look at the state of the field. *Journal of American History* 93, 2007, pp. 1130-1131.

<sup>33</sup> G.L. Mosse, Two world wars and the myth of the war experience, *Journal of Contemporary History*, (21) 4, 1986, 492-495.

<sup>34</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-1945*, p. 304.

<sup>35</sup> N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and social injustice*, p. 43.

people were products of the great depression, and economic conditions before the war had some influence on the decision to enlist. However, because recruits came from all walks of life with a large contingent of students, it is more reasonable to assume that a dreary and frugal lifestyle, coupled with limited travel opportunities, influenced the decision to volunteer, rather than unemployment and poverty. Because of its glamorous image, the Air Force had no shortage of recruits. The SAAF had 14,326 officers and men serving in the Mediterranean theatre alone.<sup>36</sup>

In her interviews of more than eighty veterans, Crwys-Williams found that it was primarily adventure which motivated men to enlist and not politics. Oosthuizen interprets this as meaning that the reasons were more of an economic nature. Quoting Tothill, Oosthuizen wrote that some men and women, irrespective of political leanings, saw military service as a way out of their economic difficulties. Oosthuizen's conclusion is that political conviction was not the only driving force for enlistment.<sup>37</sup>

According to James Ambrose Brown, the majority of volunteers in 1939 were under twenty. University students were not particularly keen to break their studies. Only 25 percent of students from the University of the Witwatersrand volunteered and no more than 700 from the University of Cape Town.<sup>38</sup>

Considering that the recruitment figures were pitifully low during 1944 (less than 150 per month), and considering that school leavers were joining as soon as they turned eighteen, it is difficult to see who were the no-hopers wanting to join in order to procure demobilization benefits.<sup>39</sup>

According to Martin & Orpen, the special recruiting drive in July 1944 had netted another 800 men. Another source puts the figure at 1,400.<sup>40</sup> Recruiting teams were instructed to appeal to the men's sense of adventure, to stress comradeship and "being in at the kill". Never were they told to make promises regarding demobilization benefits.

Neil Roos correctly states that the decision to enlist commonly had nothing to do with King and country; it was not bound by an allegiance to a flag or other icons of nation or nationalism. This lack of patriotism was not a South African phenomenon. In his chapter entitled "The ideological vacuum" Fussell argues that patriotism was made obsolete by the Great War of 1914-1918.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the South African soldier was constantly reminded that the pride of his nation was at stake.<sup>42</sup> Some of the older men also felt a loyalty to their Prime Minister, Jan Smuts. Where political conviction played a role, those citizens who supported Smuts enlisted for different reasons to those who supported Hertzog.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-1945*, p. 304.

<sup>37</sup> F. Oosthuizen, Soldiers and politics: The political ramifications of the White Union Defence Forces soldiers' demobilization experience after the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria* (24) 1, 1994, p. 24; J. Crwys-Williams, *Mood of a nation: A country at war 1939-1945*, p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour English-speaking South Africans in World War II, *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 183, File AQ 18/14, Recruiting, Rfts for 6 SA Armd Div, 27/1/1945.

<sup>40</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-1945*, p. 303; E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 84.

<sup>41</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 131.

<sup>42</sup> N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and social injustice*, p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> F. Oosthuizen, The demobilization of white defence force soldiers during and after the Second World War, pp. 31-128.

It is equally enlightening to examine why some men chose not to enlist. As is well known, a large sector of South African society was anti-British, pro-German and therefore reluctant to fight on the side of the Allies. In parliament, there were 54 English and 26 Afrikaner MPs who supported Smuts' decision to declare war, while only one English-speaker, S.C. Quinlan, and 66 Afrikaners supported Hertzog. Based on editorials and letter columns in the press, Smuts observed that his stand had the unanimous approval of the English.<sup>44</sup> The war deepened the divide between English and Afrikaner. Acts of sabotage, mainly by the Ossewa Brandwag, and attacks on soldiers led to retaliations by the English and a hardening of attitudes by both groups.<sup>45</sup>

Police officers and a few officers of the UDF were purged from the service for being unreliable. In some cases, they offered their services to the *Ossewa-Brandwag*. The war became a divisive, polarising factor in white society which pitted the pro-war and anti-war factions against each other.<sup>46</sup> White people were not unified in their whiteness.

In addition to the well known Ossewa Brandwag and their military wing, the Stormjaers, there were numerous Nazi-linked movements promoting anti-British sentiment around the country. These included the Auslandsorganization (AO), Landesgruppe Südafrika, the Laban Front and the Deutsche für Südafrika. Subversive activities included rumour mongering, radio broadcasts, anti-government press, political speeches at gatherings, pro-German propaganda by school teachers and missionaries and publication of subversive pamphlets. A favourite way of fostering hardened attitudes was to invoke Afrikaner suffering in the concentration camps. Through sabotage and violence, the anti-war faction planned to facilitate the collapse of the government. Smuts had reason to be concerned and his Chief of the General Staff, Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, expressed the view that "a large number of our people are dupes, and are consciously or unconsciously playing to the Nazi game". In 1941, the Ossewa Brandwag was estimated to have a membership of over 300,000, of which 150,000 were able-bodied men aged 18-55.<sup>47</sup> An average of the 1936 and 1946 census puts the total number of white men between the ages of 18 and 44 at 460,000 – of whom 186,218 white men enlisted full time (40 percent).

It was not only anti-British sentiment and pure nationalism which alienated Afrikaners. The hardships which they experienced during the war in the form of discrimination against those who did not volunteer for overseas duty, constant surveillance, internment camps for transgressors, and domestic hardships such as rationing played a major role in building anti-war sentiment.<sup>48</sup>

According to Giliomee, Afrikaners did not boycott the war as a group. According to him, approximately half the fighting troops were Afrikaners.<sup>49</sup> This may have been true in the case of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> divisions but when these formations became defunct, less than half the

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<sup>44</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour English-speaking South Africans in World War II. *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1 2008, pp. 63-64.

<sup>45</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour English-speaking South Africans in World War II. *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1 2008, p. 65.

<sup>46</sup> F.L. Monama, *The Second World War and South African society, 1939-1945: Preparedness and consequences*, p. 47 in T. Potgieter & I. Liebenberg, (eds), *Reflections on war*.

<sup>47</sup> F.L. Monama, *The Second World War and South African society, 1939-1945: Preparedness and consequences*, pp. 48-50 in T. Potgieter & I. Liebenberg, (eds), *Reflections on war*.

<sup>48</sup> H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a people*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2003, p. 441.

<sup>49</sup> H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a people*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2003, p. 441.

strength of many regiments rejoined and took the General Service Oath. Smuts intended to send two divisions to Italy but sufficient men attested the new oath for only one division.<sup>50</sup>

Regardless of what a man's motivation might originally have been, there were limits to his commitment. In April 1945, it was clear to everyone that the war in Europe would soon be over, and Hodgson's sentiments were universal:

As far as Burma is concerned, I can assure you that I will not volunteer. If I am drafted somewhere and am forced to go, there is nothing more I can do about it. I can assure you that I am not at all keen to go – by the time we have finished I am sure that I will have had quite enough of the army. All the same, I have signed on for anywhere in the world, so even though they have said that they will send nobody against their will, I would not bank on it one hundred per cent although it is a pretty good assurance.<sup>51</sup>

It can be concluded that the young men of the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division in particular, were motivated by the same range of factors which have motivated young men to go to war over the centuries. Primary among these are the thirst for adventure and desire to escape the conventions of everyday life. None of the sources referred to support the theory that it was economic factors which prompted enlistment in a predominantly Afrikaner fighting force although there was an expectation of certain benefits following demobilization as will be shown in Chapter 8.

For many, the political ideology which informed the decision to enlist was extremely nebulous. Douglas Baker, who joined the Natal Mounted Rifles (NMR) at the age of sixteen, viewed the disharmony between Boer and Briton as being the motivation for many jingoistic Natalians to join up. Speaking for his immediate circle which had a daily reminder in the form of a statue, Baker explained that they knew little of King George VI, “our loyalties centred more around Dick King and his horse”.<sup>52</sup>

### iii) The Red Oath and conflicting pressures

Roos cites the large percentage of initial recruits who declined to take the new General Service Oath (GSO), as evidence that they had been under pressure to enlist in the first place and had no enthusiasm for the war effort. In his opinion, the perceived “misuse” of white recruits along with the changing character of the war and the new oath of attestation were the main reasons why increasingly fewer white men volunteered to serve in the UDF.<sup>53</sup> It seems that there was indeed antagonism on behalf of those who had already been discharged. Members of a recruiting team which was sent from the division (while in Italy) on a major recruiting drive in the Union in May 1944, were advised on how to deal with the negative publicity originating from this quarter:

A great deal of harm has been done by disgruntled personnel already demobilized and a specific go should be had at them. It is felt that straight talking is required and that the personal approach is needed. All talk about democracy etc., won't do any good in the Union and the particular point with the women is to shame them in as pleasant a manner as possible.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour English-speaking South Africans in World War II. *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, p. 79.

<sup>51</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 8/4/1945.

<sup>52</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 21; In 1842, when Durban was besieged by Boers, the British hero Dick King rode 966 kilometers cross-country on horseback to Grahamstown to get assistance.

<sup>53</sup> N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and social injustice*, pp. 33-36.

<sup>54</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 183, File AQ 18/14, Recruiting, Recruiting team, 6 SA Armd Div, 10/5/1944.

Fielding's views contradict the notion that there was undue pressure to enlist in the 6<sup>th</sup> Division. In his experience, the motivation for volunteers to sign the GSO was unambiguous: There was no compulsion, no force about it. Except the compulsion of the inner man himself. A something which said – "I cannot be left out of this thing...I would never forgive myself...I must go."<sup>55</sup>

Apart from the usual medical tests, the main qualification for inclusion in the 6<sup>th</sup> Division was the signing of the General Service Oath (Red Oath) by which the volunteer agreed to serve anywhere in the world. There was ongoing conflict between the volunteers and certain permanent force members who refused to take the "Red Oath" which had been introduced on 29 March 1940. It was optional for those already serving but one could not join without taking the oath.<sup>56</sup> Hodgson explained to his younger sister that the "old oath is the one where soldiers have only signed on to serve anywhere in Africa but the new oath is for anywhere in the world". It was at this stage (March 1943) that those who signed the new oath got a "V" after their force number "to distinguish them from the others".<sup>57</sup>

Anyone under the age of 21 had to get their parents' consent before signing the oath. Hodgson was eighteen when he enlisted and his parents initially had second thoughts about having given their permission. From Pietermaritzburg he wrote: "I don't see why you and Dad are beginning to think that you shouldn't [have] let me join up now because I think that is definitely all wrong. Maybe you are thinking that because life is so slack at the moment. Now look at it from this point of view. If I had stayed behind I would have been very unsettled and unhappy seeing all my friends getting on with the job and me still enjoying the comforts of home." Clearly there was a sense of duty when he wrote "there is a job to be done and someone has to do it".<sup>58</sup>

It was not unusual for those who were too young or too old for the military to lie about their age. Two brothers who would not be left out of the fight were Michael and Lawrence McNicholas who were killed within weeks of each other. The younger brother Lawrence enlisted under the assumed name of Patrick McHugh Farrel after matriculating at the age of fifteen and gave the address of a friend in Orange Grove. It was here that the news came of his death.<sup>59</sup>

There can be no doubting the motivation of people who were already serving in a non-combat capacity and then resorted to devious means to get into a combat unit. Walter Boerop and Willem Wentzel Pretorius were serving with the SAAF at Voortrekkerhoogte. In September 1943, while on a week-end pass, they re-enlisted in the 15<sup>th</sup> Fd Rgt at Barberton. They pretended to be brothers and claimed that their objective was to join a combatant unit and be sent north immediately. In a letter dated 25 February 1944, the OC of the Reserve Artillery Regiment stated that the two were "intelligent and useful gunners who would be an asset to the regiment". It was recommended that a trial be dispensed with as their motives appear to have been sound.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> W.L. Fielding, *With the 6<sup>th</sup> Div*, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> J. Crwys-Williams, *Mood of a nation*, p. 61.

<sup>57</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 16/7/1943.

<sup>58</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 25/6/1943.

<sup>59</sup> SADDDC, Personnel records of Pte L.G. McNicholas; *Southern Cross*, Obituary of L.G. McNicholas.

<sup>60</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 208, Res Arty Rgt, Res Arty Rgt to 6 SA Armd Div Res Gp, Fraudulent enlistment, 25/2/1944; SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 208, Res Arty Rgt, Res Arty Rgt to 6 SA Armd Div Res Gp, Gnr Boerop W. alias Gnr Pretorius, L., 15/9/1944.



Another case which illustrates determination rather than coercion is that of Gunner Halgreen. He had previously been in the Youth Training Brigade and after numerous attempts to join various arms, he forged his mother's consent and enlisted under the name of Cornelius Jacob Ferreira. His commanding officer was however sympathetic in acknowledging that: "His motives in doing this, were to join a combatant unit and to see action as soon as possible, and, no doubt, owing to his age (16 at the time of enlistment) did not realize the seriousness of his offence."<sup>61</sup>

The personal narratives of certain individuals are also indicative of the type of circumstances which made enlistment attractive. Trooper Beeson enlisted under the name of his uncle (Sergeant Pringle) and gave his age as 23, whereas it was just over 17. Prior to attestation, Beeson was an apprentice electrician on the Geldenhuys Deep mine. He left the mine without permission of either the management or the Apprenticeship Board. Beeson's father was deceased and his mother was in a mental home. Before he was discovered, he was in the Middle East with the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division. No disciplinary action was taken and he was allowed to stay on at 81 Engineer (Base) Workshops as an apprentice electrician.<sup>62</sup>

The evidence also suggests that a disproportionately high number of those joining fighting units were from the elite English private schools. In these circles, there may have been an element of "coercive volunteerism" due to social pressures, culture, tradition, heritage as well as notions of honour and virtue. Patriotism may not have played a big part, but there is no indication that whiteness or poverty influenced the desire to join regiments such as the Royal Natal Carbineers, Royal Durban Light Infantry, Natal Mounted Rifles, First City/Cape Town Highlanders, Witwatersrand Rifles/Regiment De la Rey, Prince Alfred's Guard and others.

#### iv) Depletion of the ranks and subsequent replacements

During the months of June and July 1944, "battle wastages" in the division were 500 per month. This was in addition to the "normal wastages" of 600 per month due to illness, injury and other causes. The exact number of "wastages" of personnel for the period 8 May 1944 to 18 August 1944, totalled 3,506.<sup>63</sup>

General Poole's plea for "thousands" of new recruits in the infantry, armour and artillery was published in virtually every newspaper around the country in early April 1944. "We cannot have too many infantrymen. We must have backing for our reserves and be able to provide for wastage in which sickness also plays a part." He pointed out that Rhodesia had contributed its full quota and the only additional men were those now turning eighteen.<sup>64</sup> It was not only infantrymen who were in short supply. There was also a severe shortage of trained cooks and typists. Cookery courses and clerk's courses were held at the reserve group.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 208, Res Arty Rgt, Res Arty Rgt to 6 SA Armd Div Res Gp, correspondence regarding Gnr Halgreen, C.J.A. alias Ferreira, C.J., 16/10/1944.

<sup>62</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 208, Res Armd Regt, 61 Engineer (Base) Workshops to 2<sup>nd</sup> Echelon, UDF, MEF. Tpr Pringle, H.F., 21/2/1944.

<sup>63</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 163, Cas Returns, Wastage of personnel for period 8/5/1944 – 19/8/1944.

<sup>64</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 183, File AQ 18/14, Recruiting, Cutting from *The Star*, 6/4/1944.

<sup>65</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 599, HQ 6 SA Armd Div Res Gp, 13/2/1945.

According to Martin & Orpen, the rate of recruitment was normally 200 per month but a special recruiting drive in July had netted another 800 men. Nevertheless, there was still a shortfall and by August 1944 there was no option but to pull the division out of the line for a rest while reserves were brought up.<sup>66</sup> The number of recruits for the first five months of 1944 was indeed pitiful. This was not a reflection of the nation's willingness to serve – the pool had simply dried up:<sup>67</sup>

MONTH	JAN	FEB	MARCH	APRIL	MAY
RECRUITS	149	84	112	134	148

On 10 May 1944 it was announced that a delegation under Lieutenant-Colonel A.J. Bruce would be sent to the Union. The team would consist of seventeen officers and thirteen other ranks (representing all fighting units). The notice included some tips to aid them in getting their message across. The following points were stressed: “being in at the finish – adventure – comradeship – after the war meeting in pubs – swapping stories – Hitler on the defensive – no more sitting”. Recruits were told that they would be sent “up north” straight away and were guaranteed of being in an operational area in the shortest possible time.

Men were also told to make the plea for recruits in their letters home. Hodgson was sceptical: “Most of those who have managed to sneak out of it up to now will keep on doing so. From the angle I see, it looks as if this recruiting drive is going to have a fruitless result.”<sup>68</sup> The efficiency and modern equipment of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division were stressed. The recruiting team made use of cinemas, radio stations, universities, ex-servicemen's organizations and prominent people with sons in the army. Pressure was to be placed on the Chamber of Mines to release more men, and women should be asked: “Are you holding him back?”<sup>69</sup>

Colonel Bruce said that he was moderately satisfied with the tour. The best reception they got was in Johannesburg and the worst was in Durban. This is possibly due to the fact that the Royal Durban Light Infantry did their own recruiting. The tour was described by others as an “abortive mission”.<sup>70</sup> Hodgson had correctly predicted the outcome of the recruiting drive but his prediction that the war would be over by December or January was a common misperception of the time:

We heard that the recruiting campaign had not been a successful one. It was just as I forecasted, it is undoubtedly a very bad time of the year to try and find many recruits. As you say when they comb out the bases they should find a large number of men to send to us, there must be a large number who find it very hard to while away the time down at base. All the same I hope we will not need all these reserves, as it would be much better to have the war over instead.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-45*, p. 303; E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 84.

<sup>67</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 183, File AQ 18/14, Recruiting, Rfts for 6 SA Armd Div, 27/1/1945.

<sup>68</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 16/6/1944.

<sup>69</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 183, File AQ 18/14, Recruiting, Recruiting team, 6 SA Armd Div, 10/5/1944.

<sup>70</sup> E. Goetzsche, *The official Natal Mounted Rifles history*, p. 279; V. Alhadeff, *South Africa in two world wars – A newspaper history*, p. 108; E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 53.

<sup>71</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 22/7/1944.

The tour lasted a month and netted 1,400 men (800 according to Martin & Orpen). A scathing article entitled “A national scandal” appeared in *Springbok* when Lieutenant-Colonel A.J. Bruce had to return to his unit “with a sorry tale of selfishness, greed and apathy of the young men of South Africa who could and should be in the army”:

For those young men who throng the dog racing tracks, the race-course, the cinemas and the dance halls, oblivious alike of the war and their pride of citizenship, the men of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division can have nothing but contempt, which they will not be slow in expressing when they return...The war cannot last forever, and when it is over, many a young man today sheltering behind a shop counter, or what is infinitely worse, his mother’s apron strings, will find himself cast into the horror of outer darkness when the red-blooded upholders of their country’s honour return and ‘strip their sleeves and show their scars’. They will not be slow to remind the shirkers of what they missed by refusing to play a man’s part in this the greatest of all wars; and it is sincerely hoped that such men will find the price of cowardice more costly than they ever dreamed.<sup>72</sup>

A long-winded but logical explanation for the shortage of volunteers was advanced by John Hodgson in a letter to his father dated 16 June 1944. He was privy to all the views of his contemporaries and had obviously applied his mind. He had been sceptical about the prospects of the success of a recruiting drive from the beginning. In his opinion, the UDF could “consider themselves very lucky if they get four thousand”. The actual figure was between 800 and 1,400. As an infantryman, Hodgson personally felt the effects of a lack of manpower and would have welcomed conscription, but realized that this was not an option in the Union.<sup>73</sup>

Like John Hodgson, Lawrence McNicholas was a member of 7 Platoon, B Company, RNC. As the casualties in his platoon mounted, he wrote: “We view the recruiting campaign with interest. We need chaps to take the place of people like George, Bruce, Frank Ledingham and Nobe Macarthy.... Our section’s done pretty well with only six men and we’ll manage with six for the rest of the war rather than get squirts who’ve been hounded into the army by the scorn of the public.”<sup>74</sup>

Of those 1,400 new recruits, 27 were medical students from the University of the Witwatersrand, including the president of the Students Representative Council. Six of the students were in their first year, five in their second, seven in their fourth, three in their fifth and one in his sixth year. One of the students was a woman medical student in her second year. On their return, the servicemen would be provided with a special tutor to smooth out any difficulties.<sup>75</sup>

In June 1944, a large group of replacements sailed for Italy and although the majority of them were making their first visit to the fighting zone, there were among them a large number of veterans. An article in the *Rand Daily Mail* of 1 August 1944 claimed that veterans and fresh-faced youngsters alike were keen to get nearer the war. An official observer of the bureau of information interviewed a number of men including Lieutenant Ian Simson who was one of many former prisoners of war who were prepared to re-enlist. Sergeant-Major Wissing, a footballer from the East Rand had served with five different regiments in the desert and become a proud father ten days prior the article in the *Rand Daily Mail*. Trooper M.F. Scallon of Port Elizabeth, a veteran of Delville Wood said: “This is one of the big things in my life.

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<sup>72</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 183, File AQ 18/14, Recruiting, Cutting from *Springbok*, no date.

<sup>73</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 16/6/1944.

<sup>74</sup> *Southern Cross*, Obituary of L.G. McNicholas.

<sup>75</sup> *The Star*, 11/8/1944, Medical students in the Sixth Division.

I've been in the army for nearly four years but one thing and another has happened to keep me back. I was injured in a car accident with an armoured car, but I am fit now and glad to go.<sup>76</sup>

The question of reserves and replacements was never far from Hodgson's mind as he discussed who would be joining, and who would not. In a letter to his father on 5 August he wrote: "Conrad had not joined up yet, and did not intend doing so because his medical category is only in the B's so he would not get a front line job, all the same I think he could join up and do his fair share by releasing someone else." Then on 16 January 1945: "All the chaps seem to be collecting up here slowly, so it must be pretty desolate down there now, as far as our crowd of fellows are concerned, at any rate."

Replacements for the infantry also came from within the division and very often it was required that an NCO or officer forfeit his rank. Armoured units such as the PR, SSB and PAG had extremely high standards for their officers and NCO's in their fighting formations. Colonel Arthur Johnstone OC of the Pretoria Regiment wrote a series of letters in April motivating his request to remove certain NCOs from his unit. Even the ILH/KimR which was desperately short of firepower and accepted rejects from more specialized units, turned down applicants who were not prepared to forgo their rank.<sup>77</sup> Corporal C.N. Preston was attached to HQ Sqn in the reserve armoured regiment and the letter which he submitted to his commanding officer on 28 August 1944 was brief and to the point:

With reference to the GOC's appeal for voluntary transfers to the infantry, I hereby state that I wish to be transferred to the RNC. I am willing to forgo my corporal's rank. Trusting that this application will receive your favourable consideration.

Tank regiments were very selective with regard to the suitability or otherwise of crew members. Officers in particular, could find themselves languishing in the reserve group if no place could be found for them within their parent regiments. If an officer was considered unsuitable, he would be passed over for promotion, despite being qualified, experienced and willing. Officers involved in training were also superseded by those who had been trained by them. More than one officer was lost to the division due to disappointment. Captain N.R. Flint was one such officer. He had served with the PAG since 1934 and informed the OC of the reserve regiment that if a suitable vacancy within his parent unit (PAG) could not be found, he would be applying to second to the Imperial Forces where his qualifications would have greater scope.<sup>78</sup>

As far as 12 SA Motorised Brigade was concerned, during the final phases of the war, normal wastage was replaced satisfactorily and the system worked well, except when heavy casualties occurred at Monte Stanco when it became necessary to call for a composite company, members of which were sent straight into action on arrival. This was not a satisfactory state of affairs due to unfamiliarity and nervousness. It is significant that a large proportion of "constructive desertion" cases were from reinforcements being sent forward.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 1/8/1944, Sixth Division reinforcements leave for Italy.

<sup>77</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 208, Res Armd Regt, Personnel Unsuitable for Armour, 28/7/1944; SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 208, Res Armd Regt, Letter from Lieutenant-Colonel A. Johnstone to Commander 11 SA Armd Bde regarding P.E. Taylor, 2/4/1944.

<sup>78</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 208, File RHQ 2/4/1 10 Letter from Capt N.R. Flint to OC 6 SA Armd Div Res Armd Regt, June 1944.

<sup>79</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, 12 SA Mtd Bde, Report on Operations in the Italian Campaign for period August 44 to May 45.

By January 1945, the drive for recruits was coming to an end, only recruits younger than 26 would now be accepted for units in the field. At the opening of the “Speed the Victory Fair” in Johannesburg on 25 November 1944, Smuts said: “In all these circumstances, I do not feel that a special appeal for recruits is now justified. Young men will be welcome if they feel the urge and come forward voluntarily. We will gladly accept recruits for the Sixth Division and for training as air crews.”<sup>80</sup>

#### v) Conclusions on recruitment and replacements

Received history holds that there was a severe shortage of manpower in the UDF. This may have been true for some, but certainly not for all branches of the military – especially not the air force. Within the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division itself, there were shortages of manpower in the infantry units and certain other specialized units. However, the reluctance of South Africans to serve appears to have been exaggerated. As has been mentioned, Field-Marshal J.C. Smuts himself stated that the European population responded magnificently to the call to arms. Considering that half the population was ideologically opposed to the war, the fact that “so many of them have volunteered for full-time service, is a response which has not been surpassed by any of the Allied nations at war”.<sup>81</sup>

It is true, however, that in the last two years of the war, the pool of potential volunteers had all but dried up and it was only the school leavers of eighteen years and younger who made themselves available. Hodgson sums up the situation:

...all the people who intended to join up, who left school before last year, have already done so, all those in between twenty and thirty who ever had intentions of joining up, have already done so, those who have not done so, I am sure, have no intentions of ever doing so.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, according to Hodgson’s appraisal, the only remaining source of recruits was school leavers of a certain political persuasion. It must be remembered that a large proportion of the population were ideologically opposed to South Africa’s participation in the war and hoped for a German victory, although it is likely that as the war drew to a close, some wanted to jump on the bandwagon. On 28 August 1944, having just come to the end of a two week break behind the lines at Siena, Hodgson facetiously wrote to his parents:

There is such a little to talk about except the wonderful time we are having and I can’t do too much of that, because the so called key-men are bound to get to hear of it, and then the recruiting office will be swamped, as they will think they are missing something.<sup>83</sup>

The issue of the shortage of replacements (as opposed to initial recruits) also seems to have been exaggerated. When at Siena, two replacements were sent from reserve to 7/22 Med Rgt and the diarist refers to them as “supernumerary to establishment”.<sup>84</sup> The same regiment once complained of a shortage of transport because their strength was 103 more than a Royal Artillery Medium Regiment.<sup>85</sup> It is true that it was the infantry regiments who were most affected but there were many reserves itching to get in before the war was over.

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<sup>80</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 183, File AQ 18/14, Recruiting, Rfts for 6 SA Armd Div, 27/1/1945.

<sup>81</sup> *The Nonqai*, 35, March 1944, Foreword by Field-Marshal the Rt. Hon. J.C. Smuts.

<sup>82</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 16/6/1944.

<sup>83</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V & W.A. Hodgson, 28/8/1945.

<sup>84</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, 25/8/1944.

<sup>85</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Lessons learned, Report to CRA, 20/8/1944.

### c) Demographics of the division

Although the exact demographic composition of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division has not been established, there is no evidence that those who did the fighting and dying in Italy were poor whites. As has been shown above, volunteers slowed to a trickle from 1943 onwards. These late volunteers were mostly school leavers and university students from the upper echelons of society. It may be that the poor whites were either those who declined to take the GSO or those who went to Italy as railway engineers and other non-divisional troops.

The 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division was formed in February 1943 and its character was established at that time through its officer corps and policies. One needs only to look at the war diaries, orders and other documents in the military archives to see that the official language of the division was English. Not every person with an English surname is necessarily English speaking, but the casualty lists, and nominal rolls are overwhelmingly English (approximately 65 percent). Captain Blamey, a company commander in the NMR, estimated that ninety percent of the men in three rifle companies were farmers and therefore not unemployed. All the company commanders were farmers and left their wives in charge.<sup>86</sup>

One Transvaal farmer who left his farm in the hands of his wife was Private Glen Easton. His father, William Easton, was Scottish-born and had been the Town Treasurer of Johannesburg. Although he was 35 years and seven months old, married (to an Afrikaans woman) and owned his own farm, Easton attested on 30 June, answering the call to “Avenge Tobruk”. In his endeavours to see action, he spent time in Potchefstroom and Pietermaritzburg – serving in the tank corps (SATC), the Pretoria Regiment and the Transvaal Scottish before becoming cannon fodder in the Royal Natal Carbineers.<sup>87</sup> His wife continued to run the farm for the next sixty years.

One scholar who has disputed the opinion that the UDF was comprised of 40 percent English and 60 percent Afrikaners is John Lambert. By studying the Rolls of Honour of the elite English private and government schools, and the school magazines of the period, he concluded that approximately 50 percent of all past pupils from these schools were serving – as were members of staff. Some did not wait to matriculate and others did not wait for South Africa to enter the war but decided to travel overseas at their own expense to join the Royal Air Force, Royal Navy and other Imperial formations.<sup>88</sup> Importantly, Lambert points out that school boys followed the example of their older classmates, and in the final stages of the war, school-leavers were virtually the only source of new recruits.<sup>89</sup>

It seems that a large proportion of the recruits had attended exclusive private schools where the rolls of honour show that elite boy’s schools lost more old boys in the Second World War than they did in the Great War. They also received a disproportionately high number of awards. As during the Great War, Bishop’s old boys headed the list with 284 decorations.<sup>90</sup> This spirit which these schools fostered was in itself a motivating force. As during the First

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<sup>86</sup> A.E. Blamey, *A company commander remembers*, p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> SADDCC, Personnel records, Pte G. Easton.

<sup>88</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour: English-speaking South Africans in World War II, *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, p. 66.

<sup>89</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour: English-speaking South Africans in World War II, *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, p. 71.

<sup>90</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour English-speaking South Africans in World War II. *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, p. 72.

World War, manliness and “playing the game” embraced an outlook on life which stressed qualities such as honourableness and respectability.<sup>91</sup> It may be hard to understand that doing one’s duty made sense in 1939 just as it had in 1914. Winter is of the opinion that millions of men from all belligerent countries went to war because it was their duty to do so and because they believed they were fighting in defence of their countries.<sup>92</sup>

An insight into the human material constituting the Royal Natal Carbineers is provided by this textual snapshot John Hodgson’s tent companions on the eve of battle. Equally, there were almost certain to be groups of older men or of a different social background:

There is John McLaren from Johannesburg, he is nearly twenty, we have been together since we joined up. By the way our corporal is 23 and our L/Cpl is 22. Then Laurence McNicholas, known as “Mac”, he is just over seventeen. Then there is George, known as “Fat Sam”. Then Michael Wood from St John’s. He was at Waterkloof with me. Benjamin Harley from St John’s & Northern Transvaal, known as “Ben”. The last two are about 18 and a half. Then comes Frank Leddingham from Port Elizabeth, we were together at the Kraal (Kaffers Kraal). He is 18.<sup>93</sup>

The Royal Natal Carbineers has been predominantly English throughout its history; therefore it is not surprising that the majority of Hodgson’s comrades were English. Two members of 7 Platoon RNC were Afrikaans speaking and according to McNicholas, the further the Natalians were away from home, the more Afrikaans they spoke. Nevertheless, it is clear that the RNC was made up largely of English school leavers.<sup>94</sup> In the words of McNicholas, who attended Marist Brothers College: “We have a very fine crowd of chaps in our Squadron. A seasoning of ‘original Royals’ and a lot of chaps, like myself, fresh from school”.<sup>95</sup>

On 16 January 1945 and again on 26 January, Hodgson wrote that a number of new replacements had arrived. “The whole crowd seems to be collecting up here slowly, which is really grand. Myself, I feel one bound ahead of them as I have been here all the time, right from the start, while all the others have only just joined us at a later date”. Some wangling was done for new-comers to be posted to the companies in which they had friends.<sup>96</sup>

The type of work done by most units in Italy demanded a high standard of personnel, and the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division tried to retain only the best. “Throw-outs” from the division were posted to the SA Rest Camp and other non-divisional units. A rest camp administration officer, Captain S.B. Featherstone, complained that the men he was sent had been disposed of by their previous units for “inefficiency, laziness, insubordination, insobriety, or inability to hold the rank he may have”.<sup>97</sup> There are further examples in the chapter on discipline where it is shown that the division retained only the most suitable men.

The requirements of a good soldier include physical fitness, drive, independence, intelligence, self-esteem, education and humour which help in resisting the pressures of

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<sup>91</sup> J. Lambert, Munitions factories: Turning out a constant supply of living material: White South African elite boys’ schools and the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. *South African Historical Journal*, 51, 2004, p. 70.

<sup>92</sup> J.M. Winter, Catastrophe and culture: Recent trends in the historiography of the First World War. *The Journal of Modern History* (64) 3, 1992, pp. 531-532.

<sup>93</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J. B. Hodgson – W.A. & M.V. Hodgson, 1/1/1944.

<sup>94</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J. B. Hodgson – W.A. & M.V. Hodgson, 1/1/1944.

<sup>95</sup> Alison Sulentic collection, L.G. McNicholas – Miss O'Donoghue, 7/11/1943.

<sup>96</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J. B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 16/1/1945; John Hodgson Collection, J. B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 26/1/1945.

<sup>97</sup> SADDCC, Box 726, WD, SA Rest Camp UDF, CMF, 1-31 March 1945.

battle.<sup>98</sup> If the results of Hodgson's wireless course are anything to go by, these characteristics were not lacking among his class-mates. There were only three complete failures and most passed with distinction. Hodgson got honours in Morse by sending and receiving twelve words per minute.<sup>99</sup> Likewise, artillerymen and tank gunners needed a fair amount of intelligence to master trigonometry. Tank crews also required skill in map-reading and mechanics. By the end of the war, the composition of the SSB, had changed whereby the tank crews were especially selected. One squadron was entirely Rhodesian.

Officers and NCOs were expected to be gentlemen. The bullying NCOs which are a feature of standing armies around the world, were not tolerated in the division. One such permanent force member was Sergeant P.J. De Buys, whose adverse report read as follows:

Is a bullying abusive type who cannot handle men well. Is prone to order men around but not generally prepared to work with them. Is fond of swearing, was most unpopular with the men, and was a disturbing element in a tank crew. He is fond of liquor and then becomes most objectionable...<sup>100</sup>

Lambert acknowledges that it is impossible to know exactly what proportion of volunteers for the UDF were English-speaking. The ratio was often assumed to be representative of the national demographic which was 60 percent Afrikaans and 40 percent English-speaking. This is unlikely considering that the Ossewa Brandwag membership was stronger than that of the entire UDF.<sup>101</sup>

As previously mentioned, the 6<sup>th</sup> Division differed in composition to that of other UDF formations. Many were young school leavers and students but there were also older men including farmers, miners and civil servants plus a few permanent force members and undoubtedly some were from the ranks of the unemployed. In total, 1,400 Rhodesians went to Italy with the 6th South African Armoured Division and make up a significant portion of the roll of honour.

The question of demographics cannot be fully answered without studying a large sample of attestation papers in the archives, but from an avalanche of information ranging from references in letters, personnel records of individuals, comments by officers regarding performance, newspaper articles and public relations copy (all discussed above), a picture does begin to emerge.

#### **d) Officer corps**

Campaign and regimental histories are very often written by senior officers and are invariably written in a way which presents the officer corps in the most favourable light possible. The frictions and inefficiencies which are present in any large organization are conveniently ignored. In these top-down accounts, praise has been lavished on the officer corps of the division whereas ordinary soldiers are referred to only as "details" or "ORs". The objective of this section is simply to give an indication of how the officers were perceived by the rank and file and to demonstrate that there were personalities and egos involved, rather than to provide a complete appraisal of the officer corps.

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<sup>98</sup> E. Dinter, *Hero or coward, pressures facing the soldier in battle*, p. 73.

<sup>99</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 5/12/1943.

<sup>100</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 208, Res Armd Regt, Letter from Lt-Col A Johnstone to OC 11 SA Armd Bde, 7 regarding T/Sjt P.J. De Buys, April 1944.

<sup>101</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour English-speaking South Africans in World War II. *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, pp. 65-67.



When the “Union War Histories Narrative on the Italian Campaign” was being re-written in 1948, various senior officers were asked for their comments. Judging from their remarks, many of those interviewed were not afraid to pass judgment on fellow officers and comment on the working relationships between them.<sup>102</sup> These comments did not find their way into the official history, although advice such as the following was taken: “It is suggested that the names of commanders and officers should be included as much as possible to give more colour to the narrative.”<sup>103</sup> The original narrative is in fact conspicuous by its omission of names. This narrative was never published and it was Orpen’s *Victory in Italy* which appeared in 1975 as the official history. It draws a lot on the work of the historical recording section, but no acknowledgement is given to the authors of the Union War Histories.<sup>104</sup>

Predictably, one of the most complimentary portrayals of the General Officer Commanding (GOC), General W.E. Evered Poole, comes from Orpen: “The thoroughness of Poole’s own training and his own outlook as a highly intelligent career soldier had undoubtedly contributed considerably to the success of his division.”<sup>105</sup> After the successful conclusion of the campaign, Poole was hailed by the South African press as a folk hero. Still in his early forties, Poole cut a fine figure, everything about him redolent of smartness and neatness according to one newspaper report. Black hair brushed back, brown eyes and a low pleasant voice.<sup>106</sup>

Some senior officers were determined to ensure that they and their units received sufficient favourable publicity. In one particular case, Axelson was summoned to the ILH/KimR tactical HQ by Lieutenant-Colonel R. Reeves-Moore who was “anxious that the history of his battalion be properly written”. He believed that too much credit was being given to the role of the New Zealanders in the Florence battles and proceeded to give Axelson his version, including some little known details of the events.<sup>107</sup>

Axelson normally found the regimental commanders to be very cooperative when it came to publicity for their units. On 11 June 1944, the day after the Battle of Celleno in which the SSB had been heavily involved, the CO, Colonel “Papa” Brits, gave a full statement for the benefit of the historical records and the press, and gave a guided tour of the regimental area. Then on 30 June, at Montepulciano, Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Johnson of the Pretoria Regiment had no objection to the historical recording section taking photographs of his tanks and tagging along.<sup>108</sup> On a visit to the Guards Brigade near Radda, Axelson (the historical recording officer) and his British counterpart, Eric Linklater, were given VIP treatment.<sup>109</sup>

Brigadier Palmer, a grey haired First World War veteran and former policeman, was in command of the 12<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Brigade. Some of the senior officers, however, were very young, fit and dynamic. One need only look at their physical prowess on the sports field. In Turin on 16 June 1945, 13 Bde held an inter-unit athletic championship in the Stadium del Popolo in Turin. For many of the spectators, the highlight would have been the unit commanders and 2 I/Cs 100 metre sprint which was won by the lithe young CO of the

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<sup>102</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 142, Notes on interview with Maj Rushmere.

<sup>103</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 142, Interview with Maj I Moore, Brigade Major, 12 SA Mtd Bde, no date.

<sup>104</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 142, Notes on interview with Maj Rushmere.

<sup>105</sup> N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 167.

<sup>106</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 172, File HQS/14/D, Honours and Awards, Rear Div 6 SA Armd Div, 16/5/1945.

<sup>107</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 109.

<sup>108</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, pp. 21-26.

<sup>109</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, pp. 55-60.

Natal Carbineers, Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Francis, in a very respectable time of 12,2 seconds. Brigadier J.B. (Jack) Bester came a close second.<sup>110</sup> Not everyone was happy following him into battle as his method of locating the enemy was to stand on the skyline until being fired on – a nerve wracking experience for any orderly or messenger accompanying him. Fielding was admiring of his commanding officer:

One could just imagine that South African Soldier [Bester], peering over a ridge with eyes that seemed to gouge the distant view. And that thin straight nose of his, seeming to smell the very presence of the Hun, like a well-bred spaniel itching to point.<sup>111</sup>

It was only long after the war that officers were prepared to publically criticize fellow officers. In his thesis, J.J. Bruwer quotes a letter written in 1979 by Major C.N. Saville who was in the tactical HQ on 8 October 1944 when the RNC were ordered to take Monte Stanco: “I was not very impressed with Brig Furstenburg’s appreciation of the situation. I received the impression that he had grossly under-estimated the strength of the enemy in the Monte Stanco – Grizzana area and the extent of the task which he was calling upon the regiment to perform, particularly in the light of 4/13 FFR’s unsuccessful attempt to hold Monte Stanco that very morning.”<sup>112</sup>

Furstenburg stood six foot five inches, he was in his early thirties and not as popular as the other brigadiers. In a 1948 interview, Captain Power, formerly an 11 Brigade staff officer, gave his opinion regarding various fellow-officers. According to him, Brigadier Furstenburg left all the administration to his two staff officers, Captain Power and Major H.E. van Santen. At first he appeared a difficult man but after knowing him for a time, Power developed a tremendous admiration for the Brigadier. He was always right forward and absorbed in the conduct of the battle. Captain Power (11 SA Arm’d Bde) further states that his superior, Major H.E. van Santen, and Colonel E. O’C Maggs were the most efficient staff officers in the UDF. Colonel Brits was “extremely efficient and a most charming man to work with”. The Pretoria Regiment was apparently the least efficient and the Brigade HQ had much trouble with them on the administrative side.<sup>113</sup>

The testimony of Major I. Moore of 12 SA Motorised Brigade amply illustrates that relations between officers were not always harmonious. Moore was the Brigade Major, responsible for the running of Brigade HQ and for the staff work of the Brigade. On one occasion near Radda, the Second-in-Command, Colonel P.H. Grobbellar, came to Moore and said: “I have just come from the Brig who says you must move HQ forward”. Moore asked “where?” Grobbellar said “forward”. When Moore asked for further details, Grobbellar shouted: “Don’t argue with me. You bloody well get cracking.” Moore did so, with the result that the Brigade HQ found itself within 500 yards of the enemy, and was the most advanced unit in the division. After this, Grobbellar apparently gave no more orders.<sup>114</sup>

The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division had a uniquely qualified interrogation officer - Captain H.F. Betzler. He had served as an officer in the German Army in WWI and was on

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<sup>110</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 633, DSR, 1-31 July 1945, Programme, 13 SA Motorised Brigade, Inter Unit Athletic Championships; M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, pp. 47-50.

<sup>111</sup> W.L. Fielding, *With the 6<sup>th</sup> Div*, p. 133.

<sup>112</sup> J.J. Bruwer, *Die Rol van die Sesde Suid-Afrikaanse Pantserdivisie in die ontplooiing van die geallieerde offensief in Italië: Die slag van Monte Stanco: 7 tot 13 Oktober 1944*, p. 74.

<sup>113</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 142, Interview with Capt Power, 18/11/1948.

<sup>114</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 142, Interview with Maj I. Moore, Former Brigade Major, 12 SA Mtd Bde, 1948.

the Nazi's blacklist.<sup>115</sup> Captain Betzler spoke fluent German, Greek, French, various Balkan languages, Russian and Arabic. This together with his uncanny ability to extract information from prisoners ensured that General Poole was better informed on security matters than General Mark W. Clark, the American Fifth Army commander himself. Axelson had the opportunity to see him interrogating a prisoner in the middle of the night with a candle on either side of him and a revolver close to hand. Using a combination of sinister threats, theatrics and cunning, he got the intelligence he was looking for. After the war, Captain Betzler worked for the Union War Histories section of the Prime Minister's department.<sup>116</sup>

While still in the Union, the feeling in ranks of the Regiment De la Rey was that the permanent force officers were over-age and incompetent. When asked to take the oath, they usually asked for transfers to non-combat units. By contrast, the officers of the Field Force Brigade (FFB) were veterans of the desert war where the ranks had been decimated but the officer corps was relatively intact. Brigadier Jack Bester whose favourite expression was "ODJ" (for op die job) and was OC of the WR/DLR as well as Major (later General) Barends, commander of "A" Coy, were FFB officers who took over the regiment. In his memoirs, Lionel Wulfsohn recalled that they were young and dynamic and he considered himself fortunate that he did not have to follow the old lot into battle.<sup>117</sup>

Enlisted men seldom came into contact with their senior officers. However, the reputation of a commanding officer and his personality could make an impression on the men as one soldier remarked:

The Colonel of our regiment, Lt Col Moray Comrie M.C. and bar seems to be a very nice man. He gave us a talk yesterday morning, in which he told us that this regiment has the highest traditions in South Africa and is the oldest and the number one regiment of the country.<sup>118</sup>

In his memoir, written in 2005, Douglas Baker mentioned the incompetence of the officer corps – especially in the early part of the war. Officers apparently could not navigate and had to learn how to use a compass and read a map. Friendly fire incidents were frequent because positions had not been calculated accurately. Baker was an ordinary soldier who served in the Natal Mounted Rifles through the entire war and was wounded twice.<sup>119</sup>

Baker describes the colonels in command of the NMR as a "succession of misfits ranging from a schoolmaster, a grocer and a policeman to farmers and sycophants". He scathingly points out that they were never seen at the front or visiting the wounded in hospital. In Baker's opinion, these colonels collectively or individually, were lacking intelligence, empathy, human psychology, sense of humour, energy and drive.<sup>120</sup>

#### e) **The South Africans as part of a multinational force**

The Allied multinational force in Italy (including air forces) comprised approximately eighteen different nations. It has been said that one of the main sources of strength of the Allies came from the high quality and national diversity of the participants and the

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<sup>115</sup> N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 168.

<sup>116</sup> N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 190; E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 66.

<sup>117</sup> James Bourhill Collection, L.M. Wulfsohn, Unpublished memoirs.

<sup>118</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 2/6/1943.

<sup>119</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 101.

<sup>120</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 469.

competition which existed between them.<sup>121</sup> However, this diversity also presented one of the biggest challenges of the campaign. The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division came under command of the British and the Americans successively and interfaced with the formations on the left and on the right. Perhaps most important was the co-operation between different nationalities within the division itself, the greatest challenge being for the British and the Americans to work together.

The British, reluctant to repeat the mistakes of the First World War, tried to minimise casualties. The Americans who had had a less traumatic experience in the Great War, and had much greater reserves of manpower, saw this as a lack of drive and aggression. The British, however, viewed the callous use of men as a lack of skill and diligence on the part of the officers.<sup>122</sup> There were also differences in attitude to having a “soldierly appearance” and in leadership style. Senior British commanders liked to be seen in the front line from time to time. From an intelligence point of view, the South Africans worked better with the British than with the Americans who tended to keep back at corps level secret information that should have been passed on.<sup>123</sup>

Although the French were fighting hard on the side of the Allies, they were not highly rated or trusted. When France capitulated in 1940, the colonies at first sided with the Vichy government and the Nazis. In Italy, the French forces were augmented by Corsicans, Moroccans, Algerians and Tunisians. Fielding found the French liaison officer (LO) quite friendly, but Axelson wrote that although the LO visited each day, he was vague and relations improved when the French, consisting of Moroccan and Algerians, were replaced by the 8<sup>th</sup> Indian Division.<sup>124</sup>

Allied relations with the French colonial forces were at times hostile and the US military reported that morale was negatively affected by the actions of the Moroccan Goums. Bearded with their long hair braided in pigtailed, sandals, striped djellabas and foot-long knives, these North Africans “lived for looting and rape”.<sup>125</sup> According to Bourke, the fearsome reputation of certain nationalities such as the Moroccans, the Gurkhas and Scots is deliberately distorted for the effect it has on the morale of the enemy.<sup>126</sup>

At times, relations between the British Eighth Army and the American Fifth Army became extremely tense. The entry into Rome where General Clark muscled his way to the front of the line is the best known example of this brittleness. There was also fierce competition between the South Africans and the New Zealanders (among others) to be the first into Florence. When in January 1945, Axelson submitted his account of the advance to Florence, the second operations officer (GII) expressed his concern over a number of things including a remark attributed to Brigadier Furstenburg about shooting the New Zealanders off the road. He was sure the remark had not been made and if it had, it should not have been recorded.<sup>127</sup> In an interview in 1948, Major H. Rushmere, Brigade Major of 11 SA Armd Bde, stated that

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<sup>121</sup> J. Kros, *War in Italy*, p. 287.

<sup>122</sup> M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 46.

<sup>123</sup> N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 190; M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 46.

<sup>124</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 49; W.L. Fielding, *With the 6<sup>th</sup> Div*, p. 142.

<sup>125</sup> R. Atkinson, *The day of battle*, p. 529.

<sup>126</sup> J. Bourke, *An intimate history of killing*, p. 117.

<sup>127</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 159.

there was no truth to the rumour that Brigadier Furstenburg had threatened to shoot the New Zealanders off the road so as to win the race to Florence.<sup>128</sup>

When it came to discipline, there was a world of difference between the British army and the colonials. The Guards, in particular, looked spick and span at all times. Even in a forward defended locality (FDL), the officers were immaculately dressed and one remarked to the South African historical recording officer: “It’s a bad business, we have not been able to get Brasso to a forward platoon for six days.” Axelson also noticed that the most junior subaltern addressed the most senior officer by his Christian name.<sup>129</sup>



FIGURE 1: Men of the Pretoria Regiment wearing the flash of the Guards Brigade behind their headdress badge.

FROM: *Military History Journal* 13 (1) 2004.

On his return to South Africa, W.L. Fielding, an intelligence officer, was asked, “what is all this talk about the Guards and the Springboks, did they really get on well?” He would always reply “yes, very definitely” adding that “the South Africans assimilated something of the quick-eyed, almost gleeful stalking sense of the Afrikaner, when hunting his prey.”<sup>130</sup>

The relations between the Rhodesians and the South Africans, being such close neighbours, were perhaps a bit more tenuous but this did not preclude close cooperation. During the attack on Monte Caprara by the WR/DLR, the Rhodesian battery fired more than 10,000 rounds in support and thirty Rhodesians manned observation posts and line maintenance parties. During the drive to the Po, this battery was divorced from its own regiment and came under the command of the WR/DLR to provide close support. According to the Rhodesian military observer, the Rhodesians thought highly of the South Africans and vice versa – despite calling each other “Hairy Back” and “Bush Wacker”.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>128</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 142, Notes on interview with Maj Rushmere, 24/11/1948.

<sup>129</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, pp. 56-58.

<sup>130</sup> W.L. Fielding, *With the 6<sup>th</sup> Div*, p. 97.

<sup>131</sup> SADDCC, Press cuttings donated by W.R. van der Riet, Sixth Division, South Africans and Rhodesians in Italy, Rhodesians Sixth Division armour cross Po, 29/3/1945.



FIGURE 2: Bill Mauldin cartoon illustrating the difference in operating style between the Americans and British, captioned “You blokes leave an awfully messy battlefield”.

FROM: <http://www.stripes.com/02/nov02/mauldin/index.html>.

#### f) Summary of movements and the geography

The division’s movements began in Durban with the departure of the troopship, *Ile de France* on 19 April 1943 and ended with the repatriation stage in late 1945 and early 1946. Although a year was spent training in Egypt, the period of actual operations lasted only a year from 4 May 1944 to 4 May 1945. Only a summary of the period of operations is given here, and Appendix B contains a time-line of movements and events from Cassino until the liberation of Florence. The leave periods are covered in a different section. Various analysts have broken down the campaign into a number of phases.

General W.H. Evered Poole’s official operations report (issued in June 1945) distinguishes five stages in 6 SA Armoured Division’s operations in Italy. Phase 1: The pursuit and continuous contact, of an enemy trying to carry out an organized withdrawal, i.e. Cassino – Castiglione. Phase 2: A series of set-piece attacks on strong natural positions against an enemy prepared to fight it out, e.g. Monte Catearelto, Stanco and Pt 826 (with the division on a two axis advance). Phase 3: The static winter phase. Phase 4: The breakthrough – that is the attack on Monte Sole. Phase 5: The pursuit against an enemy becoming more and more disorganized and finally ending with capitulation, i.e. April-May 1945.<sup>132</sup>

In other accounts, the campaign is further broken down into the Cassino to Rome phase, a Rome to Florence phase, then the rest period in Siena in August 1944. Following the rest

<sup>132</sup> A.B. Theunissen, Major-General W. H. Evered Poole, CB, CBE, DSO: 1902-1969 Personal Retrospects, *Military History Journal* 9 (5) December 1992, p. 16.

period, during the period under command of the American Fifth Army, 12 SA Mtd Bde made even more distinctions as follows:<sup>133</sup>

## PERIOD A

(August 1944 – February 1945)

- Phase I      Static period up to the crossing of the Arno (25 August – 5 September).
- Phase II     Mobile period from the crossing of the Arno up to the breakthrough of the Gothic Line on 29 September 1944.
- Phase III    Mobile period from Prato up Route 6620 to the October battles of Monte Stanco – Monte Salvaro.
- Phase IV    Static winter period (November 1944 – February 1945).

## PERIOD B

(Final period of operations in Italy, 6 April – 3 May 45)

- Phase V      The administrative arrangements and activities from 6 April 1945 up to and including the attack on Monte Sole, Monte Caprara and Monte Abelle – 17 April 1945.
- Phase VI     The period following the capture by 12 SA Mtd Bde of the above-mentioned objectives, up until and including the concentration in the Milan area, 3 May 1945.

The advance to Florence was characterized by a series of leapfrogging movements whereby one battalion or brigade would pass through another – thereby replacing tired troops with fresh. The field artillery, however, remained in support of whoever was doing the fighting. In what is probably the first book written about the Italian campaign from a South African point of view, W.L. Fielding provides a bird's-eye view of operations in the pursuit phase before Florence:

Ahead went the reconnaissance screen, Sherman tanks of the N.M.R. Close on their heels, and often intermingled with them, came two brigades, one composed of South African infantrymen, the other of British Guardsmen. With each of these brigades was a tank regiment. In either counter-attack or breakthrough role lay the headquarters of the Division's armoured brigade, with a regiment of tanks, usually the SSB, and its specially trained motor battalion, the ILH/KimR.<sup>134</sup>

While the South Africans were held up at Chiusi, *The Star* of 23 June 1944 gave a concise appraisal of the geography and the overall campaign to date. The area of operations would soon encompass the mountainous sector between the two armies and the South Africans would be responsible for this central sector. The observer was totally correct, however, to speculate that the advance would be stopped north of Florence on the "Tuscan frontier":

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<sup>133</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, 12 SA Mtd Bde, Report on Operations in the Italian Campaign for period August 1944 to May 1945.

<sup>134</sup> W.L. Fielding, *With the 6<sup>th</sup> Div*, p. 1.

Mere inspection of the map, regardless of the physical character of the country, might suggest that a kind of drag net, 100 miles deep, is being pulled northward with a large German force trapped inside it; but now it is plain that, if this net exists, it is, to all intents and purposes, empty; it encloses only an expanse of barren mountains, in which no forces have ever been reported in action, or could be expected to operate.

A truer picture is obtained by thinking of two distinct Allied advances, maintaining loose contact across the mountain barrier. On the west, the Fifth Army and the bulk of the Eighth are pressing steadily forward on a broad front and extending their mastery over the Tuscany plain. The enemy are doing their best to delay the advances here and there but the Allies certainly cannot be halted before reaching the Tuscan frontier where the great Apennine chain sweeps across their path. It has yet to be seen whether the enemy intend to make their next important stand in front or behind the mountains. [i.e. On the River Po.]<sup>135</sup>

As it is put by Lieutenant-Colonel Chester Starr: “To gain a correct picture of the Fifth Army [and also the Eighth Army], one must visualize it not as a thin fighting line but as a zone up to 50 miles deep slowly advancing up the Italian peninsula – an armoured borer, as it were, with a steel cutting edge fed and kept going by a great mass of machinery.” The cutting edge, as represented by the infantry, formed less than a fourth the army’s strength.<sup>136</sup>

This armoured borer ground to a halt in the northern Apennines, becoming bogged down in the October rains and winter snow. The much-vaunted Gothic Line had been breached relatively easily, mainly due to a breakthrough on the American front. As far back as July, the South African press had been considering the implications of the Gothic Line and described it as “the most formidable natural barrier in Italy... The range over which the line is built is 50 miles deep at its narrowest.”<sup>137</sup>

Contrary to common perceptions, life in the winter line was not idle. It may have been static, but the war continued unabated. Apart from the daily shelling, operations in this sector were limited to patrol activity, sometimes using partisans, who knew the area intimately, as guides. Sometimes, a patrol would go out for 36 hours, laying up during the day and observing enemy movements.<sup>138</sup> The FC/CTH sent out a total of ninety patrols during this period, “the majority fighting patrols to seek and kill the enemy.”<sup>139</sup> From the 12 Mtd Bde front, an average of eight patrols, ranging from three men to two platoons, were sent out every night.<sup>140</sup> Despite meticulous planning, patrols often ran into *casas* occupied by Germans and the work was epitomized by physical and mental strain, ambushes, mines and booby traps.<sup>141</sup>

The freezing weather experienced in the winter line will be discussed elsewhere, as will the six week period of rest at Lucca. It was only in the spring of 1945 that a breakthrough could be achieved. The final period of operations included the assault on Monte Sole and Monte Caprara and the final battles of Camposanto Bridge and Finale Emilia. At the Po River itself, there was little resistance encountered.

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<sup>135</sup> *The Star*, 23/6/1944, Fifth and Eighth Army pushing steadily on in Italy.

<sup>136</sup> C.G. Starr, *From Salerno to the Alps*, p. 371.

<sup>137</sup> *The Star*, 10/7/1944, Gothic Line a formidable natural barrier.

<sup>138</sup> G.B.Hobbs, *From Sicily to the Alps*. p. 204.

<sup>139</sup> L.G. Murray, *First City/Cape Town Highlanders in the Italian Campaign: A short history, 1943-1945*, p. 52.

<sup>140</sup> M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p. 43.

<sup>141</sup> L.G. Murray, *First City/Cape Town Highlanders in the Italian Campaign: A short history, 1943-1945*, p. 52; SADDCC Archive, Box 624, War Diary of 1/6<sup>th</sup> Fd Rgt, 3/10/1944.



During the chase across the Po plains, 13 Mtd Bde was spearheading and moving so fast that 1/25,000 maps were useless and commanders switched to 1/100,000 maps. Venice was now the objective. Murray writes that on 27 April: "...the Division began moving into concentration immediately south of Legnago. It seemed that every formation was 'elbowing' its way forward along the packed roads so as to get at the enemy."<sup>142</sup>

On 30 April, it was announced that all organized enemy resistance had ceased except north west of Milan where two German divisions were still holding out. Fortunately for the exhausted and unenthusiastic men, the last of the enemy capitulated.<sup>143</sup> According to Monick, the move was precipitated by the threat of a Partisan uprising.<sup>144</sup> Nevertheless, at first light, on 1 May, the Division began departing for Milan – via Cremona. It had taken just 19 days for the Allies to advance from the Apennines to the Alps. It was at 1800 hrs on 2 May that General Von Vietinghoff released the news of the German surrender in Italy. On 7 May, the surrender of German forces was announced on the wireless and at 0001 hrs, on 9 May, the war in Europe ended.

Following the victory parade at the Monza race track on 14 May, the three brigades were sent to three different sectors: 13 Bde was at Turin, 12 Bde was along the French-Italian border in the Province of Aosta and 11 Bde was on the Swiss border.<sup>145</sup> The divisional headquarters was at Baveno on the shores of Lake Maggiore. Later, when repatriation took over from border duty as the main priority, administrative headquarters moved to Rapallo on the Italian Riviera.

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<sup>142</sup> L. Murray, *First City/Cape Town Highlanders in the Italian Campaign: A short history, 1943-1945*, pp. 62-64.

<sup>143</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 221; N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 308.

<sup>144</sup> S. Monick, *A bugle calls*, p. 481.

<sup>145</sup> A.B. Theunissen, Major-General W.H. Evered Poole, CB, CBE, DSO: 1902-1969 Personal Retrospects, p. 23.

## CHAPTER 3: LIFE IN CAMP AND ON THE ROAD

### a) Camp conditions and facilities

At the outbreak of war, the UDF training facilities were totally inadequate. Following the initial rush to enlist, bungalows and bell tents were filled to capacity from Kimberley to Kafferskraal where the Armoured Car Regiment (SAAC) was based. Zonderwater near Cullinan was a military base and a POW camp. Staff officers did countless courses at Roberts Heights. The infantry trained in the traditional pursuits of squad drill, bayonet drill, marksmanship interspersed with bouts of boredom and “bull”. Route-marches like the 32 mile slog from Barberton to Nelspruit were particularly memorable.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional training ground of the Natal Mounted Rifles and Natal Carbineers was in the hills around Ladysmith where their forefathers had been besieged in the Anglo-Boer War. Hay Paddock (alternatively named “Clay Paddock” and “Flea Paddock”) was established on a 72 hectare site on the south eastern fringe of Pietermaritzburg, near Scottsville, in what is today the suburb of Hayfields in Pietermaritzburg. The camp was within walking distance of the town, however, conditions left a lot to be desired. The problems were highlighted in a letter written by Mrs M. Cochrane to the Hon. F.C. Sturrock, the Acting Minister of Defence:

It has been brought to my notice by officers and men stationed at Hay Paddock, P.M.Burg, of the bad conditions prevailing in that camp. I understand that it has been built on the side of a hill, the men are under canvass. In dry weather they are blinded by dust and in wet weather they are up to their knees in mud. These men are waiting to embark up north and across the seas, but some of them have been here for months on end and have been home on embarkation leave as many as three times, and still they do not proceed out of Maritzburg.<sup>2</sup>

At peak times in 1943, the camp accommodated 25,000 men although the average occupancy was 15,000 and the facilities were meant for 20,000. Although Hodgson’s letters portray a remarkable ability to look on the bright side, they did corroborate Mrs Cochrane’s report:

Yesterday and today have been very windy and extremely dusty. Last night our tent was hit by what you could practically call a hurricane. Half of our tent doesn’t hook down so the wind just swept right through and smothered everything in dust, and all we could do was to get right down under the blankets to prevent ourselves being choked by the dust; so you can imagine what a mess we were in this morning. We were very lucky that our tent was not swept away, because we would have really been in the soup then; three tents were swept away and the occupants are still searching for their belongings.<sup>3</sup>

Conditions could have been worse and they did in fact get worse when the division went “up north”. Although the big base camps in Egypt had been utilized for a number of years, the facilities still left much to be desired by the time the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div took occupation. Sleeping and eating conditions in Khatatba were very basic. The tents were of good quality but were not dug in and they would flap about in the desert sandstorms.

Most men slept on the sand but one man recounted how he constructed a bed from planks from a packing crate (wood was a scarce commodity). The nails were rusty and bent – the

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<sup>1</sup> E. Goetzsche, *The official history of the Natal Mounted Rifles*, pp. 180-181; J. Keene, *South Africa in World War II*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> SADDCC, Chief of the General Staff (CGS), Box 283, Mrs M. Cochrane, MPC – The Hon. F.C. Sturrock, Acting Minister of Defence.

<sup>3</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 5/8/1943.

tools he borrowed from the stores. In a letter dated 27 October 1943, he proudly described the construction to his mother:

Today I made myself a real luxury – a bed, I am lying on it at the moment, and it is absolutely perfect. It is just six feet long, about three feet wide, and the height off the ground is just on nine inches. The top is made of four floor boards, built up on two patent trestles. It has got a lovely spring in it and it is lovely to lie on. Also it is jolly nice to get off the ground and get our blankets out of the sand. This is a sketch of it looking at it from the side and the end.

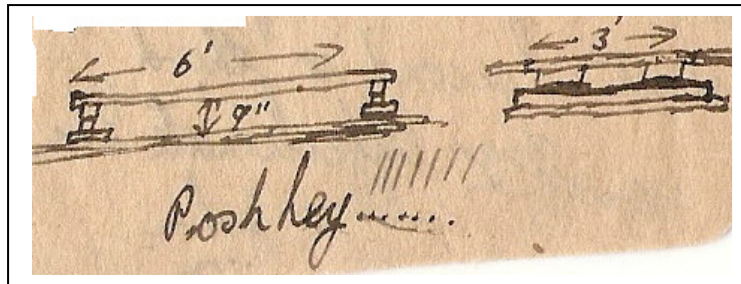


FIGURE 3: Image of original drawing of a home-made bed.  
 FROM: John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 27/10/1943.

The official title of the big base camp just outside Cairo was No. 1 R & T (Reserve and Transit) Depot. The ground was allocated by the Egyptian government. It was originally planned for 5,000 men housed in 20 blocks of 250 men plus an administration block with the camp reception station. Today, Helwân or Hulwân is the last stop on the Cairo Metro, 15 kilometres south of Gisa and 30 Kilometres from the city centre.<sup>4</sup> The proximity of Helwan to the fleshpots of Cairo made life more bearable than at Khatatba. Hodgson's descriptions of the restaurants and bars contradict the commonly held perceptions that Helwan was "hell on earth".<sup>5</sup>

Men generally preferred to be in forward areas where the section lines were separate from the others and things were more lax.<sup>6</sup> After landing in Italy in March 1944, the division began concentrating in the area around Altamura and Gravina. Altamura was alternately muddy and dusty, cold and depressing a few kilometres west of the town in the direction of Gravina, south of the Foggia plain. It had previously been the site of the Campo di Concentramento No. 65, where South Africans and other POWs had lived two years previously, in ankle-deep mud.<sup>7</sup>

Major I. Moore, Brigade Major in 12 SA Mtd Bde, was part of the advance party which arrived in Italy to set up base camp at Campo 65. According to him, there were no reception arrangements, virtually no facilities apart from the perimeter fence, no kitchens or cooking fuel. In a 1948 interview, Moore blamed the poor organizing of the UDF administrative headquarters and stated that base administrative arrangements were shocking throughout the war.<sup>8</sup> The camp at Altamura was totally overcrowded and the showers were rotated between

<sup>4</sup> S. Webster, The Helwan Riots: August 1945, *Military History Journal* 12 (3) 2002; SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 181, Standing Orders, Camp standing orders, UDF Adm HQ MEF.

<sup>5</sup> J.F. Bourhill, *Come back to Portofino: Through Italy with the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division*, pp. 81-83.

<sup>6</sup> L.G. McNicholas – Miss O'Donaghue, 10/1/1944.

<sup>7</sup> P. Ogilvie & R. Newman, *In the bag*, pp. 51-53.

<sup>8</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 142, Interview with Maj I. Moore, former Brigade Major of 12 SA Mtd Bde.

units. For example, the 1/6<sup>th</sup> Fd Rgt was allowed to shower on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Likewise, the local NAAFI was unable to cope and could only be used on alternate days.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout 1944, the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division Reserve Group remained at Alife where there was a big reserve depot and staging area, forty kilometres north east of Naples on the Volturno River. It contained new recruits straight from South Africa, the wounded and sick, the shell shocked, and other misfits. Captain Robinson, the senior historical recording officer, was also based there. This is where the anti-aircraft (AA) and tank regiments retrained as infantrymen for the battles of the northern Apennines. According to Baker who convalesced there, it was possible to live very happily on the banks of the Volturno, feeding on grapes and figs. It was close enough to Pompei and the Amalfi coast for week-end excursions. In December 1944, the reserve group moved to Montevarchi, south of Florence. The move began with a reconnaissance in October and was completed by 20 December. The camp at Sant' Angelo d'Alife was handed over to the Canadians who were not much impressed with the accommodation.<sup>10</sup>

Further north, it seems that base camps were the same. After recovering from his wounds, Michael Howard rejoined the division at the end of July. He travelled the route of all replacements coming up from Alife and over-nighted at a base camp in Arezzo which he describes as “bleak little place” and was surprised to find a suggestions book. Even more surprising was the fact that the book had been used, not for suggestions, but for officers in transit to write “sickly compliments, so laudatory as to suggest that the authors were either lunatic, or in view of the nature and amenities of the place, inspired with an infectious spirit of ferocious irony”.<sup>11</sup>

Not everyone in the division experienced the Battle of Monte Cassino. The tank regiments were not deployed. However, the 12 SA Motorised Brigade was in reserve and deployed in a holding position. At Vallerotonda (near Cassino) where first the Germans and then the French Moroccans had occupied their billet, the mess was awful. Apart from their toilet habits, entrails of slaughtered animals were just left lying around.<sup>12</sup> The standards of hygiene were not the same among nations.

At Cassino, there had been a scourge of flies but after centuries of campaigning, the British army had learned to maintain scrupulous cleanliness in the lines. Garbage was incinerated or buried. Waste water was thrown into soakage pits. In Italy, swill was disposed of to local farmers and positions were left as clean as possible.<sup>13</sup> The threat of dysentery was always present, especially in the hot weather and in base camps, men were instructed to wash eating utensils before and after eating. A constant war was waged against flies and because of an outbreak of typhus in Naples, strict controls were introduced to prevent troops from coming into contact with civilians.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 624, 1/6<sup>th</sup> Fd Rgt, D.R.O. 87/44, 22/4/1944.

<sup>10</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 599, 6 SA Armd Div Res. Gp., 1-31 December 1944; D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 441.

<sup>11</sup> M. Howard, Extracts from a letter by Michael Howard, in D. Quilter (ed.), *No dishonourable name*, p. 218.

<sup>12</sup> J. Kros, *War in Italy*, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 624, 1/6 Fd Rgt, Routine Order No. 1/5, 11/5/1944.

<sup>14</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 624, 1/6 Fd Rgt, D.R.O. 87/44, 22/4/1944.

Nevertheless, complaints were received that camp sites evacuated by forward troops had been fouled. These sites were allocated to rear echelons and they had no option but to occupy them. Units were politely requested to consider the following troops and make every effort to leave camp sites in a sanitary condition.<sup>15</sup>

According to Axelson, one could write an essay on army ablutions which he called “PKs” (picannin kaias), their locations and the atmosphere. Normally, it was a wooden seat over a hole in the ground. In a forward location, it could be surrounded by sandbags. They could be a single seater or even a companionable 4-seater. It would be shared by all ranks if necessary.<sup>16</sup> The GOC however, had his own corrugated iron latrine which was carried on a 15 cwt truck.<sup>17</sup>

The infantry travelled light as they had little space on their trucks for superfluous equipment. Cooking utensils, bits of furniture and even wireless radios were looted from destroyed houses when required. Arguably the most important piece of camping equipment was that used for the brewing of tea. Water could be quickly boiled on a “Tommy Cooker” which contained a gelatinous substance which burned without smoke and could make two to three cups of tea.<sup>18</sup> The division was supplied with the American “Hydra Cooker” – which was modified to become a “Bazooka”. A “Trombone” was another type of oil burning stove.<sup>19</sup> In a letter to his father, Hodgson describes the petrol stove which he used to boil water:

At the moment we have got quite a good device for making hot water. We have got a large round tin with a big pipe leading up the centre and out through the bottom, this is stood on a flat tin about the same size as the large one. The outer portion of the tin is filled with water and the flat tin with petrol. When the petrol is lighted it burns up the centre pipe and heats the water rapidly. As there is tons of petrol it is a useful gadget.<sup>20</sup>

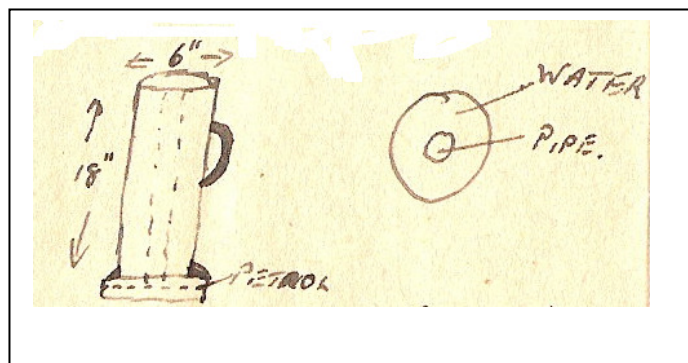


FIGURE 4: Image of original drawing of petrol stove.  
 FROM: John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 7/4/1944.

Relating to the subject of cooking facilities, it must be pointed out that even the front line troops were provided with cooked meals. Sometimes these would be supplied by rear kitchens but when the infantry were too far forward, cooking was done for small groups:

<sup>15</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 30/44, 2/7/1944.

<sup>16</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> L.G. Murray, *First City/Cape Town Highlanders in the Italian Campaign: A short history, 1943-1945*, p.18.

<sup>19</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1, 6 SA Armd Div, Special Routine Orders 43 (CMF), 22 December 1944; Sherman tanks were also known as “Tommy Cookers” or “Ronsons” due to their propensity to ignite.

<sup>20</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 7/4/1944.

A great improvement that has taken place lately and that is the cooking arrangements have been changed in our company. We no longer have company cooking, but each day the rations are dealt out to each truck and we are responsible for our own cooking. It is much better like this as we get much more and much better meals, these we improve even further with stuff from our parcels. There are seventeen of us including the cook – we were fortunate to get one of the coloured cooks from the company kitchen. When we feel like it, we do our own and he does all the washing up, but when we are tired he does it all, and he is excellent.<sup>21</sup>

The acquisition and food and its preparation was perhaps the most important aspect of everyday life. This section only touches on cooking equipment and facilities whereas in a later section, the topic of food is dealt with specifically in relation to its availability, preparation and consumption.

## b) Camp routine

The bulk of the division began arriving in Egypt in April 1943 and spent a year there in training. The two big South African base camps were at Khatatba and Helwan. The latter was closer to Cairo and vastly more comfortable. In his frank fashion, Douglas Baker (NMR) describes life in the desert as being characterized by extreme heat (up to 55 degrees centigrade) and dust in summer and cold in winter, flies, boredom, brackish water, flash floods, bully beef and biscuits, ticks, fleas, crabs and masturbation.<sup>22</sup>

Sport was the army's answer for keeping soldiers occupied and of boosting morale. At Khatatba and Helwan, playing fields were dotted among the tents. Although the uneven sand pitches were not ideal, they provided for soccer, hockey and rugby. (Sport will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.) As the training intensified, there was little time left for sport and household chores. Hodgson describes the routine on manoeuvres:

From now on we are going to get on with our training. We start at six in the morning and we don't finish until quarter past five in the evening. As you can see it does not give us much more spare time and because by the time we have had supper and a wash and got our things fixed up for the next day, we will be feeling very much like bed.<sup>23</sup>

Base camp routine consisted of washing and mending clothes, hygiene fatigues, kitchen fatigues, hauling water and supplies. Route marches in the desert were another unwelcome pastime. With Egyptian civilians in and around the camp, there was the problem of thieving. Legend has it that they could steal a tent while people were sleeping in it. Men slept with their rifles under their blankets or tied to their legs. Standing orders recommended that rifles be chained together by passing a chain through the trigger guards, "making a bundle that is almost impossible to carry away". Even during the day, weapons had to be kept under direct supervision. There was a ready market for arms and ammunition and any persons not serving in the armed forces was considered to be an arms thief.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the prospect of cheap labour was too good to pass up and Hodgson's tent employed an Egyptian to do their washing.<sup>25</sup>

The discomforts and aggravations which the troops experienced in Egypt are legendary – small wonder that the men looked forward to being posted to an operational area. However,

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<sup>21</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 13/6/1944.

<sup>22</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 253.

<sup>23</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 10/10/1943.

<sup>24</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 181, Standing Orders, Camp standing orders, UDF Adm HQ MEF.

<sup>25</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 10/10/1943.

when the division first arrived in Italy, there was not much improvement. Guard duties, fatigues, church parades and training continued during their stay at Altamura. There were lectures on mines and mules. Tank crews went on map reading exercises. There was little in the way of sight-seeing apart from a beautifully decorated cathedral but there was plenty of alcohol and some live music from time to time.<sup>26</sup> The theatre in Altamura was situated in Piazza Mercandante where Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) concerts and film shows could be seen. All restaurants except those controlled by the Allied Forces themselves, as well as all brothels, were out of bounds.<sup>27</sup> Guard duties, fatigues, church parades and training continued during their stay at Altamura. Discipline was petty and the front line offered an escape. Frank Watson, (1/6 Fd Rgt Rhodesian Battery) voiced the frustrations of all in his diary entry for 28 April 1944:

We are all wondering when and where we are going into action, some say it will be very soon, I am inclined to believe it. I hope so in a way, because the bullshit about guards etc. is getting beyond human endurance and imagination.<sup>28</sup>

Watson's feelings are understandable. In addition to the dress regulations being strictly enforced, and a clamp-down on "unsoldierly bearing", the following order was issued:

Since the arrival of the Div in this theatre, there had been a noticeable slackness on the part of ORs in saluting officers...this may be due to an impression which appears to have been gained that in an operational area saluting is dispensed with. This impression is erroneous...all officers will in future take particulars of any personnel failing to pay correct compliments and in glaring instances, will immediately place the offender under open arrest.<sup>29</sup>

After the Battle of Monte Cassino, the division concentrated in the Volturno River valley in the district of Alife. It was a fairly unique situation which would only be repeated during the two rest periods when the whole division was at Siena in August 1944 and again in March 1945 around Lucca. This particular time was most memorable not only because of the beautiful spring weather and lush surroundings – the men had come through their baptism of fire and were poised to take a leading role in the Italian campaign:

The whole company is encamped on the hill slope, but we are higher up than most and it is lovely and quiet. We have made some steps up to the ledge upon which we have the tent and all our kit; we have made a lovely fire place for all our cooking. We are interfered with by nobody and do as we please. The scenery is lovely and we have a very good view from our ledge – the hillside as well as the whole countryside is very green and studded with olive trees, below the hill is a fairly flat plain which is cultivated; beyond this is a very large river, and the other side rises again to another range of hills. The river is roughly ten minutes walk from our tent, it is wide, deep and has a fairly strong current; the water is simply wonderful – this afternoon the two of us walked down at about three; all we took with us was a cake of soap, we swam round for a bit then had a good wash and then another swim.<sup>30</sup>

While at rest, there were no formal duties, but the men took the opportunity to spruce up their kit. Civilians did the washing in return for a few cigarettes. Swimming was the main activity.<sup>31</sup> The next opportunity for rest and reorganization was in August when the division camped near Siena for two weeks. The routine here was relaxed although there were still

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<sup>26</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 362.

<sup>27</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 624, 1/6 Fd Rgt, D.R.O. 87/44 22/5/1944.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in J. Crwys-Williams, *Mood of a nation: A country at war 1939-1945*, p. 359.

<sup>29</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 624, 1/6<sup>th</sup> Fd Rgt, D.R.O. 87/44, 22 /4/1944.

<sup>30</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 25/5/1944.

<sup>31</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 25/5/1944.

some compulsory parades. There was, however, no relaxation for workshop personnel who took the opportunity to service vehicles and equipment.

In many ways, life in the front line was preferable to the nuisances experienced in base camp. Provided that the period spent in the front line was not too long or too uncomfortable, the men enjoyed being treated as professionals - doing the job for which they had been trained. The front line was seldom static during the drive to Florence, but once winter set in, the positions became entrenched for four months.

The overriding memory of the winter of 1944/45 was of living in holes in the ground and in dugouts on the front line. Certain aspects of life in the winter line are touched on elsewhere, namely under the topics of weather and health. While infantrymen were rotated out of the line every four days, artillerymen lived in greater comfort but for longer periods in shelters made from sandbags and ammunition boxes.

Even behind the front lines, while operations were ongoing and people had a job to do, soldiers were essentially left to their own devices. In the lines of the medium artillery, Gunner Johnston's routine during November and December consisted of "loafing around", washing and drying clothes, a bit of vehicle maintenance, kitchen fatigue and a number of runs to Prato on kit fatigue and ration fatigue.<sup>32</sup> Interspersed with this were some days of intense excitement avoiding enemy patrols and watching the shelling, bombing and strafing of Vergato while on observation post (OP) duty.<sup>33</sup>

While in the operational area, the forward headquarters staff worked out of van-type trucks and were kept busy with paperwork, especially the daily, weekly and casual returns. These "returns" included: statements of change in location, hostile shelling reports, daily air activity, casualties to personnel and equipment, a daily strength state, weekly field returns of officers, weekly field returns of other ranks, monthly nominal rolls, burial returns, effective fighting states, and numerous "Q" returns relating to ammunition and other supplies.<sup>34</sup>

At the end of winter, the division was again withdrawn from the line in February 1945, and spent six weeks in the Lucca area resting and reorganizing. During this time, leave parties went into Florence and some men were billeted with Italian families but essentially, camp routine prevailed and training was ongoing. The routine of 7/22 Med Regt was similar to that of most regiments while at rest in Lucca:<sup>35</sup>

0730 – 0830 hrs	Breakfast
0845 hrs	Roll Call
0900 – 1230 hrs	24 Feb-4 March: Maintenance 5 March-31 March: Training
1240 – 1330 hrs	Lunch
1400 – 1630 hrs	Sport and compulsory PT
1800 hrs	Guard mounting
2200 hrs	All men not on pass to be in barracks
2215 hrs	Lights out

<sup>32</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, 14-24 November 1944.

<sup>33</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, 2-7 December 1944.

<sup>34</sup> Ditsong National Museum of Military History (DNMMH), B412 6<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division File 2, 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division, Standing Orders for War, January 1945.

<sup>35</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 8/45, 24/2/1945.



While the fighting troops rested, replacements and reserves continued with intensive training. The Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles – Transvaal Scottish – Rand Light Infantry (DSR) training program in northern Italy included: “night attack”, “bayonet work”, “house to house fighting”, “ambush”, “night patrol”, “company attack” and “consolidation, bridgehead and expansion of bridgehead” as well as the unappealing – “practical digging of tactical positions”.<sup>36</sup>

### c) Shelter and billets

Because of the overcrowding at Altamura in the south of Italy, it was considered necessary to turn out masses of Italians from their homes for billets. This was done with the help of the local mayor as no training had been given by the UDF in this sort of work.<sup>37</sup> In the American Fifth Army, the function of allocating areas was done by a special real estate section of the army engineers. This was done in advance using aerial photographs and maps. Requests for specific locations were sometimes done well in advance for special purposes such as airfields, hospitals, rest camps and staging areas. Evictions usually occurred when a unit occupied premises without proper authorization. Requisitioning of civilian facilities was necessary in many instances and compensation was paid to the Italian Government through the Allied Commission and private persons then presented their requests for payment to that organization.<sup>38</sup>

In the north of Italy, houses were better than in the south, nevertheless Captain Michael Howard noted that it was rare to find flush toilets in civilian homes. Sanitary arrangements usually consisted of either a hole in the floor with two footrests beside it or a damp stone bench with a hole in the middle.<sup>39</sup> Some were under the impression that Italians never cleaned or repaired their houses from the time they were built and declared that the towns were “dreadful places”:

There is no sign of cleanliness and in most cases no means for cleanliness – few of the houses have water laid on, and all the occupants obtain the water from a few taps scattered throughout the town. In the town where we are billeted I think our building is the only one with waterborne sewerage. It is a fairly modern school and is very clean – no thanks to the Itis but to all those who have been billeted there. I will say most of the houses are well built and are good houses in their own style, but the occupants have no sense of upkeep or cleanliness.<sup>40</sup>

As the division advanced up Italy, permanent billets were a thing of the past although it was necessary at times to inconvenience an Italian family for a night or two. When the HQ of 7/22 Med Rgt was established in the village of San Polo, just south of Radda, the control room was in the dining room of a private house. The owner was absent at the time of occupation but returned soon afterwards, and begged to be allowed to occupy one room in his own house.<sup>41</sup> The forward troops lived in the open and when they were rotated out of the line, they would seek out the most luxurious country villas. When in action, the HQ

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<sup>36</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 633, DSR 1-30 April 1945, Training programme DSR.

<sup>37</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 142, Interview with Maj I. Moore, former Brigade Major of 12 SA Mtd Bde.

<sup>38</sup> *A Military Encyclopaedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, pp. 355-358.

<sup>39</sup> M. Howard, The valley of the Setta, winter 1944-1945, in D. Quilter (ed.), *No dishonourable name*, pp. 232-233.

<sup>40</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 13/5/1944; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 25/5/1944.

<sup>41</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, 19/7/1944.

would normally be situated in an old farmhouse while the troops lived in their fighting holes.

Seldom, if ever, did South African troops have to live below ground level as in the trenches of the First World War or at Anzio which was the closest approximation to trench warfare in the Italian campaign. Monte Cassino resembled First World War conditions in many ways, but rotation out of the line was frequent. In a letter to his parents Hodgson describes his accommodations on the front line during the Monte Cassino battles:

We lived in a shell gutted house during the day, where we were very comfortable – we went out to dug-in positions at night; we did not sleep at all by night only during the day, but we got used to this. The rations came up to us every night and I must say we were fed excellently, all tinned grub and fresh bread, we never went hungry. The time we were in the line we never saw the sun at all and have consequently lost all our sunburn, but we will soon get it back as we are living now. We occupied the front positions and we could not have been much more than two hundred yards from Gerry's forward defences – the undergrowth was very thick so we never saw them.<sup>42</sup>

During the pursuit phase, an infantry battalion would typically be spread out over a square mile or more. The men dug-in under olive trees, the command posts set up in farm houses – the first fox-hole being only about two hundred yards away from the command post. During the day, men would just sit at the edge of their fox-holes, cleaning weapons, writing letters or just talking. At night they would sleep under their blankets at the bottom of their hole or perhaps in a shell-damaged, pock-marked, barn.<sup>43</sup>

Following close behind the forward troops, the artillery would harbour in carefully chosen positions, levelled and surveyed to be ready to fire at any time. The gunners dug slit trenches or “slitties”, in case of incoming fire. It was possible for one or two men to sleep in a tank but even tank crews would dig a fox-hole for the night.



FIGURE 5: Typical overnight position in an olive grove.  
FROM: James Bourhill Collection.

The digging of one's fox-hole, funk-hole or dugout was an enduring part of life for everyone within range of enemy artillery. The size, shape and construction of the “fighting

<sup>42</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson & W.A. Hodgson, 25/5/1944.

<sup>43</sup> E. Pyle, *Brave men*, p. 125.

hole” varied to suit the tactical and terrain conditions and within reasonable limits, the soldier was allowed to exercise his own ingenuity. Often a combination “fighting and sleeping” hole was constructed and in defensive positions, the two-man fox-hole was used. Under pressure, two men together would remain in position, longer than one man alone. There were also other advantages, psychological and tactical.<sup>44</sup>

A fighting hole or slit trench could be covered by a canvas sheet or “bivvy”. The two-man bivouac or “bivvy” was a canvas sheet, about 2.1 metres long, hardly big enough for two people. It came complete with the necessary ropes and two poles. Regardless, half an hour of heavy rain would cause the “tent” to collapse resulting in a night of misery or the risk being assaulted in a ruined farm building.

The problem of drainage could be mitigated by digging a sump in one corner of the fox-hole. In flat waterlogged country, where there was no high ground such as canal bank to dig into, sand bags were used.<sup>45</sup> A man’s chances of surviving an enemy bombardment were directly related to the depth of his slit trench. The ideal depth is six feet, but when an infantryman was in pursuit mode, it was sometimes necessary to dig-in two or three times a day and enthusiasm for digging diminished somewhat.<sup>46</sup> An overhead cover was provided wherever possible.



FIGURE 6: Bill Mauldin cartoon captioned “Me future is sealed Willie. I’m gonna be a perffessor on various types of European soil”.

FROM: <http://www.stripes.com/02/nov02/mauldin/index.html>.

During their rotations out of the line, units would be rested in villages and on farms a few kilometres to the rear. Headquarters staff normally selected the mansion of the wealthiest locals. Liberal use was made of their furniture, libraries and wine cellars. Wherever possible, when operations were relatively static, shelter would be sought in a sturdy and usually deserted Italian building. Michael Howard provides a vignette of the scene in a farm house on

<sup>44</sup> *A Military Encyclopedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, p. 125.

<sup>45</sup> *A Military Encyclopedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, p. 125.

<sup>46</sup> M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 110.

the front line between Greve and Strada. It is a picture which epitomises the Tuscan summer as it was experienced in 1944:

Water cans, ammunition boxes, and mortar bomb containers were heaped against the walls; broken flowers and creepers trailed on the paths. The place was in that state of messy untidiness which is inseparable from war, and is far more typical of it than any amount of horror. Think always of that when you try to visualize conditions at the front: the debris of a civilian house as it might be your own, dusty and looted; and superimposed on that the disorder of the army – weapons and ammunition, piles of web equipment, washing and writing materials hanging out of packs, maps and mess tins of rations; mattresses dragged from beds and carried to the safe rooms downstairs; drawers hanging open; windows barricaded with washstands; men sleeping on the floor under dirty mosquito nets; a strange mixture of papers *The Daily Mirror*, *Volkischer Beobachter*, *Il Popolo*, *Eighth Army News* – scattered around and perhaps a *Spectator* or an *Horizon* which not long ago lay on the table in your sitting room in London; and flies, flies, flies. This is war in comfort, indoors, in summer. What is it like in a slit trench in winter I will tell you next year.<sup>47</sup>

As things turned out, Howard did find out what life was like in a slit trench in winter in the northern Apennines. He found that life in a forward position was not as bad as one might think. Even in the Winter Line, some men preferred being in the front line to being in billets further back. During the winter, the Coldstream Guards occupied forward positions on a ridge leading to the Monte Sole – Monte Caprara – Monte Abelle massif (a short sharp climb up from La Quercia). Especially for a Guardsman, it was a relief to be away from the inspections, parades and routine of cleaning weapons. While not on sentry duty, the men would sleep contentedly, read the newspapers, write letters and drinking gallons of sweet tea. At dawn, there would be a general stand-to in their alarm posts on top of the ridge. Howard gives a different and enlightening perspective of life in the South African sector of the Winter Line:

The conditions of the companies dug in below the crest of the ridge [Pt 501] varied with the weather; but on the whole, they furnished a good instance of the possibility of being happy in the absence of all comfort. The more one had, the more one wanted. If we were under canvas, we complained because we were not in houses. If we were billeted in a house, we grumbled furiously if the roof leaked or the windows were broken. If all was well with the house itself, we were sure to find it inconveniently situated. Here, sitting in holes in the ground on the top of a mountain, being spasmodically mortared, we were so remote from all standards of comfort, that it did not occur to us to apply them. So long as we were dry and warm, and the rations came up and we knew what was going on and had as much sleep as we wanted, we were reasonably happy.<sup>48</sup>

During the winter, the tank squadrons were used in an artillery role and were thus located within shelling range of the enemy but being on lower ground, close to civilization, conditions were not too uncomfortable. While on a visit to the forward positions of the Pretoria Regiment in the Winter Line, Sampie de Wet was surprised to find a homely atmosphere. Officers were reading in front of the fire in the mess and one was mending some ski sticks. A large black dog was stretched out in front of the fire. Comparing this scene with what she experienced in the leave hotels she wrote:

In spite of all the gaiety, the side of the war that we saw at the Roma was a horror side. Men came to dance and drink and forget death and discomfort, and then they would suddenly show their real feelings. Here right near the line, it was much more homely, and at the same time more serious.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> M. Howard, Extracts from a letter by Michael Howard, in D. Quilter, (ed.), *No dishonourable name*, p. 220.

<sup>48</sup> M. Howard, The valley of the Setta, in D. Quilter (ed.), *No dishonourable name*, p. 237.

<sup>49</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 142.



FIGURE 7: Fighting hole with “bivvy”.  
FROM: Department of Defence Archives Repository.

Rear echelon personnel lived in billets or in self-constructed shanties. Various tactical headquarters were in small villages such as Grizzana, Stanco and Camugnano. The main divisional HQ was in Lagaro and the rear divisional HQ was in Castiglione. Other units were still further back in Prato and Florence. Approximately 800 South Africans occupied Lagaro. General Poole himself spent the winter here in his caravan. He refused to stay in any civilian house until the war was over, when he agreed to take over a house at Stresa – provided that he was not putting any family out.<sup>50</sup> The Guards Brigade headquarters was at Montorio, under the nose of the Germans on Monte Sole. Access was tricky but shellings were nevertheless uncommon.

Whenever possible, concrete or stone buildings were used for brigade command posts. The use of large vans would have attracted the attention of the enemy. During mountain attacks, commanders wanted to keep close to the front. Observation posts served as command posts in many cases. On a regimental or company level, command posts (CPs) and tactical headquarters (Tac HQs) were usually situated in houses. Although they offered good targets for enemy guns, the thick walls and underground cellars usually provided safe shelter.<sup>51</sup>

Wherever possible, the division avoided having to put Italian families out of their homes. The first choice for billets was those buildings previously occupied by the Fascist Party. Schools and other government buildings came a close second. In keeping with this policy, a group of men found themselves sleeping under the stars at a resort for the workers of the Pirelli tyre factory alongside a small lake on the outskirts of Carrugate. On 10 May 1945, Bourhill wrote:

“A” troop, only 60 odd men, occupies a lake and its surrounding grounds. There is good fishing, good swimming, a pub – private – in the grounds. I spend most of the day in a pair of underpants next to the lake.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> A.B. Theunissen, Major-General W H Evered Poole, CB, CBE, DSO:1902-1969, *Personal Retrospects*, 1992, p. 20.

<sup>51</sup> *A Military Encyclopedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, p. 161.

<sup>52</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 10/5/45.

During its peacekeeping operations immediately after the war, the division spread itself out over the whole of north western Italy. This was arranged partly to avoid placing too heavy a burden on any one community. The Italian Riviera and the Lake district was able to accommodate an army as resort hotels were plentiful. When Hodgson's company moved from Imperia to a resort town called Diano Marina about nine and a half kilometers east of Imperia, ostensibly for the purpose of resting, they took over a hotel and three villas. The Orderly Room staff of nine shared one sea-front villa:

We have all got beds with sufficient furniture, electric light, bathroom next door and most important, we have nobody to worry us at all as we are about the nearest to being our own bosses as one can be in the Army. There is not much work, so we spend our time on a lovely beach; it is very convenient as we can change in our own room, and stroll out of our front door across the road and onto the beach. The rest of the company live about a hundred yards further up the road; we eat at this place in the dining room, so we are really doing things in style.<sup>53</sup>

Soon after the war ended, while stationed in Turin, Hodgson stayed in a palace which is today one of the top tourist attractions in Italy. In a letter to his parents, he provided an astonishing insight into the types of accommodation which he occupied during the campaign. His reflections serve as a useful conclusion on the subject of accommodation:

I must say that I have seen an enormous amount of Italy to date, and it is an experience that I will never forget. During the Italian campaign, I have slept in many places, from pig sties and cow sheds to Roman villas and Fascist mansions but never before, have I lived in a King's palace. Believe it or not, that is where I am at present. King Victor Emanuel has three or four palaces spread over the country and at the moment we are living in one of them. I am living on the third floor, the five of us who live in this room are very well off. At the moment, I am sitting at a very good desk in front of the window, looking out over the palace gardens to the main street which passes by the colossal gates. We have got very good electric light and a wash basin in our room with water laid on (only cold I'm afraid). We have got quite a few chairs etc, so we are very well set-up. There is a tennis court at the back of the palace grounds but unfortunately we cannot get hold of any rackets and balls.<sup>54</sup>

#### **d) On the road (The mobile phase)**

The roads (or lack thereof) were a major factor on an operational and logistical level. Apart from the four months spent in the Winter Line, this was a mobile campaign. For the ordinary soldier, the traffic control points, the bottlenecks, the demolition of bridges, the proliferation of road signs, the permitted density and speed of convoys, icy and muddy roads and the scourge of road accidents are what this campaign was about. The infantry brigades were called motorised brigades for good reason.

Atkinson called this campaign "a battle of engineers" where the speed of advance was determined by bulldozers and by the men crawling on their bellies to lift mines with a bayonet. When Germans blew up houses to block narrow village roads, Allied engineers bulldozed new tracks over piles of rubble, sometimes at second storey height and filled craters with the debris of everyday life.<sup>55</sup> It was the sight of this type of destruction which left a lasting impression on many South Africans.

The type and extent of damage to a town would be an indication of what kind of fighting was involved in taking it. The American cartoonist Bill Maudlin observed that if the buildings were fairly intact with only broken windows, doors and pocked walls, it was a quick hand-to-

<sup>53</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 23/8/1945.

<sup>54</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – A.W & M.V. Hodgson, 5/5/1945.

<sup>55</sup> R. Atkinson, *The day of battle*, pp. 252-253.

hand street fight. If most of the walls were still standing, but the roofs had gaping holes, then the entry was preceded by an artillery barrage. If some of the holes are in the slopes of the roofs facing the retreating enemy, then he gave the town a plastering after he left. Where there is not much of the town left standing, it signifies bombing from the air.<sup>56</sup>

Axelson and his fellow officers marvelled that the enemy devoted so much time and explosive to the railway line and railway tunnels through the Apennines and yet left the roads more or less untouched. There were three theories: a) The Germans relied on them so much, they thought the Allies did as well. b) The demolition charges had been laid a long time beforehand and when they decided to pull back, there was no time to do the same to the roads. c) The Germans were running short of explosives – which was the most likely explanation.<sup>57</sup> On 12 June 1944, Douglas Baker wrote: “The Germans have been absolutely brutal in their hold on the land. Everywhere they leave their equipment, burned or mangled, yet fight on stubbornly through the hills, valleys and across rivers and plains though they must realize all is lost and fight with devilish cunning and fiendish sadism”.<sup>58</sup>

The daily routine during the advance up Italy was to pull the tanks off the road at 2200 hrs, to replenish and be ready for action again at 0330 hrs. According to the Brigade Major of 11 SA Arm'd Bde, Major H. Rushmere, no movement table was drawn up for the brigade. Vehicles were merely fed onto the road at a rate of 25 every fifteen minutes. Major Rushmere was the 11<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade liaison officer during the advance north of Rome. The Americans were very methodical and would issue maps showing routes and objectives for the day. Every morning the American liaison officer would approach Rushmere and say: “My organization plans as follows... .” Rushmere would reply: “See that dust, those are our tanks and they will keep going until they can't go any further.”<sup>59</sup> Pieter Joubert of the Pretoria Regiment describes a typical morning on the road:

The stillness of the morning air broken by the whining of a Sherman electric starter, followed a moment later by the deep stuttering clamour of thirty cylinders bursting into life - which seemed to echo all over the valley – and another and another until all twelve or fifteen tanks were running. They would gradually settle down to a steady warming up roar.<sup>60</sup>

When setting out on the axis of advance, the reconnaissance (recce) squadron would lead the way, followed by the armoured vanguard. The recce element was not expected to stand and fight and therefore consisted preferably of no more than two troops so as not to hamper the armoured vanguard coming up behind. The point troop would move at least 1,000 yards ahead of the armoured vanguard and a Sherman tank would lead the way because of its ability to better withstand anti-tank fire. Stuart Tanks were considered to be the watchdogs and would follow on or off-road. When contact was made, the job of the lighter, more agile Stuarts was to create havoc among the enemy positions once the anti-tank weapons had been dealt with. Where there was a breakthrough, and terrain permitting, the recce tanks would fan out and fight. In close country and on a narrow axis, they would have to make way for the infantry to come up.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 60.

<sup>57</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 127.

<sup>58</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 399.

<sup>59</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 142, Notes on interview with Maj Rushmere, 24/11/1948.

<sup>60</sup> G.B.Hobbs, *From Sicily to the Alps*, p. 111.

<sup>61</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 540, PR 1-31 August 1944. Report by Col A. Johnstone.

Following behind the fighting tank squadrons, was the “A” echelon, consisting of forward signal group and forward “T” (technical) group. Then came the “B” echelon or replenishment echelon which consisted of a number of so-called “replenishment packets”. Where a squadron was doing a detached job, off the main axis, it would be served by a small “packet” consisting of two ammunition vehicles, one petrol vehicle, a signal 15 cwt, (truck) a fitters 15 cwt, and a water cart. “C” Echelon consisted of various soft skinned vehicles and stores trucks.<sup>62</sup>

In attack, tanks would move in short bounds, adhering to the old principles of fire and movement: “When the tank moves, it moves as fast as possible while other tanks cover him.” Any likely enemy anti-tank positions such as hayricks on skylines would be immediately engaged, without waiting for confirmation. Squadrons had to be prepared to move onto objectives 2,000 yards ahead of the infantry, and in exceptional circumstances, hold these positions for up to six hours. During the holding period, the crew was advised not get out of their tanks, thinking all is quiet. “The German has a pugnacious habit of coming back with mortar and shell fire once he has reorganized after being pushed off his objective”, Johnstone concluded.<sup>63</sup>

In a document relating to the lessons learned by 7/22 Med Rgt in the drive to Florence, the opinion was given that the mediums should be seen primarily as close support weapons. The gun towed by a Mack tractor was very mobile and could be deployed practically anywhere where field guns could go and with equal speed. According to the report, the medium guns were new and more accurate than the 25-pdrs or 105 mms. It was found from experience that the enemy would not be shifted by the fire of lighter calibre guns but moved as soon as a 100 lb shell was lobbed at him. According to the report, the division lost considerable artillery support because the mediums were relatively far back in the order of march. For this reason, it was recommended that a medium gun be brought right to the front.<sup>64</sup>

The movement and positioning of guns was also a point of contention between units. Occupation of positions at night was fraught with problems and even later afternoon moves resulted in the men getting to bed very late after preparing the positions and thereby becoming fatigued over a long period. Early morning moves were preferred as the roads were generally quiet and “leap-frogging” also worked well. The report to the commander of artillery stated that priority should be given to the artillery in the allocation of areas. It often happened that the only decent deployment areas had been unnecessarily taken by other people who could very well go elsewhere. This caused delay and very often loss in range as evidently once someone has “bought a plot” he could not be shifted.<sup>65</sup>

Like any other travellers, soldiers surveyed the countryside and the villages through which they passed. Even the small villages which were untouched, were unpleasant places with dark narrow alleyways, strewn with garbage. The further north, the nicer were the houses. Hodgson was impressed by the countryside and on many occasions compared it to the wine lands of the Cape but in his opinion, the towns of southern Italy were pitiful to begin with:

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<sup>62</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 540, PR 1-31 August 1944. Report by Col A. Johnstone.

<sup>63</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 540, PR 1-31 August 1944. Report by Col A. Johnstone.

<sup>64</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Lessons learned, Report to CRA, 20/8/1944.

<sup>65</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Lessons learned, Report to CRA, 20/8/1944.



The country strikes me as a very pleasant one except for the urban life which I think is too terrible for words. Even taking into consideration that the country has been stripped for total war and been invaded, the towns are still awful.<sup>66</sup>

Bridges were obviously prime targets for the Germans – no matter how old or famous. Unlike other bridges in Florence, the Ponte Vecchio had been spared. However, demolition rubble blocked the approaches. Sampie de Wet describes the sights and smells as experienced by one unused to war:

I had half anticipated the look of the debris that lined the river banks and the area around the Ponte Vecchio; but I had not imagined the coiled springs which were all that was left of armchairs and sofas. I had not expected the old women and children poking about among the rubble for bits of firewood or salvage. And above all I had not anticipated the smell. It was a smell probably due to unwashed humanity and the street latrines, but also due to the very old houses and their furniture now pulverized to dust.<sup>67</sup>



FIGURE 8: Bailey bridge in Florence, Ponte Vecchio in background.  
FROM: Ditsong National Museum of Military History.

The Santa Trinita Bridge which was one of the oldest and most beautiful bridges in Florence had been replaced by the Allies with a double Bailey built on pylons left by the original bridge. It was the only bridge open to civilians and it was always crowded. The Ponte alla Carraia and the Ponte Sospeso (suspension bridge) had been destroyed, the latter was replaced with a two-way Bailey bridge that was under a continuous stream of military traffic. By the end of the war, work had already started on reconstruction and the jewellery shops which lined the Ponte Vecchio were once again open for business.<sup>68</sup>

The winter driving was particularly challenging and it was necessary to introduce measures such as carrying two days rations, water, petrol (for cooking), bedding, tow ropes, spade and pick. The driver and co-driver were taught to stay with the vehicle in the event of becoming

<sup>66</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 13/5/1944.

<sup>67</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 61.

<sup>68</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 60.

stuck or snowed-in. Drivers equipped themselves with sunglasses for the snow glare. On 21 November 1944, one driver from 59 “Q” company was killed when his 3-tonner went off a 100 foot precipice. The mountain roads were kept open by American bulldozers but the ice had to be chipped off by Basotho labourers. It was said that more work could be done by five Basotho than by 100 Italians. Some thought that it would be better to use Italian POWs here than have them languishing in the Union.<sup>69</sup>



FIGURE 9: Manufacturing the road signs which were highly visible throughout Italy  
 FROM: Ditsong National Museum of Military History

In war torn Italy, there could be up to 12,000 vehicles per day on a two lane road. It was the responsibility of the movement control division of the Fifth Army to regulate these movements. Military police posts, traffic control posts and road patrols monitored convoys. The function of traffic control posts (TCPs) was to expedite and record convoy movements. The traffic engineer division of the Fifth Army was responsible for the many road signs which littered the country as well as compiling information on road conditions. The best type of stake for mounting signs was the British 6-foot angle iron stake normally used for barbed wire. To conserve stakes, available mountings such as trees, posts, walls were employed wherever possible. Directional signing was of particular importance in fast moving situations.<sup>70</sup>

The South African Military Police had a TCP at Siena (and in Florence for a period) running an information and stragglers post to assist “stragglers” on Route 2. The post existed from August 1944 and had proved to be “an undoubted success”.<sup>71</sup> During the static phase, road posts (as opposed to a TCP) were set up in the mountain villages. Their function was to

<sup>69</sup> H.R. Paterson & M. Levin, *Through desert, veld & mud*, p. 151; E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 163.

<sup>70</sup> *A Military Encyclopaedia based on operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, pp. 476-484.

<sup>71</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non- Div Activities, February and March 1945.

control the traffic convoys, keep the roads open with snow ploughs and provide assistance to any stragglers and break-downs.<sup>72</sup>



FIGURE 10: Bill Mauldin cartoon illustrating the proliferation of road signs, as well as differences between the Allies in style of communication. captioned “And now we’re entering American territory old man”.

FROM: <http://www.stripes.com/02/nov02/mauldin/index.html>.

During any major movement, military police directed traffic. Maps were inadequate and in short supply. Eric Axelson once called at the map truck to pick up a few sheets. There he was told that the division needed 15,000 sheets to move 80 kilometres and had to rely on surveys dating to 1920. Aerial photographs were therefore invaluable and often contradicted the maps.<sup>73</sup>

When making unofficial journeys, hitch-hiking was the order of the day – by whatever transport was available. After spending his first day in Castiglione strolling around, Gunner Peter Johnston took the opportunity to go back down to Montale (between Pistoia and Prato) to see a girl named Anna. He walked, rode on a donkey cart and hitched a ride in a truck. When he got there, he found that Anna was in Florence but got a “bit tight on vino” with her family. Walking and hitch-hiking on to Prato, he was kept company by two girls for quite a way. In Prato he took advantage of an American mobile shower unit before getting a lift to the “Red Tabs” club for tea and buns and a bed for the night. Picked up the next day by a 3-tonner, he was taken to “B” Echelon where he slept in the back of the truck. Finally, he got to

<sup>72</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1, 6 SA Armd Div Admn Sig Instr No. 5 (CMF); *Military Encyclopedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, p. 489.

<sup>73</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 37.

Florence – and Anna. They saw a film together at the Apollo Theatre and then it was back to Prato in an ambulance.<sup>74</sup>

The new Willy's Jeeps were found to be indispensable. Jeeps were also involved in a disproportional number of accidents but they were still much admired. As a wireless operator on the company commander's Jeep, Hodgson described to his father his first experience of four wheel drive motoring: "The set is on the company commander's jeep, and where he doesn't go in that jeep is a sin. He simply goes everywhere. Demolitions and even no roads at all, are no obstacle whatsoever."<sup>75</sup>



FIGURE 11: Jeep crossing a stream in Italy, gun tractor (quad) in background.

FROM: James Bourhill Collection.

The road between Florence and Prato was travelled by every soldier at the front, as the main road between Bologna and Florence passed through Castiglione and Prato.<sup>76</sup> During December, Sampie de Wet lived in Prato and travelled each day into Florence to work at the Villa Frasinetto. On the journey she took in her surroundings and made small talk with her South African driver which went like this: "Another Yank went into another Eyetie here last night." On her morning drives, she watched Spitfires coming low over the *autostrada* to land at the aerodrome just outside Florence. Her acute observations enable the reader to be transported to that time and place:

Just before Christmas, I saw an American Convoy on this road, [Prato to Florence] obviously moving camp. The trucks were large and new. One had in it a dining table and a set of chairs, another had nothing but a huge Christmas tree. Some weeks later, we passed a British convoy, battered trucks looking as if they had been through five years of war, enormous loads tied on under bulging tarpaulins, and clinging wherever they could find a hold, typical cockneys, each with a grin and a cigarette hanging from his lips.<sup>77</sup>

This stretch of road was the scene of a particularly tragic accident after a Christmas party that was organized in Prato by C" Squadron of the Pretoria Regiment for the night of 20 December 1944. Because of the typhoid epidemic in Prato, fraternization with the locals was forbidden. So for the dance, nurses from 107 SA General Hospital were asked to be partners.

<sup>74</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, 16-19 October 1944.

<sup>75</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 28/7/1944.

<sup>76</sup> Today there is a new highway directly linking Bologna and Florence.

<sup>77</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 128.

Transport consisting of 3-ton trucks was sent to fetch the party from outside the Roma Hotel in Florence and they arrived in Prato at approximately 2100 hrs. When the dance finished at 2359 hrs, the same transport took the party back to Florence. About two to three kilometres from Prato on the *autostrada*, there was a bomb-damaged bridge with a large block of concrete hanging down which struck the passengers on the back of the truck. Three medical personnel lost their lives in the accident. Nurse Shirley Williamson (23) of Witbank and Nurse Joyce Saville died on the scene. Sergeant Waterson died two days later.<sup>78</sup>

A convoy was described in the standing orders, as any group of more than ten vehicles or guns and for any movement of a convoy, permission had to be obtained from divisional headquarters. This was often circumvented by breaking the traffic up into smaller groups – in which case it was known as “casual traffic”. It was estimated that more than half of the army traffic was “casual traffic” and sometimes hampered operations. Army rules of the road strictly controlled speed, density, over-taking, halting, and use of lights.<sup>79</sup>

On 27 July 1944, Bourhill wrote: “I think we’ve had Roma as far as ever going back there is concerned. Traffic is very strictly controlled – and no wonder, every inch of the highway is valuable for bringing up stuff for the lines.”<sup>80</sup> By November the traffic in and around Florence had become critical, partly due to unauthorized journeys being made by all nationalities and road blocks were established to check passes and bona fides.<sup>81</sup> In January, there were still two burned out Sherman tanks on the side of the road just south of Florence. Sampie de Wet provides a vignette of the sights and sounds on the road from Rome to Florence in the Autumn of 1944:

We drove through avenues of plane trees all changing colour ...everywhere countrymen ploughing with large sleek white bullocks...fields with a deep rich beige with green grass around them...We crossed the rivers by bailey bridges, all single and therefore “one-way” so that we often had to wait...Some of the villages through which we passed had escaped quite remarkably, others were badly smashed...buildings reduced to rubble, bomb craters, houses with one or two walls left standing and the different wallpapers the only indication of where the various rooms had been.<sup>82</sup>

From the volume of archival documents relating to vehicles, traffic, roads and movement control, it can be seen that transport is a central theme of the campaign. Up until Florence, it had been a mobile war and although the Allies eventually became bogged down in the northern Apennines, the Italian campaign was for many, the ultimate road trip.

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<sup>78</sup> SADDDC, Medical file of Nurse Joyce Saville, Court of enquiry, testimony of L/Cpl H.V. Bungay.

<sup>79</sup> DNMMH, Appendix “E” the 6<sup>th</sup> Div Standing Orders. B412 6<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division file 2.

<sup>80</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 27/7/1944.

<sup>81</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1, Rear 6 SA Armd Div, Traffic control, 3/11/1944.

<sup>82</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 53.

## CHAPTER 4: SUSTENANCE OF MIND AND BODY

In addition to the basic needs such as food and clothing, the soldier needed contact with home to sustain him. As will become apparent below, the Union Defence Force was more efficient at getting the post through than supplying items of military kit. Except in extreme circumstances, food was never a critical problem, even if it had to be supplemented by parcels from home and from foraging in the countryside. Naturally, conditions differed in North Africa where the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division spent a year in training. The sustenance theme also covers sustenance of the soul – in the form of religion.

### a) **Supplies and kit**

For the purpose of reconstructing the actual experience of the legendary weather conditions which the South Africans endured “up north”, it is constructive to learn what type of clothing was considered necessary. Clothing was never an issue during the North African summers. The men (gunners in particular) would even go into action wearing underpants and boots. In base camp, dress regulations were naturally stricter. The UDF had much experience of the North African winters and with some improvising, the kit was quite adequate for Egypt where the 6<sup>th</sup> Division remained for the winter of 1943/1944. Likewise, the Italian summers presented no problems for the South Africans as far as clothing was concerned.

As the campaign proceeded up the length of Italy, supplies became more of an issue and the enforcement of the dress code became more and more irrelevant. The supply problem is easy to understand, especially in the winter of 1944 when the American Fifth Army (of which 6 SA Armoured Division was part) was at the end of a supply line approximately 8,000 kilometres long. Convoys brought supplies from the United States to the ports at Naples or Leghorn, from where they were transported by rail or road to Florence and stored in army dumps around Pistoia and Lucca. After being trucked up Route 64 or Route 6620, they would be loaded into Jeeps which would bump and splash their way in low gear up steep and twisted trails to the higher points. For the last stretch, the ammunition and supplies were strapped onto the backs of mules to get to the men who needed it. This long chain meant that it was difficult to supply the troops, and it caused delays in the advance. According to Lieutenant-Colonel Chester Starr, it was the gradual breakdown of the supply lines due to the overworking of trucks and mules, as well as the torrential rains which helped bring the drive to Bologna to a halt.<sup>1</sup>

Despite some protestations to the contrary, the fighting men found that the kit supplied by the military was barely adequate for the European winter – especially in the mountains. It was therefore necessary to wear a mixture of civilian clothes and army clothes during the winter – even after the issue of special winter kit.

Winter battledress was issued as from 25 September 1944 but light khaki still served in a mismatch with the serge tunics, woollen vests, thick socks, warm shirts and various items of civilian clothing. According to Axelson, however, the battalions were only 75 per cent equipped and the division was 7,000 battle dress short. The rest had to make do with only a blanket and a gas cape to protect them from the mountain cold. At the end of October, the

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<sup>1</sup> C.G. Starr, *From Salerno to the Alps*, pp. 372-373.

clothing situation was no better and even into December, there were still a few who, being unfortunate enough to have an unusual body size, were waiting for proper clothing.<sup>2</sup> In a letter written on 17 October 1944, soon after the battle of Monte Stanco, Captain H.H.H. Biermann commented on the clothing situation within the RNC:

Many of them have not been issued with battle dress as yet. Their boots are worn through, no overcoats are obtainable and I don't know what else. It's a bloody scandal the way the infantry chaps are treated in the way of clothing and equipment while fellows who don't really need the stuff or who could in any event manage far better without it than these poor buggers, get the first cut in on its way back down the line.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to winter equipment, the Assistant Director Quartermaster Technical (ADQT) expressed the view that “[it] should be regarded as unit equipment. It must be held in a pool. It is not a private issue, an issue to individuals. When troops are pulled out of the front line for a rest, they must leave behind their special equipment”.<sup>4</sup> Oilskin “souwesters” are typical of such specialized equipment but would have been of more use during the wet autumn than when they finally did arrive, towards the end of winter. In a report on the allocation of special winter clothing dated 11 January 1945, it is revealed that 60 oilskin jackets, 400 oilskin trousers and 400 “souwesters” were issued mainly to the artillery and the rest to a collection of units including 11 SA Armoured Brigade, 12 SA Motorised Brigade and 24 Guards Brigade.<sup>5</sup>

The military authorities in the Union scrambled to deny that there was any shortage of winter clothing, insisting that the issue was on the same scale as Imperial troops and in addition, special mountain warfare clothing had been issued on a “lavish scale”.<sup>6</sup> As at 5 January 1945, there were 3,000 to 4,000 front-line troops. The final distribution of winter clothing had been made. It was now possible for every man to wear fourteen items of clothing at once – if he could fit them all on his body.<sup>7</sup>

Sleeping bags were not standard issue, neither were they necessary during the summer months. Most men simply carried a single blanket by way of bedding. As winter arrived, some front-line troops were issued with sleeping bags. A lucky few had both sleeping bags and blankets which could be augmented by a great-coat and jersey if necessary. Hodgson had four thick blankets which he folded double.<sup>8</sup>

At the end of November 1944, Hodgson found it necessary to reline the whole of his sleeping bag with a soft blanket by putting it over the old one to make it nice and thick. He was also delighted that he got hold of a good down pillow.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that while in Egypt, it had been necessary for Hodgson's parents to send him a pillow but such items could easily be found in a war zone.

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<sup>2</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 129; Jane van Velden Collection, P. Johnston, personal diary, 27/9/1944.

<sup>3</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 140, Capt H.H.H. Biermann, military observer attached to 12 SA Bde – war correspondent Harry O'Connor, 17/10/1944.

<sup>4</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 204, Special Winter Clothing, 11/1/1945.

<sup>6</sup> SADDCC, CGS, Box 240, Extract from Staff Conference no. 130, 13/12/1944.

<sup>7</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 156.

<sup>8</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 7/12/1943.

<sup>9</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 12/11/1944.

The winter allocation of blankets was four per man and since there was a world-wide shortage of blankets and the military authorities issued an order forbidding the use of blankets for curtains, carpets, table-cloths or any other purpose for which they were not intended.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, blankets were highly prized by civilians as well. In one instance, rather than food or money, an Italian family with whom Lionel Wulfohn had been lodging, requested a blanket in payment. Wulfohn handed over his blanket and on his next visit he found that it had been converted into a warm coat. It was a dark green-coloured blanket which Wulfohn had “taken” off the train when returning from embarkation leave. On the blanket (and the coat) the letters SAR & H were written large.<sup>11</sup>

The South African brown boots were the envy of the other nationalities as they were better made and more waterproof than the British black boots. One issue of boots which were made in India, were found to crack and were uncomfortable. It seems that nothing could match the boots made in South Africa.<sup>12</sup> Hobnails caused any boots to crack and leak which in turn gave rise to trench-foot. Men were advised to dip their boots in hot dubbin, but Axelson observed that the best solution was to wrap layers of hessian around the boots so as to prevent the leather from freezing – it also gave a good grip.<sup>13</sup>

When, in January 1945, Axelson asked about the shortage of winter clothing, especially boots, the ADQT stressed that the supply of goods was very complex. The ordinance catalogue contained 136,000 items. There had been a problem during September and October of 1944 when no boots had come in. (In December a big shipment came in at Naples). The indenting of the British army was also at fault. Orders might come in and there will be no stock. The next day stock would come in but when the unit ordered again in a week or two, the stock might again be finished. It was also admitted that the British boots were terrible and that it was desirable for every man to have two pairs of boots.<sup>14</sup>

Boots remained in short supply and some men resorted to asking their families to send footwear from home – or taking them off a dead German. South African dead were buried with their boots on and on one occasion after the Battle of Monte Stanco, Italian civilians removed boots from the dead. Sampie de Wet observed that officers could buy a pair of stout army boots at the officer’s shop for as little as £1.00.<sup>15</sup>

In muddy conditions, gumboots (boots knee rubber in quartermaster language), were preferred by the gunners, but snow could go in at the top.<sup>16</sup> To help prevent Wiels Disease (carried by rats), engineers were required to wear gumboots when working on bridges over the Arno.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 628, 4/22 Fd Rgt, 1-31 December 1944.

<sup>11</sup> James Bourhill Collection, L.M. Wulfohn, Unpublished memoirs.

<sup>12</sup> SADDDC, CGS, Box 240, Extract from Staff Conference no. 132, 8/2/1945.

<sup>13</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 166.

<sup>14</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 157.

<sup>15</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 155.

<sup>16</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, pp. 129 & 140.

<sup>17</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, AAI Routine Order from A (O).





FIGURE 12: Issue of new boots during the winter in the Apennines. Two soldiers are wearing leather jerkins.

SOURCE: Ditsong National Museum of Military History

When the division first arrived in Italy, and behind the rear areas, dress regulations were strictly enforced. As will be shown in the chapter on misconduct, it was the reserves and SAAF personnel who were most often “pulled up” for dress irregularities.<sup>18</sup> Veterans of the desert liked to wear certain items of clothing which indicated that they were old campaigners. Scarves (for the sand storms), fleece-lined jackets obtained in Palestine, and especially corduroy trousers were a give-away. The cartoon characters “The Two Types” illustrated this type of dress.<sup>19</sup> The South African cartoonist, J.H. Jackson, whose work appeared in *The Nonquai* during the war years, also commented on the ways in which the men expressed their individuality.

In the Winter Line, men could get away with such a mish-mash of clothing, but customised clothing was still an issue in the early stages of the Italian campaign – before supply problems and the ravages of winter made a mockery of such orders. For example, a routine order warned soldiers not to modify their shirts in any way. No summer clothing was to be worn before 25 April 1944.<sup>20</sup> As the campaign went on, it appears that such regulations were ignored – even in certain base camps. When Captain Michael Howard rejoined the division at a staging camp in Tuscany after recovering from wounds, he found the men wearing “shorts and a beret, a deep tan and nothing else”.<sup>21</sup>

The shortage of specialized winter kit has been discussed above, but no item of regulation uniform was subject to modification than the outer layer. It was found that greatcoats were not ideal winter clothing in the Apennines. They became wet and uncomfortably heavy. The American type of equipment was preferable and it was for this reason that John Hodgson and

<sup>18</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>19</sup> *Union Jack*, Northern Italy, Special Victory Edition, 8/5/1945.

<sup>20</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 624, 1/6 Fd Rgt, D.R.O. 87/44, 22/4/1944.

<sup>21</sup> M. Howard, Extracts from a letter by Michael Howard, in D. Quilter (ed.), *No dishonourable name*, p. 218.

many others asked their family to send them sheepskin jackets or a leather jerkin. It is no wonder these became scarce commodities in the Union – even before the winter set in. In a letter to his father, Hodgson hinted that a leather jacket “would be very, very welcome up here”. That it was not part of the uniform was not a concern.<sup>22</sup>

The possibility of carrying extra clothing and equipment varied. Whereas artillerymen could carry extra items, the infantryman had to travel light. Motorised infantrymen could, however, keep their extra kit in the truck when in action. Any clothing which was totally superfluous was handed back to the quartermaster – after first stripping off all the buttons.<sup>23</sup> The array of household goods carried on the truck was staggering. While the smallest items could be of significance to the soldier, only the most personal possessions held any value:

These days we are very well off in our truck, what with all the things we have picked up here and there. We have a large number of Jerry automatic weapons, any number of cooking utensils – a large copper pot, mincing machine, orange squeezer, potato masher, china plates and cups, big meat dishes and knives, forks and spoons of all shapes and sizes. In the last town we captured I got a folding knife, fork and spoon all in the form of pen knives, they are excellent ...they all fit into a little leather purse. Very useful to carry in our small packs when we go on a long march [euphemism for going into action].<sup>24</sup>

When going on patrol, the men dressed in any way which they felt most comfortable, even by way of headgear. A tin helmet gave a headache at the best of times and in the cold it was like an instrument of torture.<sup>25</sup> Improvisation was essential. Only essential items were carried into the attack. Whereas the American soldier did not carry a pack into battle, the British and South African soldier carried a small pack which contained a water bottle, mess gear, towel, washing and shaving kit, extra pair of socks and an emergency ration. The gas cape, which was used as a rain coat, was very light and was made into a roll and fastened to the top of the combat pack.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 21/9/1944.

<sup>23</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 7/12//1943.

<sup>24</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 4/7/1944.

<sup>25</sup> SADDDC, Photographic Section, No. N344-N348.

<sup>26</sup> *A Military Encyclopaedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, pp. 191-192.



FIGURE 13: Infantryman with battle gear in cold weather.  
 SOURCE: Ditsong National Museum of Military History.

An indication of the scale of clothing which comprised the standard issue can be seen from the following list of summer kit which was supplied to reinforcements going forward in the spring of 1945:<sup>27</sup>

Shorts K/D	prs	1
Trousers K/D	prs	2
Shirts Bush		2
Belts Shirts Bush		2
Drawers Cellular		1
Vests Cotton or Tropical		1
Hosetops	prs	1
Nets Bush		1
Shirts Angola Drab		2 (winter kit retained)

In the early stages of his service, Hodgson was continually, but respectfully, requesting that items of kit be sent to him by his family. It appears that once he was on campaign, his needs became less or in some cases he was able to salvage items from the enemy.<sup>28</sup> He asked his mother to send a number of necessities which the army did not supply. These included a stone for sharpening his razor blades, a kit-bag lock (his knife and fork had been stolen), books to read and a mess tin for cooking and eating. The products which he requested his mother to send down to him at Hay Paddock, provide an interesting insight into the requirements of a foot soldier in the Second World War over and above what the army would supply. Personal toiletries such as Wrights Coal Tar Soap and tooth paste and cleaning agents such as Brasso were the responsibility of the individual – not the army. Cups and cutlery could be obtained as army issue but these were considered inferior and quickly replaced with

<sup>27</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 599, 6 SA Armd Div Res Gp, 26/3/1945.

<sup>28</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 3/1/1945.

one's own preferences. If Hodgson is to be believed, an enamel mug had to be white in colour as it kept the contents hot for longer. Likewise, the preferred ink was "Waterman's" as other makes would block the pen. Apparently "Swans" was next best.<sup>29</sup>

Once Hodgson was in Italy, living off the land and travelling light, the only items he asked for were winter clothes. For the rest, either the host country or the enemy could provide. Certain pharmaceutical items such as foot powder, plasters and ointments still had to be sent from home. During his first winter in the northern hemisphere, Hodgson's mother equipped him with thick course socks, long sleeve jerseys and short sleeve pullovers which proved adequate for Egyptian winters but as will be seen, the Italian winters were a different story.<sup>30</sup> If it was not for the warm gloves and sheepskin jacket which his parents sent him, Hodgson would have been in a bad way.<sup>31</sup> From the correspondence of Bourhill and Hodgson, it is clear that there was an appreciation for the sacrifices which their families were making to obtain such necessities in hard times.

As in every army throughout the ages, a frequent activity is that of keeping one's equipment in good order. As it was put by one who was there, "...the business of looking after oneself is the only occupation that one has to do that is not connected directly with war".<sup>32</sup> In addition to the usual washing and ironing, South African soldiers would at their own expense modify certain military kit which was inadequate. They learned to sew and mend and to hoard buttons which were a scarcity at the time.<sup>33</sup>

Cheap labour was plentiful in Egypt, so it is not surprising that locals were employed to do the household chores. Likewise, in Italy, the civilians were willing to do the laundry in exchange for a few supplies. Letters and diaries reveal the extent to which bartering occurred, and Hodgson's first such barter transaction took place in the vicinity of Monte Cassino where the Allies had been living in close proximity to the civilians for many months:

During this morning we got all our kit fixed up – procured an Italian to do our washing which he returned just now in a spotless condition and for a nominal fee – some cigarettes (I keep my weekly issue for such purposes these days), a piece of soap and a box of matches for washing about fifteen articles.<sup>34</sup>

Hodgson did not mind doing the washing himself but Italian women were in need of the work and rendered a very good service. Wherever there was a river, there was an opportunity to do the laundry and before setting off on leave to Rome or Siena, much time was spent sprucing-up kit. In the densely populated area of the Arno Valley Hodgson wrote: "There are three fairly nice *senorinas* who we have in-spanned to do our washing and ironing, also our mending, with the result that all my kit is in perfect condition."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 25/6/1943; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 10/7/1943.

<sup>30</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 7/12/1943.

<sup>31</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 5/10/1944.

<sup>32</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 7/12/1943.

<sup>33</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 18/11/1943.

<sup>34</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. & M.V. Hodgson, 25/5/1944.

<sup>35</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 27/8/1944.

## b) Meals and rations

Letters and diaries are more than just littered with references to food – it is the overriding theme. If avoiding being killed was the primary concern of the fighting man, the quantity and quality of food ran a close second. As can be seen from the body of photographs of the division, there were few, if any, overweight men. Italy was a better place than most to forage off the land but at least one report mentions that there was a shortage of fresh foods such as meat, fish, poultry and eggs, which meant that even those in hospital had an insufficient diet and little variety.<sup>36</sup>

During their training in the desert there was little opportunity for 6<sup>th</sup> Division soldiers to augment rations from local sources. In Egypt, “Gypo-guts” could be brought on by the water or anything else, while a diet of bully beef and biscuits caused constipation. As a change from bully beef, water buffalo, commonly seen in the lands of the delta, ended up in the pot but could not be disguised as beef. Even ice creams were made from the milk of these buffalo as there were no cows in the delta.<sup>37</sup> Any dish would include desert grit as one of the ingredients. In a letter to his wife, Ellen, Glen Easton wrote: “Have had awful heartburn since we came here. I wonder if it is the food! As you know, I have never been troubled by it before.”<sup>38</sup>

Hodgson, who did not complain much, hinted to his sister that the desert diet left a lot to be desired: “The food here has not been too good so far but I don’t suppose they have got properly organized as yet. We get boiled eggs for breakfast as a rule. They are Egyptian eggs and they are honestly not as big as a bantam egg, also they seem to collect a lot of water inside... The bread we get is white but it is very soggy.”<sup>39</sup> He lost over a kilogram in two months and now weighed 74 kg.<sup>40</sup> The effect of tinned rations on the digestive system is evident from his pharmaceutical needs: “I received the medicine that Lays sent up to me by Air Mail, last Saturday. The laxative arrived in good condition but the other stuff which I presume was camphor ice had suffered fairly badly from the heat, but don’t worry about that as someone managed to get some for me from Cairo.”<sup>41</sup>

At Khatatba base camp, there were rudimentary messes and the food was likely to cause indigestion or constipation as has been described. The more fortunate men who received regular food parcels, made themselves as self-sufficient as possible. One soldier describes the lengths that he and his tent mates went to make their meals more interesting:

It is lovely in the evenings to sit in the tent and cook our own supper instead of going over to the mess. We have got a lovely little petrol stove for which we all clubbed together. Each chap contributes a tin of stuff and with it we make a gorgeous meal. I will tell you what some of our meals are like: first of all lovely hot beans and Vienna sausages, followed by grilled Escourt sausages, which after grilling have been mixed with hot tomato juice... After this we have some tinned fruit, then biscuits and cheese, hot coffee, cocoa, Milo or something like that. We vary the menu by having asparagus instead of sausages, also spaghetti.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>37</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 17/11/1943.

<sup>38</sup> Glen Easton Jnr Collection, G. Easton – E. Easton, 1/3/1943.

<sup>39</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 7/10/1943.

<sup>40</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 21/11/1943.

<sup>41</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 2/11/1943.

<sup>42</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 11/12/1943.

A typical army breakfast in Egypt consisted of porridge – often without milk or sugar. This was followed by soya links (a tinned mash consisting of pork sausages and soya beans) washed down with coffee.<sup>43</sup> After many months in the desert, some men became adept at turning out little luxuries like pancakes. A hot drink before bed became routine. However, most commodities were scarce and nothing was wasted.<sup>44</sup>

In Italy, while in base camp, hot meals were always available, although the lucky ones could supplement (or substitute) these with the contents of parcels from home. The division had its own mobile bakeries but civilian bakeries were also contracted to supply bread. Considering the near starvation diet, Hodgson's claims of overeating seem far-fetched:

I have been overeating these last couple of days, what with all those parcels that arrived at the beginning of the week, we are having a wonderful time. The jam which you included in one of them has been very popular, as we don't get much jam and as we get plenty of bread, this comes in very useful.<sup>45</sup>

While at Gravina, there was little opportunity for foraging, discipline was tight and food was scarce as this had been the site of a large prisoner of war camp (Campo di Concentramento No. 65) where many South Africans had lived two years previously. In comparison to the former inmates, members of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division lived well. The food ration for POW's at this camp was typically 80 grams of macaroni, a ladle of dandelion soup, 200 grams of bread and a tiny cube of cheese per day.<sup>46</sup>

When the division was in pursuit mode, and mobile kitchens were caught up in the traffic, meals were erratic and men made do with what they carried in their trucks, pooling their resources. After the Battle of Monte Cassino, the drive to Rome began and traffic movement was chaotic. Bourhill was fortunate to have recently received a parcel. The contents included cookies, and home-made mebos which is a confection that has been made from apricots that have been pickled, sugared and dried. These proved to be most welcome during the rapid advance from Cassino:

We went a very long time without food, and there in my cubby-hole in the quad reposed a full tin of eats! ... . At intervals I dished out mebos and we did much better than other subs. When the food came up at last I really wasn't very hungry – it's wonderful what sweet goods can do to keep one going.<sup>47</sup>

One of the more popular treats from home was fruit cake – due to its keeping quality and nutrition, not to mention the taste. Hodgson's letters show that he was receiving fruit cake throughout the campaign. Clearly, cake and biscuits were more sought-after than any tinned goods. The packing presented more problems but with South African ingenuity, cake and biscuits were packed into old fruit tins with the lids put back on with a bit of solder.<sup>48</sup>

The countryside was able to provide some variation with fruit, vegetables and (in the early spring) plenty of cherries. Drinking water was seldom a problem, even if it had to be treated first. In the mountains, clean water could usually be found close at hand. In early June 1944, John Hodgson was having his first taste of living off the land:

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<sup>43</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 23/1/1944.

<sup>44</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 14/3/1944.

<sup>45</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 27/4/1944.

<sup>46</sup> P. Ogilvie & R. Newman, *In the bag*, pp. 51-53.

<sup>47</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 12/6/1944.

<sup>48</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 21/9/1944.

The cherries form a large part of our diet, as these days we are mainly fed with bully beef and biscuits, so these make a good break. One good thing about this country is, we are never short of water; wherever we go we find wells and the water therein is really wonderfully clean and cool. It also has a very nice taste as it all comes from these springs in the wells and never gets anywhere near metal pipes, etc.<sup>49</sup>

It seems that few people took seriously the warnings not to obtain food from the surrounding countryside. Euphemistically referred to as “organising” or “scrounging”, the army called it looting and the seriousness with which they viewed it, was stressed in a routine order. All ranks were warned that acts of this nature were regarded with extreme disfavour and could result in a field general court martial. “This type of theft is often regarded as an achievement by some members of the forces, whereas it is, in fact, nothing short of ‘Fifth Column’ activity and a very serious deterrent to the war effort”.<sup>50</sup> Fruit and vegetables were freely available in the fields but chickens and other livestock usually had to be bargained for from the locals. It appears that the 21 year old Douglas Baker was not one who took orders too literally and any un-caged chicken was considered to be a “stray”. The meal which was put together after one scrounging mission is impressive by any standards:

Len and I are going to see if we can get a couple of fowl at the nearby villa. I shall take my Tommy gun in case we meet a few stray ones before we get there. Yesterday afternoon we visited the nearby vegetable fields with shovels and brought back a back-breaking load of new potatoes, beetroots, onions, lettuce and beans. We had a variety of salads. I was forced to make mayonnaise out of a teaspoon of curry, pepper, egg powder, milk and sour wine, as we had no mustard, salad oil or vinegar. It was quite a success.<sup>51</sup>

Foraging opportunities were better the further forward one was. According to a forward observation officer, the advantage of being on OP duty, is that “you can forage and (while you live!) live well”.<sup>52</sup> It was only the leading troops who could claim that they ate a cooked breakfast, courtesy of the Germans. Hodgson and his platoon capitalized on the opportunity at the hill-top town of Civita Castellana:

When we captured a feature from Jerry we occupied one of the houses there. They had to clear out in a hurry and they left their breakfast half cooked, so we got stuck into it. We had lovely meat cakes, fresh brown bread (we only get white, so this was a pleasant change), also quite a number of lovely tinned Danish butter. It was really marvellous after a hard night’s work.<sup>53</sup>

It has been well documented that in the vicinity of Acquaviva in the Chiana valley, many geese were acquired (legitimately or otherwise) and carried on the backs of tanks or trucks until they were ready for slaughter. It was not unusual for hens and even pigs to be carried in ammunition boxes on the back of tanks.<sup>54</sup> When one hen became “bomb happy” and went off the lay, an officer wanted to put her into the pot, but the crew had become fond of her and objected. So the hen was traded for a rooster - which was eaten.<sup>55</sup>

Only when movement was rapid, did the troops have to do without hot meals. During periods of little movement, rations were usually taken up to the platoon positions at night. This could be a pack of iron rations or where possible, a kitchen was established in a building close to the forward positions and prepared food was carried forward in large pots. Hot coffee was

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<sup>49</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 8/6/1944.

<sup>50</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 35/44, 4/8/1944.

<sup>51</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 399.

<sup>52</sup> J. Swaab, *Field of fire, diary of a gunner officer*, p. 242.

<sup>53</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 9/6/1944.

<sup>54</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 640, PR, Regimental History, June 1944.

<sup>55</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 640, PR, Regimental History, June 1944.

sometimes carried in water cans wrapped in blankets. Bread was also used to supplement emergency rations.<sup>56</sup>

When in action, “hard tack” was the order of the day. These included M & V (Meat & Veg) and Bully & Biscuit. The beef came from Argentina and was issued at the rate of 212.6 grams per man per day. The bread was freshly baked and was apparently as good as any at home in the Union. Fresh meat was also supplied when possible.<sup>57</sup> The hard ration preferences were clearly revealed when Bombardier Alexander left his pack at his post while he went out to repair communication lines and came back to find that all the good things like milk, spam and bully beef had been swiped and all that remained were the three luckless tins of M & V [Meat and Veg].<sup>58</sup>

In the winter line, hot food was brought up to the forward locations once a day in vacuum flasks by mule train. When in battle, only tinned food was brought up. By contrast, during the summer fighting in Tuscany, the Guards Brigade officers lived extremely well – even in the front line. On a mountain top near Radda, at the Grenadier Guards regimental HQ, Linklater and Axelson were treated to dinner of soup, meat, three vegetables, a sweet and savoury – washed down with gin and a first-class wine.<sup>59</sup>

During Operation Pike, (the assault on Monte Sole in the Spring of 1945) the troops were issued both British 14-man “Compo” rations and the South African 8-man packs. Although the quantities of each item are not indicated, the variety in the contents of these packs can be seen from the following schedule and it would appear that the British ration was preferable to the South African one.<sup>60</sup>

#### BRITISH COMPO PACK RATIONS

(Wooden packing)

Biscuits

Steak & Kidney Pie

or

M & V (Meat and Veg)

Tinned vegetables

Steamed pudding

Chocolate

Tinned fruit

Tea/milk/sugar powder

Boiled sweets

Breakfast ration:

Bacon

Sausages or fish

Sweet biscuits

(14 men for one day)

#### 8 MAN PACK

(Two sandbags)

Biscuits

Preserved meat

or

Stewed steak

or

M & V

Tinned vegetables

Tea/milk/sugar powder

Dried fruit

Tinned bacon

(8 men for one day)

<sup>56</sup> *A Military Encyclopaedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>57</sup> SADDDC, Photographic Section, N443-N446.

<sup>58</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Statement from Bdr W.P. Alexander 7/64 Fd Bty, 4/22 Fd Rgt.

<sup>59</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 59.

<sup>60</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, 12 SA Mtd Bde, Report on Operations in the Italian Campaign for period August 1944 to May 1945.



Not surprisingly, “iron rations” became monotonous after months on campaign. The effects on the stomach have been mentioned. Fortunately, the Italian countryside was able to provide some variation. Tinned rations, a novelty for the civilians, would be well utilized when billeted in Italian homes. Both Baker and Wulfsohn describe how a group of men would establish an ongoing relationship with an Italian family which was cherished and jealously guarded from outsiders. Their experiences staying with families in Rome were remarkably similar.<sup>61</sup> “The drill was that you arrived with food of any description and handed it over and the madame of the establishment who served you with a meal whenever you asked which was pretty frequent and at all hours”. The evening meal was typically Italian which was antipasto, pasta with a sauce concocted out of the “meat and vegetable” tins thinly disguised with tomato, peppers and aubergines. With the addition of cheese, olives and figs nobody went hungry.<sup>62</sup>

Surprisingly, personal accounts seldom mention pasta. Johnston, however, mentions on one occasion that his meal included tortellini. This was eaten with sardines on toast and Christmas pudding, washed down with cognac.<sup>63</sup> More than one South African was horrified at being fed rabbit or even lamb, which up until short time before, had been a household pet.<sup>64</sup> When billeted with an Italian family Bourhill wrote that he had rabbit with lavender and pig with garlic and white wine – insinuating that he preferred to eat army rations.<sup>65</sup> Hodgson’s experience of sharing food with an Italian family was typical whereby he provided the flour and a tin of jam (obtained from the army cook) and the “old lady” of the house turned these into tartlets.<sup>66</sup>

Because of the shortage of foodstuffs in occupied Italy, military personnel were forbidden from eating in civilian restaurants. Only those restaurants which were run by the Allied forces, or cafés which sold only beverages, were not out of bounds.<sup>67</sup> During the winter months, the large number of men entering Florence on day passes made it impossible to supply two meals a day to each man. Restaurants would supply one main midday meal at a charge of ten Lire. An evening snack and a cup of tea could be obtained free of charge.<sup>68</sup> In civilian areas where there was the occurrence of typhoid and other “excremental diseases”, the eating of uncooked vegetables was discouraged. It was recommended that fruit be peeled and that vegetables, and lettuce leaves be soaked in water containing a solution of chlorine for thirty minutes.<sup>69</sup> Such was the craving for protein that street food in Rome included little birds on skewers.<sup>70</sup>

Army cooks also tried to make the tinned rations more palatable using some ingenious recipes. The editors of *The Sable* went as far as to consult a few of the division’s cooks for tips on what could be done with a tin of bully beef. Some were simple ideas such as punching holes in the tin and placing it on an open fire (preferably coals) and leaving it until it turned

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<sup>61</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, pp. 436-437; L.M. Wulfsohn, unpublished memoirs.

<sup>62</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, pp. 436-437.

<sup>63</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary.

<sup>64</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 24/4/1945.

<sup>65</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 6/3/1945.

<sup>66</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 2/3/1944.

<sup>67</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 628, 4/22 Fd Rgt, 1-31 December 1944.

<sup>68</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1. Appendix “A” to 6 SA Armd Div. Routine orders 34 (CMF) 13/11/1944.

<sup>69</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order No 27/44, 13/6/1944.

<sup>70</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 201.

brown and crispy. Bully beef fritters could be made by mixing in flour and eggs, but one of the most intricate recipes was for a type of cottage pie:<sup>71</sup>

Cut up your bully fairly finely, add army biscuit crumbs and chopped onion. Season with salt and pepper. Mash your tinned (or fresh) potatoes, and prepare a mash for a top and a bottom dressing. Grease your pan or Dixie well; lay in it bottom dressing, bully, top dressing; cover Dixie with a lid and brown your pie off, top and bottom. Can you smell that aroma?

Similarly, bully beef was the main ingredient in the savouries which were made for Italian girls who were coming to a dance at Hofmeyr House. Chunks of bread were covered with bully beef mashed up with margarine or cheese.<sup>72</sup> For a private party, Hodgson and his companions tried to make a type of “Peppermint Crisp” by impregnating army biscuits with crushed 3X Mints. Army chocolate was melted to make cocoa.<sup>73</sup>



FIGURE 14: Grapes were plentiful, especially in the Arno River valley in September 1944.  
SOURCE: Ditsong National Museum of Military History.

Although the obsessing about food could be due to its scarcity, there is no indication that South African troops went hungry for any length of time. The availability of army rations ensured that there was ample currency for bartering with the locals. The mixture of army rations and fresh produce from the fields allowed for a good variety – in southern and central Italy at least. During the winter in the sparsely populated northern Apennines, however, the diet was barely adequate.

<sup>71</sup> *The Sable*, Lee R.W. & Wale L.S. (eds.), Italian Font Edition, January 1945, p. 38.

<sup>72</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 196.

<sup>73</sup> J. Swaab, *Field of fire, diary of a gunner officer*, p. 207.

Diaries and letters of soldiers are dominated by detailed descriptions of what they ate and what they craved. Hodgson would also imagine the meals which his mother might be preparing at home and vowed never again to be fussy about food. Soldiers described the meals prepared for them by Italian families, using whatever army and local ingredients were available.<sup>74</sup> In Chapter 8, entitled “Interface with civil society”, there is further discussion on the interaction with civilians on their farms and the resulting cultural and culinary exchanges.

### c) Letters and parcels

Letters and parcels from home provided a link with a life of normality – a critical support system. The sentiments expressed by Hodgson in a letter to his mother are typical: “You have no idea of all the great joy that has been going on here lately. The post has been coming in at a terrific rate and the first lot of surface mail has also arrived. Today I received eight letters, so as you can imagine I was all excitement.”<sup>75</sup> Bourhill received a limited amount of mail, his mother being his only regular correspondent. After a week of solid rain, the arrival of two letters was enough to “make the sun shine”.<sup>76</sup>

By contrast, the lack of letters could have a negative effect on morale. Glen Easton, who was destined to be killed while serving with the Royal Natal Carbineers, complained to his wife that his friends were receiving letters while he was not: “I wonder if you realize what your letters mean to me and how I watch out for them, as I always said, you cannot write too many letters or too often.”<sup>77</sup>

Some considered a letter to be as good as “five minutes leave”.<sup>78</sup> Michael Howard, the Guards captain who would become a history professor, described how he would read a letter at least twice. The first time quickly and then again slowly – savouring every word. Letters were always welcome but nothing brought greater joy than a parcel which covered the top two items on the soldiers’ agenda – food and mail. In this department, Hodgson was extremely fortunate:

Yesterday I got back to the regiment, after our long absence, and there was a wonderful collection of parcels and letters awaiting me. I will give you an account of it all: I received four very welcome letters from you, they were numbers 37, 38, 39 & 40. It was simply grand to hear all the news. I went over to the Y.M.C.A. after supper and read all my letters, as I like taking my time when reading them, and I don’t like being interrupted. Actually it took me an hour and a half to read all my post.<sup>79</sup>

According to Fussell, psychologists are aware of the importance a soldier attaches to his secondary group i.e. his family. They also recognize the condition in which fatigued soldiers repress reality, sometimes in peculiar ways.<sup>80</sup> This flight from reality includes daydreaming of home. Through letters, parcels and newspapers (*The Star* and *Sunday Times*) Hodgson was able to maintain close links with home and throughout his absence he maintained a keen interest in every aspect of home life:

...you have no idea how happy I am after receiving a letter from you telling me all about the little things. As each letter comes I piece together all the information and get a very clear picture of how everything is

<sup>74</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 2/11/1943.

<sup>75</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 30/10/1943.

<sup>76</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 24/6/1944.

<sup>77</sup> Glen Easton Jnr Collection, G. Easton – E. Easton, 1/3/1943.

<sup>78</sup> J. Swaab, *Field of fire, diary of a gunner officer*, p. 248.

<sup>79</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 3/12/1943.

<sup>80</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 285.

looking at home. Like after this last letter I can picture right outside in the front; the lovely green grass backed up by the blazing red canners against a perfect brick wall, topped with purple verbena. ...<sup>81</sup>

For Douglas Baker, the parcel and its contents were a link with home: “Little knick knacks, mementoes... were balm to the heartsick and lovelorn, to the shell-shocked and emotionally exhausted... a therapy to the rich and the poor, subjected to intense grief or trauma.” These parcels were usually opened alone although the contents were always shared.<sup>82</sup> After receiving a batch of four parcels at once, Hodgson describes the joy of unpacking them and identifying the contents, some of which might be slightly damaged despite his mother’s best efforts. The more perishable goods were consumed first and the rest was packed away carefully so as to last until the next lot arrived. The packaging of a food parcel was an art-form in itself. Each parcel came with an inventory list and even the wrapping was designed to be of some use.<sup>83</sup>

Parcels would typically contain tinned food, biscuits, toiletries, dried fruit, home-made confectionary and home-knitted items, including jerseys and socks which were thought to be preferable to the army issue which tended to shrink in the wet. Some of the more unusual items which Mrs Hodgson thought of sending included a candle stick holder and a pillow. While in Egypt, Hodgson mentioned that sugar was unobtainable and named the most essential commodities as being tea, sugar and Klim (powdered milk).<sup>84</sup>

Although appreciative of everything, Hodgson asked his mother to send chocolate milk instead of plain milk and tinned fruit in place of vegetables. He received parcels from his parents and family friends, some of whom sent them directly from Thrupps store. Among those items which had to be supplied from home were necessities such as toilet paper, medications such as foot powder, and everyday items such as sugar which was extremely scarce. The contents of his parcels reveal as much about his cravings and the efforts of his mother to satisfy them, as they do about the brand names of the day:

In this last batch the Bosco [chocolate syrup] came...I have already had some of it with bread [or Provita as mentioned in other letters] and margarine and it is really very nice as yet we have not had it hot. Every evening now we have Milo, Nescafe or Cocoa and in the afternoons we have tea, which are all very nice.<sup>85</sup>

It was not every soldier who was as well looked after by his family as was John Hodgson. He was supplied with all his necessities and more. Up until the end of May 1944, the division had been relatively static but as from the beginning of June, they were in pursuit mode, constantly on the move. Rear echelons were finding it difficult to keep the forward troops fed and supplied. It was at exactly this time that many of the men were relying on their food parcels to keep them going, but Hodgson received just too many parcels for an infantryman to deal with. In a letter dated 18 June 1944, written from around Belvedere where the Carbineers were in the lead and taking heavy casualties, he informed his mother that under those conditions, the arrival of parcels presented a problem.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 24/11/1943.

<sup>82</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 97.

<sup>83</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 3/12/1943.

<sup>84</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 11/12/1943.

<sup>85</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 26/1/1944.

<sup>86</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 18/6/1944.

As can be seen, it is the sweet things which were much appreciated, while tinned vegetables were not. In September 1944, the Allies were in the Arno River valley and September is harvest season for many fruits and other crops. There was plenty to supplement the army rations, which possibly explains why Hodgson requested more reading material and less food. Folklore suggests that during the war chocolate was highly desirable and was used as a medium of exchange. It is revealing therefore that he specifically requested that chocolate be excluded. He claimed to have “gone off it” but it also tended to mess up the parcel. Some of the alternatives he requested are still household names today. These include Marie Biscuits, Lemon Creams, Ginger Biscuits, Acid Drops and Butter Drops.<sup>87</sup>

The demands on some parents and their personal contribution to the war effort increased as the campaign reached the Winter Line. Hodgson's list of wants is a reflection of his sparse living conditions and include a new knitted balaclava, a spare pair of garters and tinned goods (especially condensed milk) which was handy in the front lines.<sup>88</sup>

Parcels were mainly sent surface mail while letters were sent airmail. Some of Hodgson's letters were written on ordinary paper and were quite bulky but the vast majority were written on air letter cards. The quality of army-issue letter cards was poor in comparison to the ones which could be bought in the union. In fact, all air letters were rationed until 17 December 1943, after which, they became freely available.<sup>89</sup> In Egypt, a man was issued two letter cards each week and for the rest of his correspondence, he had to make do with any paper he could find.<sup>90</sup>

A general order, under the heading of “security” stated: “All private correspondence i.e. letters etc., after being read, must be destroyed by fire.”<sup>91</sup> Regardless of this, it was usual for a soldier to carry one or two special letters. Among a soldier's most treasured possessions were his photographs. A traumatic event in Hodgson's life occurred in February 1945 when he lost all the photographs which he had collected over the previous eighteen months. Only the two in his wallet were not lost. These were kept in a “very nice Jerry grenade box” and would give to the driver when he was away from the transport. It seems that when he left his winter position to go to Lucca, he left it behind and the Americans had taken over so there was not much chance of it being sent on to him. In a letter to his parents, he requested them to send him some replacements.<sup>92</sup>

Judging from the photographs to be found in every veteran's collection, the army-approved photographic studios were well patronised. Not realizing how much a few photographs would be treasured after his death in action, Glen Easton wrote: “You should have received those snaps that I sent you some time ago. So far you have not mentioned them in your letters.”<sup>93</sup> While on leave in Cairo, Hodgson and a group of friends went to a professional photographer. Knowing that the prints would be widely distributed, and closely examined by those at home, great care was taken over their dress and appearance.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 2/9/1944.

<sup>88</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 24/12/1943.

<sup>89</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1, 6 SA Armd Div Routine Orders (CMF), 11/12/1944.

<sup>90</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 26/10/1943.

<sup>91</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 624, 1/6<sup>th</sup> Fd Rgt, D.R.O. 87/44, 22/4/1944.

<sup>92</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 21/2/1945; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 25/2/1945.

<sup>93</sup> Glen Easton Jnr Collection, G. Easton – E. Easton, 1/3/1943.

<sup>94</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 18/11/1943.

#### d) The postal system

The postal system was relatively quick and surprisingly reliable. It appears, however, that there were complaints during the early part of the war and by the end of the war, any distribution problems had been ironed out. Glen Easton's letter to his wife confirms that some had a low opinion of the postal system, but also shows how important a part it played in their lives:

I only hope we stay here for some time now, as with our wonderful army postal authorities, it seems to take them months to realize that we have left a camp and then weeks before they decide to try and find out where one has gone so they can send the letters on. Honestly, they are a hopeless lot.<sup>95</sup>

By contrast, Bourhill was on top of the world when he wrote on 26 May 1944: "Three days ago, a lovely long letter came from you dated 13<sup>th</sup> May – pretty good going considering, I think. I almost love the personnel of the A.P.O.!!". The reason for his elation could be due to his having just come through his baptism of fire at Monte Cassino and his present idyllic surroundings on the banks of the Volturno River. Perhaps the money order had something to do with it."<sup>96</sup>

The expected time for a letter to reach Egypt was less than two weeks but for Italy it usually took a while longer. From Egypt, Easton wrote: "When are my plasters coming, I have waited two weeks for them now...".<sup>97</sup> One man had only recently arrived in Italy when he wrote to his mother, telling her that her last letter had taken two weeks to get to him. The insinuation is that this was considered slow but it may also have been intended as a hint that he had moved to a theatre of war. In the same letter, he indicated that surface mail varied from four to eight weeks.<sup>98</sup>

It appears that by September 1944, there was a vast improvement in the postal system and it was speculated that it was because there was an aeroplane coming up from the Union every day with the result that every day was mail day now, instead of just Tuesday and Friday. The return run had to be just as frequent or "otherwise it would be a very short while before the Union ran out of planes."<sup>99</sup>

The postal system would become over-burdened during the Christmas period. Men were told to send off their letters and parcels in good time. For Christmas, special greeting air letters with a Christmas motif were distributed (five per person). These had to be handed in at Army Post Offices before 7 December 1944. Ordinary letters and parcels had to be posted before 31 October 1944 to ensure that they arrived before Christmas.<sup>100</sup>

Hodgson numbered all his letters and requested his correspondents to do the same – none went astray. Seldom did a week go by when Hodgson did not get at least one letter. He was also an ardent correspondent. By 17 July 1943, while still at Pietermaritzburg, Hodgson had written 51 letters and received 41 letters.<sup>101</sup> While at Khatatba in October 1944, he counted

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<sup>95</sup> Glen Easton Jnr Collection, G. Easton – E. Easton, 1/3/1943.

<sup>96</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 26/5/1944.

<sup>97</sup> Glen Easton Jnr Collection, G. Easton – E. Easton, 1/3/1943.

<sup>98</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 1/4/1944.

<sup>99</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 16/9/1944.

<sup>100</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1, Postal arrangements, 27/10/1944.

<sup>101</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 17/7/1943.

15 incoming letters in reply to his 28 outgoing letters.<sup>102</sup> During the five months from the beginning of June 1943 to the beginning of November he had already written 129 letters in total.<sup>103</sup>

During an inspection of the postal service in Italy during February 1945, all postal arrangements were found to be satisfactory. New systems had been put in place to overcome delays. A new base Post Office (SAAPO 3) was opened in Naples.<sup>104</sup> The air mail distribution and collecting centre was seldom less than a hundred kilometres and sometimes more than 200 kilometres from the army post office (APO) at divisional headquarters (Div HQ APO). Jeeps were the recommended mode of transport for the division's postal unit as they could be used with or without trailers and were able to negotiate almost any type of road and pass convoys easily.<sup>105</sup>

By February 1945, Hodgson was suffering from correspondence fatigue, he could hardly bring himself to write. He comments that January must be his worst month on record – having written only three letters in return for seven from his mother.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless he dutifully kept up his correspondence until the end of the year. There is no doubt that letters were essential for keeping up the morale of the men, and a constant flow of letters was reassuring to the folks at home.

#### e) Ouma's Gifts and Comforts Fund

From time to time, especially over Christmas, all members of the division (including the Guards Brigade) received "Glory Bags" from the SA Gifts and Comforts Fund (also known as Ouma's Gifts and Comforts Fund after Mrs Isie Smuts). Normally they would contain items such as cigarettes, chocolates, razor blades, tooth paste, boot polish and even wireless sets.<sup>107</sup> Soon after his arrival in Egypt, Hodgson received his first "Glory Bag" and one month later the second one arrived. The arrival of these gifts was clearly an important event as he would describe the contents of each to his mother. The first instalment to arrive contained 100 cigarettes, soap, flea powder, string, sweets and sundry useful articles such as a handkerchief, lip balm, matches, and a tin of crystals which when put in water make a drink.<sup>108</sup> In his next glory bag, Hodgson received a pair of socks – knitted by a lady in Port Elizabeth.<sup>109</sup> It was during the Christmas of 1944 that these bags were most appreciated, and in the Italian winter, the men speculated on their contents before they arrived.<sup>110</sup>

As a New Year's gift at the end of 1944, divisional personnel were sent a small tin of chocolates. On the outside was a representation of a Springbok and a "V" for victory. On the inside of the lid, it was personally signed by Isie Smuts using a black marking pen. These tins are cherished to this day.

Clearly, the public at home were kept informed about the activities of Ouma's Gifts and Comforts Fund as Hodgson read in the newspapers which were sent to him. One article

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<sup>102</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 31/10/1943.

<sup>103</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 2/11/1943.

<sup>104</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>105</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 196, File AQ 23/1, War Establishment Tables.

<sup>106</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 3/2/1945.

<sup>107</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 100.

<sup>108</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 10/10/1944.

<sup>109</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 9/11/1944.

<sup>110</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 11/12/1943.

mentioned that more than sixty million cigarettes were sent in one year.<sup>111</sup> Even in post-war Italy, the “Glory Bags” continued to bring socks, cigarettes and the odd wireless.<sup>112</sup>

#### f) Sustenance of the soul

As can be expected, in dangerous and stressful times, many soldiers turned to religion. Dinter, writing on the soldier in battle, maintains that faith gives comfort and hope to the soldier. In war-time as in every other crisis in life, interest in religion increases considerably.<sup>113</sup> The regimental chaplains were in great demand but the spiritual needs of the men within the division were well looked after. The status of an army chaplain was higher than his captain’s rank might have indicated.

Under the guidance of the military chaplains, soldiers were assured that because it was a just war, it was possible to kill without sin and without guilt. Like military physiatrists, military chaplains often served the army and the state over and above the needs of their flock. It was a case of ethics vs military authority.<sup>114</sup> Bourke states that “although chaplains did disagree on various points, *every* clergyman saw clerical and military values as almost identical.” Many priests felt comfortable in the military and understood that they had to follow the rules.<sup>115</sup>

It appeared that the army had converted the chaplains who were essentially non-combatants but some carried a side-arm just in case. There are numerous examples of fighting padres throughout the ages and young, fit priests were keen to join the chaplain’s departments. The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division had its fair share of charismatic priests. One example was the regimental chaplain of the WR/DLR, Captain M.D.V. “Doempie” Cloete, who always accompanied his men into battle. He was known to have captured prisoners armed only with a pace stick. At Monte Stanco, he won the MC for his courage while assisting the wounded and at Monte Caprara he rallied the men after they had been cut up in an artillery barrage on the start line.<sup>116</sup>

Sustenance (or perhaps insurance) was found in the books which were carried in many packs. Most common was the New Testament but other motivational and uplifting books of the time were *Strength for service to God and country*, and *A book of worship and devotion for the armed forces*.<sup>117</sup> In a survey of American troops in Europe, only six per cent stated that prayer did not help at all when things got rough in battle. McManus quotes numerous sources who said that they believed in a benevolent God who was on their side and who would protect them. They did not pray for the destruction of the enemy but rather for self-preservation. Many veterans attribute their survival to a supernatural power.<sup>118</sup>

A feeling of the presence of God was the saving grace of one who wrote: “Mother I’ve been very scared at times! But fear is over quickly, and it passes with the danger, but it’s the continued sub-conscious uneasiness that counts. But God is near and I have faith, and you are

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<sup>111</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 16/9/1944.

<sup>112</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 8/2/1945; SADDCC, WD, Box 647, RNC, 15/7/1945.

<sup>113</sup> E. Dinter, *Hero or coward, pressures facing the soldier in battle*, p. 73.

<sup>114</sup> J. Bourke, *An intimate history of killing*, pp. 268-280.

<sup>115</sup> J. Bourke, *An intimate history of killing*, p. 301.

<sup>116</sup> James Bourhill Collection, L.M. Wulfsohn, Unpublished memoirs; S. Monick, *A bugle calls*, p. 459.

<sup>117</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, pp. 233-237.

<sup>118</sup> J.C. McManus, *The deadly brotherhood*, pp. 235-236.



near and I love you and it's quite ok."<sup>119</sup> Hodgson appears to have put his faith in a St Christopher lucky charm.<sup>120</sup> Others had a deeper faith. On hearing that he would be starting the attack on Monte Salvaro at dawn, Private A.I. Lourens describes why he felt no fear:

Ek voel goed, ek besef onmiddellik die waarde daarvan om die Here te ken! Ek bid nie. Die Here praat met my. Hy inspireer my. Ek hoor 'n duidelike stem wat vir my sê: "Ek sal by jou wees!" My verstand is helder. Ek beplan nie, ek word gelei. Die donkerte, reën en mistigheid pla my nie. Ek gaan lê teen die wal en ek slaap.<sup>121</sup>

Although the obscenities of war may have turned some into atheists, it appears that the opposite tendency was more prevalent. One ordinary soldier in the Witwatersrand Rifles/De La Rey Regiment, Lance Corporal Gordon Filby, was clearly feeling the strain when he wrote to his parents from point 806 on Monte Salvaro: "If any man ever tells you that he is an atheist tell him to come up here and he'll come to believe in God so much that he will probably become a minister. I'm not ashamed to say that I pray every time before we go in and so does everyone I know. It is what keeps a man going."<sup>122</sup> Filby was killed during the attack on Monte Caprara on 16 April 1945.

Baker's views on religion reflect his individuality, but he was not alone in recognizing the moral dilemma of Christianity and war. Disenchanted with religion, his attitude was that if there was a God he wouldn't have permitted war in the first place. "Death was a horrid reality all around us daily, and we demanded justice from God, even if survival could not be guaranteed."<sup>123</sup> Because death was so swift and final, it was difficult for some to believe in life everlasting. Rather a sense of fatalism prevailed and the prospect of a quick painless death was the best one could hope for.<sup>124</sup>

From the many different accounts and letters of condolence, it appears that Private L.G. (Laurence) McNicholas died a relatively quick and painless death, but it was particularly heartbreaking and keenly felt by his comrades. He was a bright talent who was fifteen years old when he matriculated at Marist Brothers, and was aged seventeen at the time of his death.<sup>125</sup> After allowing time for the next-of-kin to be informed, Hodgson wrote to his father about the death of his good friend with a hint of resignation. "I suppose it is the way of the world, all the best seem to go".<sup>126</sup>

The tragedy of Lawrence McNicholas' death was compounded by the death in action of his older brother, Michael, two weeks previously. When Michael was killed, the young McNicholas accepted this great sorrow with resignation and did not question the will of God. He wrote to his parents asking them to do the same, little knowing that they would soon have to endure an even greater test of faith when faced with his own death:

Take comfort from your trust in God. I realize more fully every day what a great consolation our religion is to us. When I am alone in a trench and we are all afraid, I have my God to talk to and to have courage in. Everybody under fire tries to pray. You don't find any atheists in shellholes, but they haven't got that complete trust in God. They have a sort of blind hope. That's where we Catholics score. We have this

<sup>119</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 12/6/1944.

<sup>120</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.H. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 27/8/1944.

<sup>121</sup> A.I. Lourens, Harde gevegte in koue, nat misweer, *The Springbok*, 93, June 2008, p. 8.

<sup>122</sup> William Gould Collection, G.L. Filby – Mr & Mrs Filby, 22/10/1944.

<sup>123</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 407.

<sup>124</sup> J. Swaab, *Field of fire, diary of a gunner officer*, p. 160.

<sup>125</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, P.E. Smith – Mr and Mrs McNicholas, 14/8/1944.

<sup>126</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 28/7/1944.

natural fear of dying like everybody else, without the fear of death. I will pray for Mick and ask him to comfort you, until I can get home.<sup>127</sup>

Similar sentiments were expressed in a letter of condolence to the widow of Sergeant O.O.M. (Kippie) Sangster (FC/CTH) who was killed during the siege of the *teatro* at Chiusi on 22 June 1944.

We often wonder why these fine men should be taken but you know it was God's will and we just have to abide by it; payment to God must be made up of the very best and it will be through him that the world will be made a very much better place; so that they will stand out in honour, and will ever be remembered by all who love freedom and Christianity and when the struggle is over, we will thank God for men like Kippie who have made this old world a place of peace and freedom for all mankind.<sup>128</sup>

It is perhaps telling that among Sergeant Sangster's personal effects which were forwarded to his widow, was the Empire Day hymn sheet and a photo of the tomb of Rachel (a sacred site between Bethlehem and Jerusalem) but no bible. At a memorial service held by the Pretoria Regiment for six members of the regiment who fell in fighting on the Gothic Line in October and November, the hymn list included a perennial favourite. The first verse reveals that a popular theme related to sustenance of the spirit and support:

*Oh God our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast,  
And our eternal home.*<sup>129</sup>

Clearly, interest in religion was heightened among the men who were in harm's way, but this did not make church parades any more tolerable. Faith, as always, was a private matter but on certain occasions – before battle and at the thanksgiving parade attendance was more enthusiastic. Just as the motto on the German belt buckle read "*Gott mit uns*", the divisional chaplains no doubt convinced of the righteousness of their cause.

This chapter covers the subjects which were of primary importance to the soldier. These include news from home and the necessities of food and clothing. Naturally the possibility of dying a violent death was also foremost in the minds of fighting men and inevitably, a connection must be made between death and religion. From the letters of condolence to the next-of-kin, it would appear that while certain individuals did make reference to God's will, the strong bonds of friendship were the predominant theme.

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<sup>127</sup> Alison Sulentic Collection, L.G. McNicholas – Mr and Mrs McNicholas, 1/7/1944; SADDDC, Personnel records, L.G. McNicholas.

<sup>128</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, E.W. Penny – M. Sangster, 18/8/1944.

<sup>129</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 640, PR, 1-30 March 1945.

## CHAPTER 5: RECREATION AND LEISURE

It has been said that army life is characterised by long periods of intense boredom interspersed with short periods of terror. Leisure time can be said to include the periods of leave ranging from a 24 hour pass to several weeks of rest and reorganization but it also includes those idle moments in the rear areas or in the line. Such time was spent reading, listening to music, shopping (hence the section on money and markets), exploring the country or just killing time with idle conversation. The army's answer to boredom was to organize sport of every conceivable kind while Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) provided a variety of activities to maintain morale. An understanding of the popular literature, music and film, as well as general interests, is essential for reconstructing the lives of the men on campaign with the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division.

### a) Reading matter

*The Springbok* of March 1946 considered that educated people of this era were prolific readers. Furthermore, it was noticed that during the war years, public libraries, book clubs and book sellers were much busier than they had ever been before the war. This was attributed to the petrol rationing and the lack of other forms of entertainment.<sup>1</sup>

The main reasons why soldiers read were boredom and the need for a diversion. The demand for reading material outstripped supply. In an effort to meet the need, the South African Library Association launched a "Books for troops" campaign. Including the head office in Pretoria, there were eight "Books for troops" centres where members of the public dropped off unwanted books. In 1944, a total of thirty thousand books were shipped out of Pretoria, a third of which were sent up north, the remainder were distributed to camps within the Union. Between January and April 1945, five thousand books were sent up north where they were distributed by the UDF Institutes or retained in their travelling libraries. Nevertheless, it was the families at home who endeavoured to make up the shortfall in reading matter.<sup>2</sup>

Where there was a YMCA there was a library, which was also well fitted out for writing and the refreshments were also good. The YMCA at Helwan was a haven after a long hot day.<sup>3</sup> At the Union Defence Force Institutes (UDFI) club in Prato, the Red Tabs Club, there was a small library where books, magazines, draughts and writing materials were made available. Many Guardsmen frequented this popular place and apparently they made the most use of the library. The few Afrikaans books were also in great demand.<sup>4</sup>

Books were needed most when the division was at rest and the men had time to do some serious reading. While at rest in Lucca, Hodgson read three books simultaneously: *Upon that mountain* by Eric Shipton, a biography telling of a man who tries to climb Everest; *Seven tempest* by Vaughan Wilkins and *British scientists* by J.G. Crowther.<sup>5</sup> Hodgson's father sent his son text books on civil engineering but during the Gothic Line battles he had neither the time nor the inclination to study them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Springbok*, March 1946, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> F.A. Peters, There's a Springbok waiting for that book, *The Nonqai* 36, 1945, p. 543.

<sup>3</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 18/3/1944.

<sup>4</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, pp. 158-159.

<sup>5</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 13/3/1945.

<sup>6</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 14/9/1944.

Douglas Baker's published memoir lists 88 books which circulated amongst his regiment, the Natal Mounted Rifles, during 1943 and 1944. In the manner of a big book club, each book was rated out of ten. The books which were rated highest and circulated the fastest were those with a "bit of stick" in them. Nevertheless, some genuine classics were highly appreciated. Some examples of the favourites as well as less-liked books are as follows:<sup>7</sup>

Title	Author	Rating
Dynasty of death	J.B. Hilton	10
The keys of the kingdom	A.J. Cronin	10
Self portrait	Gilbert Frankau	10
Escape to yesterday	Gilbert Frankau	10
Return via Dunkirk	Gun Buster	9
Rebecca	Daphne du Maurier	8
There are no South Africans	G. Galpiens	7
Ladies paradise	Emile Zola	6
Put out more flags	Evelyn Waugh	5
The doomsday men	J.B. Priestley	4
The aerodrome	Rex Warner	3
The thirty-nine steps	John Buchan	3

Clearly, intellectual capacity was not lacking in the division. However, even Hodgson, who dabbled in subjects like applied mathematics and hydrostatics, found Leo Tolstoy's *War and peace* in three volumes to be heavy going. After ten days of reading he gave it up for the time being at the end of July 1944, explaining that one really wants plenty of time to get down to it, which was not really possible at that moment. Instead, he switched to *Mountain city* by Upton Sinclair, which he enjoyed because of its light reading and its "very pleasant story".<sup>8</sup>

For self improvement, a book called *A study of history* was recommended reading of the day. This was probably the work of Arnold Toynbee, the first six volumes of which were published just before the Second World War. *Forever Amber* (1944) a novel about a naughty girl, was more accessible and considered to be very erotic. Another literary aphrodisiac was Nicholas Monsarrat's *Leave cancelled* (1945).<sup>9</sup> A book of free verse which was considered to be unashamedly erotic was *This is my beloved*. For the high-minded, Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* was required reading.<sup>10</sup> A story which raised a laugh among comrades was told by a soldier who had been to hospital to be circumcised. All had gone well except for bursting a stitch while reading Hemingway's *For whom the bell tolls*.<sup>11</sup> These classics were commonly found on the shelves of South African readers.

Another evergreen title which was familiar to Hodgson and his contemporaries was *Gone with the wind*.<sup>12</sup> Deneys Reitz's book, *Commando*, made a great impression on the twenty

<sup>7</sup> D.B. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, pp. 496-498.

<sup>8</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 18/7/1944; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 28/7/1944.

<sup>9</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 107.

<sup>10</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 208.

<sup>11</sup> J. Swaab, *Field of fire, diary of a gunner officer*, p. 213.

<sup>12</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 9/4/1944.

year old Hodgson.<sup>13</sup> Considering that it is still in print and on certain best-sellers lists, it must rate among the most exceptional South African books of all time.

On Baker's book list, there were a number of titles dealing with the subject of war which were highly rated and newspapers were especially appreciated for their coverage of the war. However, according to some sources, soldiers during and after the war did not want to read about the war. In one parcel which Hodgson received from his sister, there were two books on Dunkirk which met a luke-warm response.<sup>14</sup> The city librarian of Johannesburg, R.F. Kennedy, wrote in an article in *The Springbok* of March 1946, that returning soldiers did not want to read war books. Apparently, it had been the same after the First World War. They found an escape in more pastoral pursuits evidenced by the fact that the most sought after books in the library were those on poultry farming. Ex-volunteer university students were particularly voracious readers, but had no time to read outside of their curriculum.<sup>15</sup>

In a letter which was written while the division was in the front line, preparing for the assault on Monte Sole on 16 April 1945, Hodgson provides an example of what he considered light reading. From the extract of *A Knight on wheels* by Ian Hay, which he shares with his parents<sup>16</sup>, it is clear that the type of humour which appealed to readers of his era would be lost on the reader of today. A book named *Insides out* made Hodgson laugh out loud – to the extent that he could not read it in company for fear of annoying people. Nevertheless, “all the other people who read it found it the same”.<sup>17</sup> Light reading as always, was the best way to escape and before battle, it would be difficult to focus on anything heavier than a comic, a magazine or the back page of the *Sunday Times*. Crossword puzzles were at a premium.<sup>18</sup>



FIGURE 15: Two soldiers of the WR/DLR distract themselves with some light reading before the attack on Monte Caprara.

FROM: Ditsong National Museum of Military History.

<sup>13</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 9/4/1944.

<sup>14</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 12/11/1944.

<sup>15</sup> *The Springbok*, March 1946, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 13/4/1945.

<sup>17</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 3/1/1945.

<sup>18</sup> D.B. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 496.

Where books were scarce and leisure time was plentiful, any type of reading material was at a premium. All English (or Afrikaans) language literature had to be sent up from the Union or produced by the military themselves. Some parents regularly included newspapers and magazines in their parcels. *Outspan* magazines were welcomed, but the *Sunday Times* was particularly appreciated for the gossip, sporting news and college news. Even old scraps of newspaper paper used in the packaging of parcels would be read – provided that they had not been soiled by the parcel contents.<sup>19</sup>

The military provided a fair amount of reading material in the form of newspapers, pamphlets and journals. The three best known newspapers in this theatre of war were *Eighth Army News*, *The Union Jack*, and *The Stars and Stripes*. The main South African newspaper was *Springbok*. It was a serious newspaper, read by everyone to keep abreast of political and military matters. There were also snippets of local news from various South African cities and towns. In the edition of 28 September 1944, there was already mention of demobilization.<sup>20</sup> A primitive little newsheet called *el Bullsheets* was circulated daily in Khatatba. It contained some news of the war and of camp life. The most popular feature was probably the cartoon.

The *Springbok* was printed in Rome, by a staff of professional newspapermen representing almost every South African newspaper. It was distributed free and was read with great interest by those in the field and at home. Even in the post-war months, *Springbok* continued to be widely read. According to the court of enquiry into the Helwan Riots of 20 August 1945, when the men did not receive their 2 August 1945 issue of *Springbok*, the rumour spread that it had been suppressed for revealing the true conditions within the camp.<sup>21</sup>

During training in Egypt, two bored members of the reserve group created *The Sable* which was relatively successful. Labelled “The mouthpiece of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division” this was considered a divisional publication which had been censor-approved and could therefore be sent home. This could be the reason why Hodgson considered it to be uninteresting and mainly “just nonsense”.<sup>22</sup>

Within a month of the end of the war, an enterprising member of the Pretoria Regiment, Trooper T.E. Swanepoel, started up a new magazine called *La Stella d’Oro*. Unlike some of the other in-house publications, it was of a high quality. The publishers ensconced themselves in Rapallo which is a popular resort near Genoa. At 10 Lire per copy, *La Stella d’Oro* was popular for its pin-ups, short stories, political opinion and sports news.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the magazines printed in Italy, friends and family would send up rolls of glossy magazines, such as *Life* and *Punch*, which had previously been scattered across South African coffee tables.<sup>24</sup> Newspapers and magazines could also be found in the reading rooms of the rest camps set up by the UDFI.

In conclusion, it can be said that all reading matter was well used. A book or magazine would travel through the whole company and beyond – for as long as the binding could

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<sup>19</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 21/9/1944.

<sup>20</sup> *Springbok*, 28/09/1944. SANMMH, B 412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div.

<sup>21</sup> S. Webster, The Helwan Riots: August 1945, *Journal of Military History* 12(3), pp. 88-93.

<sup>22</sup> *La Stella D’Oro*, 7, p. 8, 5/7/1945, Ditsong Museum of Military History, B 412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div. John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 8/6/1944.

<sup>23</sup> *La Stella D’Oro*, 7, p. 8, 5/7/1945, Ditsong Museum of Military History, B 412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div.

<sup>24</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 12/11/1944.

stand up to it.”<sup>25</sup> Like the propaganda pamphlets which regularly rained down on both sides, all magazines and newspapers had a secondary function as toilet paper.

## b) Film, music and radio

### i) Film

Cinema-going was a main leisure activity of advanced societies who were involved in the war.<sup>26</sup> This was the heyday of film and popular music. Regardless of where the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division was based, the cinema was there as a favourite past-time. In letters and diaries, men regularly referred to the films which they had seen. In base camps, one could watch at least two films a week. During the year in the desert, film was the primary form of entertainment and mobile cinemas ensured that even in the front line, there could be an escape from reality from time to time. The prominent role which film played in society is evidenced by the simple fact that people recorded in their diaries, the titles of the many films which they had seen, and used precious space to discuss these in their letters home.

Pietermaritzburg in the 1940s was military staging post and a paradise for film lovers. In 1941, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century opened in Longmarket Street as the city’s largest and most modern cinema. The other two cinemas were the Excelsior and the Kings.<sup>27</sup> It seems that filmgoers of the time were not too discerning although some of the less realistic war films did not sit well with soldiers.

Films which were on circuit in Pietermaritzburg included the wartime classic “Wake Island”. Hodgson pronounced that “it wasn’t too bad, but it was quite impossible [unrealistic] which spoils the effect of the film quite a lot.”<sup>28</sup> The Marine Corps “Wake Island” was the first in 1942, and then came “Guadalcanal Diary” in 1943, “Lifeboat” in 1944, and numerous others.<sup>29</sup> Desert Victory (1943), was a documentary about the Desert Rats, which was so popular that it showed simultaneously in two theatres in Alexandria in Egypt. It was treasured for its “realism”, although there were special effects and faked sequences.<sup>30</sup> The motion picture industry saw it as their duty to build morale – as opposed to building military hardware. Various branches of the US Military generated what were virtually official films to aid recruitment to their particular branch.<sup>31</sup>

From wartime letters, it can be seen that film provided a link with home, a common interest between soldiers and civilians. Because the same films were on circuit in civilian and military theatres, it was possible to discuss the films which they had seen and thereby share a common experience. People liked to discuss film stars like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. Noel Coward was a household name at the time. He was riding high on the success of his 1942 naval drama – “In which we serve”. In 1943 he toured the Union and also performed in Egypt.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 9/4/1944.

<sup>26</sup> C. Coultass, British feature films and the Second World War, *Journal of Contemporary History* (19) 1, 1984, p.7.

<sup>27</sup> J. Laband. & R. Haswell (eds.), *Pietermaritzburg 1838-1988: A new portrait of an African city*, pp. 110-113.

<sup>28</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 12/7/1943.

<sup>29</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 190.

<sup>31</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 153.

<sup>32</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 27/10/1943.

At Khatatba, there were three open air cinemas named after the familiar ones in Johannesburg. At Helwan, there were two outdoor cinemas, the Pall Mall and the Colosseum, where a plastered brick wall served as a screen and the audience arranged themselves on a hillside on the sand.<sup>33</sup> Some of the films had not even been released in the Union and while the division was at Helwan, the following films were on offer: “Du Barry was a Lady”, “Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”, “Ziegfield Girl”, “Time out for Rhythm”, “Bitter Sweet”, “Sunny”, “Hellgapoppin”, “Night in Lisbon”, “Gunga Din” and “You’ll Never Get Rich”, with Rita Hayworth and Fred Astaire.<sup>34</sup> The reason why films featured so significantly in the correspondence from Egypt is that there was little else of interest to do or to write home about.<sup>35</sup> Erotic films were few and far between but this did not stop the men from fantasising about their favourite stars. Hedy Lamarr was the thinking man’s favourite pin-up, who had starred in the most erotic movie of the decade – “Ecstasy” (1933). Lana Turner, in “Ziegfield Girl” (1941) became notorious for giving viewers a glimpse of breast as she bent down to pick flowers.<sup>36</sup>

Soon after arriving in Italy, because of strict censorship there was a not much to write home about, except for the films previously watched. In addition to combating boredom, such entertainments provided some relief from the stresses of combat. While advancing up Italy and far forward in the Winter Line, mobile film units would pull into a regimental area and set up an open air film show. In Rome, Naples, and even in smaller centres such as Prato it was possible to see a different film every night.<sup>37</sup>

In the early part of the war, when things were going badly for Britain, escapism was needed and war films were not popular, but this changed in the later years as the films themselves became more credible. The use of film as a medium of communication, propaganda and entertainment has become a primary area of study – especially those of wartime vintage. These include documentary films and feature (fiction) films.<sup>38</sup> The effect of wartime cinema on memory will be discussed in Chapter 11.

## ii) Music and radio

As with film, music could evoke feelings of nostalgia and an escape to another time and place.<sup>39</sup> While in the Soldier’s Club in Pietermaritzburg, someone was playing “Deep in the heart of Texas” on the piano and Hodgson was reminded of an evening at where he had danced to that tune in the dining room at home.<sup>40</sup> When there was a piano in the room, people gathered around for a sing-along. Some of the favourites included the inane “Run rabbit run”, “I’ll be loving you always”, “Isle of Capri”, “White cliffs of Dover” and the universally loved “Lili Marlene”.<sup>41</sup> In English, Lili Marlene was recorded by Vera Lynn, Bing Crosby, and later Marlene Dietrich. The secret of the song’s success was its universal theme – that of a

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<sup>33</sup> S. Webster, The Helwan Riots: August 1945, *Military History Journal* 12(3) 2002, pp. 88-91, June 2002; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 26/3/1944.

<sup>34</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 2/11/ 1943.

<sup>35</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 18/3/1944.

<sup>36</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 106.

<sup>37</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 25/7/1944.

<sup>38</sup> C. Coultass, British feature films and the Second World War, *Journal of Contemporary History* (19) 1, 1984, p.7.

<sup>39</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 9/11/1943.

<sup>40</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 25/6/1943.

<sup>41</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, pp. 188-190.



soldier parting from his sweetheart:<sup>42</sup> Lili Marlene was the theme of the desert war but the soldiers carried it with them to Italy where it acquired some even more sentimental verses.

Patriotic or propaganda songs like "... hang out the washing on the Sigfried Line" apparently did not catch on. It was the songs with a sexual connotation like "They're either too young or too old" which were the most popular. Hopes of fidelity were also a common theme, hence: "Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me" and "Somebody else is taking my place".<sup>43</sup> Other songs with a sexual allusion are "Why don't we do this more often", "In the mood" or the subtly suggestive "That lovely week-end":<sup>44</sup> These songs were popular throughout the entire English speaking world, including South Africa.

Likewise, the international stars like Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Victor Sylvester, George Formby and Gracie Fields were household names in South Africa. Frank Sinatra only became known in 1944 and 1945 but Benny Goodman, the "King of Swing" and the Andrews Sisters were big wartime stars.<sup>45</sup> Their records could be obtained in Johannesburg at Bothners, Polliachs and then Recordix, two blocks up from the station in Eloff Street.<sup>46</sup>

According to Baade, the BBC mobilized dance music to boost morale believing it could relax, cheer and energise listeners. Consequently, in 1942 they banned "slushy" lyrics, male crooners, and overly sentimental, insincere female singers to combat what it identified as "morale-sapping sentimentality". Instead, it stuck to dance music in the form of American-style swing and strict-tempo ballroom. "Jitterbug" dancing was considered by some to be a great stress-reliever while others considered it vulgar. The more youthful audience preferred Geraldo while those over thirty showed a preference for Vic Sylvester.<sup>47</sup>

The BBC's dance music programming was typified by Geraldo and Jack Payne, the bandleaders who enjoyed steady, long-term contracts at the BBC for most of the war. They based their broadcasts on the concept of variety, something for everyone. Besides dominating the air waves, dance bands gave live performances in clubs, theatres and dance halls.<sup>48</sup> Gerald Bright and his ensemble, better known as "Geraldo and his Dance Orchestra" or "Geraldo and his Sweet Music", was one of the most accessible entertainment groups and played to the troops in Cairo.<sup>49</sup> Baade reports that dance music declined in popularity from about 1944 and BBC programming responded accordingly.<sup>50</sup>

According to an article in *The Star* of 8 May 1945 (VE Day), the popular songs of the war were wistful rather than boisterous and "Lili Marlene" which was taken from the Germans, was the undisputed favourite of the Eighth Army. South Africans chanted "South of the Border" as they rolled through Italy while "White Christmas" was soon to become a chilly reality. Apparently few songs of the war had had the universal appeal of "Over There",

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<sup>42</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, p. 106.

<sup>43</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, pp. 182-186.

<sup>44</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 107.

<sup>45</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, p. 110.

<sup>46</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 19/7/1943.

<sup>47</sup> C. Baade, "The dancing front": Dance music, dancing and the BBC in World War II, *Popular Music* (25) 3 Special issue on dance, 2006, pp. 347-348.

<sup>48</sup> C. Baade, "The dancing front": Dance music, dancing and the BBC in World War II, *Popular Music* (25) 3 Special issue on dance, 2006, pp. 350-363.

<sup>49</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 2/11/1943.

<sup>50</sup> C. Baade, "The dancing front": Dance music, dancing and the BBC in World War II, *Popular Music* (25) 3 Special issue on dance, 2006, pp. 350-363.

“There’s a Long Long Trail”, “Pack Up Your Troubles” and all the others which are associated with the trenches of the First World War. The South Africans carried “Sarie Marais” with them and spread it in many directions until some Americans were singing it.<sup>51</sup> Spike Milligan who was a musician and a jazz lover, as well as a comedian, mentioned the song “Pistol packin’ mama” on a number of occasions in his memoirs of the Italian campaign and the South African military observer, H.H.H. Biermann, described how that same song was playing in a regimental aid post while shells were exploding over the forward positions only 800 yards away.<sup>52</sup>

Music was ever-present, whether in camp or in the forward areas – whether from a wireless radio or record player. Douglas Baker was delegated by his tank crew to listen to the news on the wireless at HQ and then report back.<sup>53</sup> Immediately after the Battle of Monte Cassino, while at rest along the banks of the Volturno River, Bourhill wrote that evenings were spent sitting on a petrol tin, listening to Tommy Dorsey or Vic Sylvester dance tunes.<sup>54</sup> At the top of Monte Salvaro on the morning after the battle for Pt 826, signallers tuned into the BBC and music wafted across the battlefield.<sup>55</sup>

On 29 October 1944, immediately after the Battle of Monte Salvaro, the Royal Natal Carbineers were being rested just behind the lines and Hodgson described to his mother how he had one of the military wireless sets tuned in to the “Forces Programme” which was broadcast from Daventry all day long. The BBC also played music but Daventry was the preferred music station because there was very little heavy music. Only the most pleasant light music was played and about two to three hours of the programme was taken up by the playing of forces’ favourites – requests from men of the services all over the world. After the war, while comfortably billeted on the Italian Riviera, Hodgson and his roommates clubbed together and bought a good wireless which could “get anything”. An extra speaker was attached to the wireless which was placed on the opposite end of the house, thereby providing music throughout.<sup>56</sup>

By 1945, a radio station called “The South African Forces Radio” was operating out of Rome. It broadcast for six hours per day and featured home news in English and Afrikaans, messages to soldiers from families in the Union, music by South African artists, South African sporting features and request programmes by the SABC.<sup>57</sup> The Army Education Services made much use of this service for their educational programs, many of which bordered on propaganda. The program list for a typical day in February 1945 included radio dramas on “What is democracy?”, “The right to vote”, and “Freedom of speech” as well as “What to see in Rome”. The issue of soil erosion in South Africa seems to have been a major topic of the day.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *The Star*, 8/5/1945, War songs old and new, Clipping in UWH, Box 271.

<sup>52</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 140, Narratives by Capt H.H.H. Biermann, military observer attached to 12 SA Bde.

<sup>53</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 16/1/1945.

<sup>54</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 26/5/1944.

<sup>55</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 140, Narratives by Capt H.H.H. Biermann, military observer attached to 12 SA Bde.

<sup>56</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 20/9/1945.

<sup>57</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 6/45, 10/2/1945.

<sup>58</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726, AES, 1-28 February 1945.

### c) ENSA shows

The Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) was the British equivalent of the American United Service Organization (USO). The “Amuseliers”, “Modernairs”, “Wot Nots” and “Sundowners” were some of the South African entertainment units which sustained the morale of all nationalities in the Mediterranean Theatre. While some were of a poor standard, the “Crazy Gang” had an outstandingly popular show which was considered clean and wholesome. Various bands did broadcasts for the forces and played for dances and functions, especially in hospitals. The 3 CC Concert Unit, “African Stars”, apparently did wonders for the morale of the NEAS.<sup>59</sup>

The Union Defence Force (UDF) entertainment unit which was based in Helwan, performed on a collapsible stage. There were some fairly well-known South African personalities, like Gordon Mulholland, but nothing to match Bob Hope and the big bands who entertained the American troops and sometimes South Africans.<sup>60</sup> After the Battle of Monte Cassino, an ENSA show was put on at Limatola using a flat-bed trailer as a stage. One show which was performed every night at the big base came in Altamura in the South of Italy was called “Sunny” and seems to have been highly acclaimed.<sup>61</sup>

In Castiglione during the winter, Axelson saw a concert put on by the entertainment group “Bullytins”.<sup>62</sup> The performance (one of their last) might well have been poor, as complaints were received after almost every show.<sup>63</sup> Most of their audiences were American. Axelson made no comment on the standard of the performance. Typically, the shows were aimed at the lowest common denominator – smut and sex. One of the more mature officers was not impressed by what he saw of live entertainment in a theatre of war:

The comedian relied almost entirely on sex and scored something of a hit. The show wound up by a two woman scene, one being dressed as a male, and singing lustily they performed antics of an extremely sexual nature, with much indecent caressing and undoing of fly buttons. What they were singing, I am unable to say – as it was drowned out in the roars of applause.<sup>64</sup>

Clearly, the impact was the same among mature men of all nationalities. A contributor to the RNC war diary was one of the more discriminating. He wrote that for a change, the UDF concert put on by the Swingboks was not at all bad, and was remarkable for the complete absence of smut.<sup>65</sup> Hodgson appears to have seen the same show and was equally impressed. He explained that he was normally disappointed by the terrible performances of the ENSA concerts.<sup>66</sup>

Among the last ENSA performances at Alassio, was a show called “All for fun” which was fairly good with plenty of laughs.<sup>67</sup> The UDF entertainment groups, the “Amuseliers”,

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<sup>59</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>60</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 14/1/1944.

<sup>61</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 27/4/1944.

<sup>62</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, pp. 156-162.

<sup>63</sup> H. Bantjes, *Die vermaaklikheidsgroep van die Unie-Verdedingsmag gedurende die Tweede Wêreldoorlog*, p. 91.

<sup>64</sup> J. Swaab, *Field of fire, diary of a gunner officer*, p. 164.

<sup>65</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 647, RNC, 1-30 September 1945.

<sup>66</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 6/10/1945.

<sup>67</sup> John Hodgson Collection. J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 25/11/1945.

“Troopadours” and “Swingboks” were among the last to leave Italy in November 1945. They had entertained troops of all dominions across the country.<sup>68</sup>

#### d) Killing time

For many, leisure activities consisted merely of “pottering around”, going for walks and becoming acquainted with the countryside and its population, but idle hours were mostly spent in idle conversation. The American war correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote about the everyday life of ordinary men, including the conversations between them. If the South Africans were anything like the Americans, they spoke mainly of home – such was their longing. They spoke also about their immediate comfort or lack thereof.<sup>69</sup>

Conversation was a favourite way of killing time. In one man’s words, there would be a lot of “sitting about in a friendly group, cooking some grub or beverage and chatting about every topic under the sun”.<sup>70</sup> According to Baker, life after death was a hot military question amongst soldiers in dangerous times.<sup>71</sup> In his diary, Schwaab draws the distinction between talking about death and thinking about it to yourself. One did not want to think too deeply about the meaning of life and the possibility of finding out about heaven and hell, though many spoke about it.<sup>72</sup> Needless to say, sex was another hot topic and it has been said that in the presence of death, women and sex take on great importance.<sup>73</sup>

Whereas in the early stages, the topics of conversation might have included attitudes to the war and home leave, towards the end, men questioned the meaning of life and pondered what awaited them when they got home.<sup>74</sup> As far back as 20 August 1944, the generation of electricity in South Africa was causing a heated debate in Hodgson’s circle. He wrote to his father to help settle an argument he was having with his tent-mates about the generating capacity of the Kilp generating station.<sup>75</sup>

Mostly they would just talk about home and what they would do when they got there. Hodgson longed for the comforts of home following a period of heavy fighting and bad weather in the northern Apennines. By revealing the most talked-about subjects, Hodgson articulated his innermost feelings:

We often sit down and discuss all the different things we will do when we get back; it is amazing what is usually the most talked of subject; not dancing or anything like that, but being able to have a good bath, then having a lovely bed to climb into at night; in fact all the comforts of home, and just to take things easy at home, and enjoy to the full all the benefits of a good home - that is also the way I feel.<sup>76</sup>

No doubt, jokes took up their fair share of the conversation. What people found to be funny in the 1940s may not seem funny today. Apparently it was members of the armed forces who developed “shaggy dog” stories which are intentionally pointless and usually (but not always)

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<sup>68</sup> H. Bantjes, *Die vermaaklikheidsgroep van die Unie-Verdedingsmag gedurende die Tweede Wêreldoorlog*, p. 93.

<sup>69</sup> E. Pyle, *Brave men*, p. 71.

<sup>70</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 18/3/1944.

<sup>71</sup> D.M.Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 98.

<sup>72</sup> J. Swaab, *Field of fire, diary of a gunner officer*, p. 263.

<sup>73</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, p. 124.

<sup>74</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 14/1/1944.

<sup>75</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 20/8/1944.

<sup>76</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 6/11/1944.

involve a talking dog.<sup>77</sup> These stories were also long and not worth repeating, but in a letter to his mother, John Hodgson tells a “joke” which originates from a line which has been attributed to Monty Wooley in real life:

Monty Woolley playing Santa Claus is seated on a department store platform in “Life Begins at 8:30.” He has been secretly imbibing and gives a hearty belch. One woman in the crowd is shocked. Woolley, observing her leans forward and says, “And what did you expect madam – Chimes?”<sup>78</sup>

Card games, crossword puzzles and chess has always been a good way to while away the time. On campaigner provided specifications of the ultimate campaign chess set. It had to be small, strong and portable. The type where the board is the box in which the men are kept and when the box opens out it is used for the board. The pieces had to have little pegs on them and they peg onto the board, otherwise they would be eternally falling over.<sup>79</sup>

On one level, smoking can be considered to be a way of passing the time. Certainly, it was a common pursuit and it provided relaxation and comfort in times of stress. Film clips and photographs show that pipe and cigarette smoking rituals were performed by all ranks from the GOC down.

One of the most frivolous examples of how some men passed the time was the growing of a moustache which gave one officer and added interest in life and he would wax it tenderly every evening.<sup>80</sup> Even the young McNicholas became the proud possessor of a moustache, “Quite a noble effort, not very anaemic looking, but nice and dark and thick. It impresses daily.”<sup>81</sup>

#### e) Physical and mental exercise

At Khatatba, sports fields were dotted among the tents, separating the regimental lines. Men played football, hockey and rugby on the sometimes hard, sometimes sandy, always uneven ground. It was entirely possible to get lost among the thousands of tents (especially after a night of carousing). Football was quite popular as it was the only convenient game to play on soft sand.<sup>82</sup> Hockey was the sport of choice for men of normal build. Rugby was best left to the seasoned players.<sup>83</sup> Even the football could get rough and any injury would result in a court of enquiry. When Trooper A. Brown of the NMR injured his knee on 5 May 1943, the mandatory court of enquiry was held three weeks later. After calling a number of witnesses including the referee and the MO, the president of the court of enquiry, Lieutenant Frank, found that there had been no misconduct.<sup>84</sup>

International matches took place at the Alamein Club on Geziera Island in Cairo, and convoys of trucks transported men to the game.<sup>85</sup> On one particular Sunday in early November 1943, a “very good and exciting rugby” match was played against New

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<sup>77</sup>J. Lumsden, Shaggy dog stories, *The Nonqai* 37 (A) 1946, p. 593.

<sup>78</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 15/2/1944; E.M. (Monty) Wooley was an American actor of the 1930s to 1950s.

<sup>79</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 23/7/1944.

<sup>80</sup> J. Swaab, *Field of fire, diary of a gunner officer*, p. 154.

<sup>81</sup> Alison Sulentic collection, L.G. McNicholas – Miss O’Donoghue, 7/11/1943.

<sup>82</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 11/12/1943.

<sup>83</sup> D.M.Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 99.

<sup>84</sup> SADDCC, Medical records, Trooper A. Brown 226044V, Court of enquiry on 28/5/1943 at Khatadba.

<sup>85</sup> W.L. Fielding, *With the 6<sup>th</sup> Div*, p. 18.

Zealand. The score was 22-5, “a smashing victory for South Africa”. The crowd numbered about 10,000 of whom only about one hundred were civilians, one of whom was Sir Anthony Eden.<sup>86</sup> On Sunday 19 March 1944 the division again went into Cairo to watch the last match of the rugby season, fully expecting to beat the “Kiwis”. “You can imagine our disappointment when they came back and told us we had lost by thirteen points to five. They gave us a good beating which I think was mainly due to overconfidence.”<sup>87</sup>

A September 1943 issue of “el Bullsheat” declared that it was now cricket season, and a match would be played between the Springboks, (captained by H. Wade) and the rest of Egypt at the Gezira Club in Cairo.<sup>88</sup> Boxing news featured prominently on the sparse pages of “el Bullsheat”. “Poole’s Punchers” were highly rated, having seven finalists in the Cairo Area Amateur Championships – including both of the heavyweight finalists (Private C.N. Vorster and Gunner J.L. Smit). The bouts were judged by British rules which meant that they were controlled from outside the ring and there was no cheering by the crowd during the fight. Trooper P. (Pop) Mafaffy had been the Transvaal welterweight champion and was the division’s flyweight hope. Wearing a green shirt and the divisional flash on his thigh, he floored his RAF opponent in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round. Six of these boxers were selected to tour Palestine in October 1943.<sup>89</sup> A boxing match was staged between the British and the Americans at the Gezira Sporting Club. A lunch or dinner at the club was an important aspect of such an outing.<sup>90</sup>

Once the division had moved to Italy and was fully involved in the campaign, there was little time and no need for sport. The men had to take part in sport from a distance by betting on the horse races, instead of participating actively. During a period of fierce fighting in the summer of 1944, the running of the Durban July provided a welcome distraction. For Natal boys in particular, discussion and betting on the “erzats” Durban July started well before the actual race day but it took a week for the results to become known.<sup>91</sup>

Whenever the division was at rest, sport took on major proportions. During the first rest period at Siena, in August 1944, there was not much organized sport as it was only two weeks and it was interspersed with trips to Rome. Nevertheless, the locals were apparently astounded at the energy of the South Africans. During the second rest period however (at Lucca in March 1945), the first thing that unit commanders did was lay out sports fields as instructed by the experts. A rugby field measured 110 yds by 75 yds. Other sports included association football, hockey, rugby football, softball, table tennis and quoit tennis.<sup>92</sup> Soccer was played on the Lucca aerodrome which became muddy when it rained.<sup>93</sup>

The first real snowfall was on 23 December, and the men became children again – frolicking in the snow, seemingly with little thought given to personal safety or how they would dry out

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<sup>86</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 9/11/1943.

<sup>87</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 19/3/1944.

<sup>88</sup> DNMMH, B.412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div, Bullsheat No. 139, 3/10/1943.

<sup>89</sup> DNMMH, B.412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div, Bullsheat No. 125, 19 Sept 1943; DNMMH, B.412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div, DSMMH, Bullsheat No. 95, 20/8/1943; DNMMH, B.412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div, Bullsheat No. 111, 5/9/1943; DNMMH, B.412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div, Bullsheat No. 118, 12/9/1943; DNMMH, B.412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div Bullsheat No. 139, 3/10/1943.

<sup>90</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 8/2/1944.

<sup>91</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 22/6/1944; The Durban July Handicap in 1944 was won by a horse called Monteith. The filly Preston Pan however did go on to become a highly successful broodmare.

<sup>92</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 3, Div Sports Office, Sports Fields, 23/2/1945.

<sup>93</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 29/3/1945.

later. During the next month, much time was devoted to manufacturing skis and trying them out. Some spectacular falls resulted from skiing in the moonlight. These antics were well documented in the publicity photographs and on SA Mirror.<sup>94</sup> It seems that the army encouraged the sport and even provided some skis. Virtually everyone took their turn to fool around.<sup>95</sup>



FIGURE 16: Skiing South African style – P.M. Johnston on the left.  
 FROM: Jane van Velden Collection.

In the post-war period, while the men were fretting about repatriation, the division put great emphasis on sports to keep them busy. There was inter-company competition, inter-battalion competition and even international competition. Team sports as always took centre stage, but some less traditional sporting competitions took place. A twenty kilometre motorcycle reliability trial was held near Milan at the beginning of June. This was not a race, it was more a test of riding skill as the eleven hazards had to be negotiated without putting a foot down or stalling.<sup>96</sup>

A few days later, there was a swimming gala in Milan where Springbok swimmers competed against American swimmers. The South Africans did well in the freestyle but “in the breaststroke, our sole Springbok representative was outpaced by the unorthodox butterfly style of three ‘Niseis’, American soldiers of Japanese origin”. Two Americans and four South Africans gave a diving display and there was also a water polo exhibition.<sup>97</sup>

During this post-war period, a Old Hiltonian’s letters primarily contained news of his sporting activities. His detailed account of a cricket match against a British artillery regiment emphasises the role of Natal’s most famous schools. The Royal Natal Carbineers team

<sup>94</sup> N. Orpen, *Gunners of the Cape*, p. 250; Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, 11-25 January 1945.

<sup>95</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 12/1/1945.

<sup>96</sup> SADDDC, Photograph description, CN179.

<sup>97</sup> SADDDC, Photographic section, C184-C186.

included the ex-captain of Natal Schools (Bestall from Maritzburg College) and ex-head-boy of Michaelhouse (Rex Pennington). Their British opponents had no chance.<sup>98</sup>

Hodgson noticed that there were very few tennis courts in Italy, virtually no private ones and only a few public courts. The first opportunity he got to play tennis was in Turin after the war had ended. He found a club along the lines of the Johannesburg Country Club where he could have a game. But no sooner had he organized balls and rackets, was he told that the club was out of bounds to Other Ranks (ORs). In other words, it was reserved for officers only. “This type of thing makes me boil, because why should an officer be better suited to tennis etc. than any other rank, in many cases it is the reverse. There is still a chance that if we get invited, we can play.” As it happens, Hodgson managed to become an honorary member of the Marine Club where he could play tennis and do a bit of boating in proper skulls with sliding seats.<sup>99</sup>

In Turin on 16 June 1945, 13 SA Mtd Bde held an inter-unit athletic championship in the Stadium del Popolo, Torino. The day was dominated by the RNC thanks to their stars like Frank Kingwell and middle distance champion Errol Dinkelman who won the 1500 m in 4 minutes 40 seconds. The bands of the FC/CTH – DSR (massed pipe) and the ILH performed for the crowd which filled only the main covered stand. Not included in the official programme was an officers’ novelty race that involved drinking and passing beer bottles around the track. That evening, a grand ball was held at the Esperia Rowing Club.<sup>100</sup>

After having played matches against every team imaginable, interest in sport started wearing off in late 1945. A divisional road race was being held at Genoa but nobody was anxious to travel the two and a half hours in the back of a truck to get there. Sport was restricted partly because of the large number of troops now congregated in the area and there being only two playing fields available around Alassio. Nevertheless, now that every other regiment was nearby, it was possible to compete against other teams in the Infantry Group and the old rivals of the Carbineers – the NMR.<sup>101</sup>

In November 1945, a rugby match between the South Africa and New Zealand was being billed as the game of the century. Although being played in Rapallo, the account and results were being eagerly awaited in the Union.<sup>102</sup> From all over northern Italy, Springbok and New Zealand supporters travelled to see the match. The former were not disappointed. The 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division thrashed the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division 30-5.<sup>103</sup> A return match was played in Florence on 20 November. Predictably, the “Springboks” won – by 23 points to three after being 0 - 3 down at half time.<sup>104</sup> At events such as this, there was a strong presence of military police – especially in the parking area, where theft was likely to occur, and around the bars.

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<sup>98</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 9/9/1945.

<sup>99</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 20 /5/1945.

<sup>100</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 633, DSR, 1-31 July 1945, Programme, 13 SA Motorised Brigade, Inter Unit Athletic Championships; M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, pp. 47-50; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 20/6/1945.

<sup>101</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 31/10/1945.

<sup>102</sup> *La Stella d’Oro*, 3 (3) p. 8, Italian Riviera, 4/11/1945, DNMMH, B 412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div.

<sup>103</sup> *La Stella d’Oro*, 4(3) p.8, Italian Riviera, 11/11/1945, DNMMH, B 412 (68). 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div; SADDCC, WD, Box 647, RNC, 10/11/1945.

<sup>104</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 647, RNC, 18-20 November 1945.



As the last few members of the division were waiting for repatriation, hockey trials took place up and down the Riviera for the divisional hockey team, as an international match was being planned against the New Zealand division. There were many Old Hiltonians present at the trials which made for much jocularly.<sup>105</sup> There were some expert players around – but for some reason, the international was cancelled.<sup>106</sup> An alternate form of exercise was to go climbing in the frozen peaks of the interior, and a cross country race at Rapallo generated great interest.

Mental exercise offered an alternative to physical exercise as a way of passing the time productively. Education and self-improvement was always on the agenda of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division but only in the latter stages did it become a priority. During the rest period in early 1945, while the division was based at Lucca, some South Africans “chosen for their educational qualifications”, i.e. officers, were sent to Perugia to attend an Army School of Education where they attended classes in politics, economics and international affairs. The courses lasted three weeks and were also given in Afrikaans. Apparently they were supposed to pass on the knowledge they had gained when they returned to their units.<sup>107</sup>

Army Education Services (AES) published a weekly pamphlet called *PEP* (Peace, Education, Progress) and presented a series of courses at “Rusthof” in Florence for those who intended taking up or resuming post-matric studies. The purpose was actually to prepare students for their return to civilian life. Rank was not recognized in the training centre. The policy was that everybody ate, slept and worked together, irrespective of rank. The syllabus included: SA affairs, recent history, economic and political questions, the broader facts of biology and psychology. The arts, music and literature were also given a place. The July edition of *PEP* had a cartoon by Vic Clapham (RNC) which depicted a soldier looking at a sign saying “Welcome back to South African Soil”. Under his feet, is a landmine labelled “Race Hate” and the caption says “Achtung! Minen!”.<sup>108</sup>

It was being said that whoever gave the repatriation system its name, was labouring under a misapprehension because it seemed to do everything except repatriate. The weather and consequently, bad flying conditions, were being blamed. Organized sport was at a low ebb, and those who were so inclined, were given the opportunity to revive their grey matter. An education wing was created at Alassio under the direction of Lieutenant John Oxley. In addition to the course on South African Affairs, individual lectures were scheduled when operational commitments permitted.<sup>109</sup> At the army educational school in Alassio, the information section of the UDF ran a concentrated ten day course on South African affairs. Only forty from the division attended.<sup>110</sup>

#### **f) UDFI, welfare and women’s organizations**

The three main organizations which did welfare work for the UDF in Italy were the Red Cross, the UDFI (UDF Institutes which was a combination of Toc H and YMCA) and thirdly UDF Welfare which ran rest camps for other ranks. It is a canteen system which originated with the South African Garrison Institutes (SAGI) in the Anglo-Boer War. Lord Roberts was

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<sup>105</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 18/11/1945.

<sup>106</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 25/11/ 1945.

<sup>107</sup> SADDCC, Photographic Section, N436-N438.

<sup>108</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726, AES, PEP Something new at Florence school, 2/7/1945, pp. 1-2.

<sup>109</sup> M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p. 52.

<sup>110</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 23/10/1945.

determined to put an end to sutlering where traders would follow armies into the field and exact extortionate prices from underpaid soldiers. The direct successor of UDFI is SADFI and its British counterpart is NAAFI.<sup>111</sup>

The UDFI was in Italy even before the 6<sup>th</sup> Division arrived. By October 1943, the UDFI advanced HQ had moved from Sicily to Foggia where it occupied a bombed out building. When the division arrived, the UDFI expanded to a total staff of 75 with eight mobile canteens, four mobile cinemas and it became an integral part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division. The unit would later be divided into two sections. The first section served the Adriatic coast area while the second section under Captain J.R. Cruikshank operated two mobile canteens and two mobile cinemas from a base south of Florence, known as the “Holiday Inn” Springbok Field Club.<sup>112</sup>

Wherever the division went, the UDFI would follow. Their aim was to bring a bit of civilian life to the soldiers. There were three mobile cinemas which took film shows to the forward areas – sometimes in the firing line. Mobile canteens sold personal necessities and the two libraries on wheels with 3,000 books were more static tented institutions which sprang up wherever the men settled. These offered restaurants, writing rooms and chapels. They sponsored debates, bridge and chess drives, old boys gatherings and musical evenings. Sightseeing tours of Rome were also organized by UDFI. In Italy, it was run by Captain Cruikshank, described as “tolerant and genial” assisted by Lieutenant Archie Coats – an unorthodox go-getter.<sup>113</sup>

Leave and transit camps, clubs, tea gardens and canteens with a South African flavour sprung up all over Italy. In Prato there was the non-residential, teetotal but still popular Red Tabs Club. In Florence, the UDFI ran the Voortrekker Club (formerly Albergo Colombia), which could accommodate 140 people. The “Drop In” Cape Club was for members of the Cape Corps and Native Military Corps visiting Florence.<sup>114</sup> The UDFI was not only operative in the big centres, it also had a mobile canteen in the mountains which dispensed coffee as far forward as it dared to go on the roads under observation.

The Red Tabs Club (later renamed the Orange Flash Club), was open at certain times during the day, and closed at 2100 hrs. At the counter, men would queue for sweet milky tea and a bun. The main hall was filled with tables of varying sizes and men took their tea in here, where they sat for hours – sometimes sprawled asleep across the tables in their mud stained clothing. The stone floors were usually soiled with mud and snow brought in on men’s boots. A first-rate Italian band performed on a platform in one corner. The hall was pleasantly warm with a stove near the door of the reading room. Books, magazines, draughts and writing materials were made available.<sup>115</sup>

The South African Woman’s Auxiliary Services (SAWAS) were mainly employed in these rest centres. Their tasks would include housekeeping, guest relations and secretarial duties.<sup>116</sup> According to Sampie de Wet, the SAWAS were slightly superfluous in a war zone. They

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<sup>111</sup> I.J. van der Waag, *A History of the South African Defence Force Institute (SADFI) 1914-1990*, p. 2.

<sup>112</sup> I.J. van der Waag, *A History of the South African Defence Force Institute (SADFI) 1914-1990*, pp. 89-95.

<sup>113</sup> *The Sable*, Lee R.W. & Wale L.S. (eds.), *The official organ of the 6<sup>th</sup> S.A. Armoured Division*, New Year 1944, p. 15.

<sup>114</sup> I.J. van der Waag, *A History of the South African Defence Force Institute (SADFI) 1914-1990*, pp. 89-95.

<sup>115</sup> J.F. Bourhill, *Come back to Portofino*, p. 341.

<sup>116</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726 No 1 UDF Officer’s Rest Camp CMF, 13-28 February 1945.

numbered no more than twelve in Italy but felt unwanted and only tolerated. They were especially resented by the Women's Auxiliary Army Services (WAAS) known as "Waasies" for taking over their jobs as hostesses and welfare workers. Having officer status, they were allowed to censor letters.<sup>117</sup> The latter also served as dispatch riders, signallers, office workers and gunners with the coastal batteries.<sup>118</sup>

The only other branch of the women's services who served alongside the 6<sup>th</sup> Division were the South African Military Nursing Services (SAMNS) who were highly regarded by the troops for their bravery and efficiency in the war zone. Two nursing assistants (SAMNS) are buried in the Florence Commonwealth Cemetery. Joyce Saville from Durban and Shirley Williamson from Witbank were killed in a road accident between Florence and Prato after a dance on 21 December 1944.

Axelson noted in his log on 4 January 1945 that "Castiglione dei Pepoli was becoming positively inundated with South African females". First, he met the acclaimed South African photographer, Constance Stewart. He then saw two nurses at a forward dressing station and eight more at the 8 Casualty Clearing Station (8 CCS). At the same time, there was a concert in the village by the entertainment group "Bullytins".<sup>119</sup> On 25 January, Axelson noticed two SAWAS getting out of a staff car in the square at Castiglione. They had been working in Prato for the past two months and were now in Castiglione to run the Outspan Club.<sup>120</sup>

The Outspan Club was the most forward YMCA – TocH facility in Italy, situated in the village square, in what was apparently a most fashionable café. It was run by Corporal H.M. Vining, formerly a miner from Johannesburg who "commanded" a staff of twenty Italian civilians. It was very basic but they served 3,000 to 4,000 cups of tea and coffee free of charge every day.<sup>121</sup>

Other facilities include a club in Bari called Good Hope to accommodate 75 men (ORs) on leave. In a church hall, opposite the Springbok Club in Rome, was the Mimosa Club for Non-Europeans. Because of the pressure on the clubs during the static phase, various recreation halls were opened and hospitals were equipped with libraries, canteens and occupational therapists. The divisional chaplains acquired a "villa in the mountains" to be used as a retreat for those with spiritual leanings – equipment and a warden were supplied by the UDFI. The UDFI had seven orchestras in the Mediterranean theatre (CMF) playing daily in various institutions.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 89.

<sup>118</sup> J. Mervis, *South Africa in WWII*, p. 24.

<sup>119</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, pp. 156-162.

<sup>120</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, pp. 156-162.

<sup>121</sup> SADDCC, Photographic section, CN163-CN164; SADDCC, Photographic Section, N429 and N429.

<sup>122</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.



FIGURE 17: Outspan Club in Castiglione (note the ice on the ground).  
 FROM: South African National Museum of Military History.

**g) On leave**

Leave, also known as “R & R” (rest and recreation), or the more denigrating term “I & I” (intercourse & intoxication) played an important role in sustaining morale. One South African expressed his priorities by referring to “the three Rs” (rest, recreation and Rome). However, contrary to popular perceptions, soldiers did not simply run amok in foreign fleshpots. Military discipline prevailed. The military police ensured that uniforms were smart, officers were saluted, arms and ammunition were handed in to the armoury.<sup>123</sup> It appears that the memory of time spent on leave remained clearer in the minds of old soldiers than any other experience. This may be because it was more relaxed and allowed for better assimilation of their surroundings. The leave experience reflected the society in which they found themselves and represented a microcosm of the Italian culture.

During the period of the campaign, the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division as a whole was twice withdrawn from the line for purposes of rest and reorganization. These were in August 1944 when the division withdrew to Siena after the capture of the southern part of Florence and again during March 1945 when the division was withdrawn from the Winter Line to the Lucca area.

In addition to the periods during which the entire division was withdrawn from the line, leave parties of various sizes and groupings were sent for short periods of leave, mainly to Florence and Prato, during the static winter period. Front line troops were rotated out of the line to dry out and get warm every four days. Special leave hotels for officers, and rest centres for other ranks, were established for this purpose. Leave parties were not necessarily made up of a group of best friends, they could be names drawn out of a hat or selected by an unreliable rota system. Regardless of who had what, it was common practice to place all funds in a kitty

<sup>123</sup> James Bourhill Collection, “Do’s and Don’ts – while on leave”; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. & M.V. Hodgson, 6/2/1944.

which would be administered by someone thought to be the most reliable.<sup>124</sup> During the days before going on leave, there was great anticipation, speculation and planning:

We intend to get accommodation on the sea front as it will be really wonderful to look at the sea all the time instead of the rolling wastes of sand that we have here. We intend having a really good rest. No getting up at four, five and six in the morning, but breakfast in bed every morning. We intend to see all the historic sights we can see.<sup>125</sup>

Unlike Egypt, where there were adequate civilian facilities (under military control and inspection) to accommodate and feed men sent back from the line, the conditions in Italy presented a new set of problems. A large portion of the civilian population was starving, political chaos prevailed and the country had been drained of its resources during the German occupation. Furthermore, the Allied invasion had destroyed much of the transportation and communication networks, not to mention thousands of buildings. Therefore, the UDF decided to create a military organization called “SA Rest Camp”.<sup>126</sup> The first rest centres for the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division were established in Salerno. A college building and two hotels (one at Maiori for officers and one at Rovello for nurses) were requisitioned.<sup>127</sup>

While the division was in Egypt, soldiers had been making short visits to Cairo, which was only a short distance from the big transit camp at Helwan. Also while passing through Helwan on their return journey to South Africa, the men became well acquainted with Cairo. In the middle of February 1944, shortly before going to Italy, many got a chance to visit Alexandria and Palestine on a seven day pass. The Palestine leave option took the form of an organized tour – with some days at liberty.

Not only the amount of leave, but also the quality of leave facilities influenced the effectiveness of that leave. The South African troops were first accommodated in what had been Mussolini’s cavalry training school (known as Cavalry Camp) sleeping on mattresses stuffed with fodder. Situated on Route 3 on the outskirts of Rome, it was damp and cold after the autumn rains and drainage was poor. Most preferred to stay with civilians at the risk of being murdered and paying through the nose. Some fortunate men got the opportunity to stay in the American camp at the Mussolini Stadium.<sup>128</sup>

After much agitation, a new facility called “Hofmeyr House” (No 1 Detachment) was established at Caserma Regina Margherita, Via Damiata, Rome. This was also the address of the Unit HQ and had facilities for four hundred leave personnel, fifty transit personnel and thirty staff. In the basement was a laundry and showers, offices were on the ground floor, sleeping quarters on the first floor and on the second floor was the kitchen, dining room, recreation room and bar. Furniture was partly issue, partly purchased and the SAWAS contributed £500 towards this.<sup>129</sup>

Number 1 UDF Officer’s Transit Hotel was opened in July 1944 in the Albergo Minerva in the Piazza Minerva, in the centre of Rome. It catered for officers, nurses and WAAS on leave or in transit as well as the occasional rugby team.<sup>130</sup> Piazza Minerva is close to Corso

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<sup>124</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 253.

<sup>125</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 19/2/1944.

<sup>126</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726 SA Rest Camp UDF, CMF, 12/6/1944- 28/2/1945.

<sup>127</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726 SA Rest Camp UDF, CMF, 12/6/1944- 28/2/1945.

<sup>128</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, 48.

<sup>129</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726 SA Rest Camp UDF, CMF, 12/6/1944 to 28/2/1945.

<sup>130</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726 No 1 UDF Officer’s Rest Camp CMF, 13-28 February 1945.

Umberta, one of Rome's busiest streets, and not far from Piazza Venezia. Before the war, it had been used largely by emissaries to the Vatican. After it was requisitioned for the use of South African officers, it was run by the UDFI but was soon handed over to the Union Defence Force Headquarters of the Central Mediterranean Forces (UDF HQ CMF).<sup>131</sup>

While working at the Minerva Hotel in Rome in October 1944, Sampie de Wet was highly critical of the facilities. From her female perspective, it was old-fashioned with ornamental Victorian wallpaper and gaudy decorations. Most of the floors were stone, there was no central heating and often there was no hot water, it was noisy and crowded and there was "always a lot of drinking, and the drinks were very expensive". The food was mainly tinned or dehydrated, never any milk but there was white bread and good cheese. Omelettes were made from powdered eggs with shreds of onion. "It was impossible under the crowded conditions to keep the table linen clean, the crockery was cracked and chipped, the cutlery insufficient and the service bad."<sup>132</sup> It is not known what facilities were like at the Mimosa Club which was for non-European personnel.<sup>133</sup>

Allied visitors to Rome in 1944 found that the UDF troops had the worst accommodation of all Allied forces. The Minerva Hotel for officers and the Springbok Club for other ranks were equally bad and inadequate.<sup>134</sup> The Deputy Prime Minister, Hon J.H. Hofmeyr, visited Italy at this time and it was considered advisable for reasons of prestige for him to stay at the Grand Hotel but he would of course visit the Minerva to see amenities provided for South African forces.<sup>135</sup> All the other Dominion troops had sumptuous clubs, rest centres and hotels and the American Fifth Army rest camp was in the gigantic Mussolini Stadium which had every kind of facility. It had been built for the Olympic Games which never happened.<sup>136</sup>

A new facility for Non-Europeans was accommodated at 4 Non-European (NE) Leave and Transit Camp at Villa Cavaletti near Frascati, (Grotto Ferrata) about twenty kilometres south east of Rome.<sup>137</sup> The unit only moved here from "Palm Beach" twenty kilometres west of Algiers in March 1945. It was a beautiful spot on a hill overlooking Rome, adjoining a magnificent estate with olives, vineyards and cultivated lands. But, as the war diary of this unit states, the medical and hygiene conditions in this camp were most unsatisfactory and the kitchens were not fly-proof.<sup>138</sup>

One of the favourite tourist sites in Rome was as always the Trevi Fountain, which had only five centimetres of muddy water – in which stood small boys waiting to catch your coin. Without power, the fountains could not have spouted water anyway. The famous Spanish Steps were covered with the grime of war but still beautiful.<sup>139</sup> There were trams running down wide streets, normally two hooked together, with bench seats running along the sides and only standing room for most passengers.<sup>140</sup> At the Colosseum, a loud speaker blasted

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<sup>131</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726 No 1 UDF Officer's Rest Camp CMF, 13-28 February 1945.

<sup>132</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 29; E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 169.

<sup>133</sup> I. Gleeson, *The unknown force*, p. 252.

<sup>134</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 104.

<sup>135</sup> SADDCC, CGS, Box 298, file 61/29.

<sup>136</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 48.

<sup>137</sup> I. Gleeson, *The unknown force*, pp. 251-252; SADDCC, WD, Box 726, 4 NE Leave and Transit Camp UDF, 1-31 May 1945.

<sup>138</sup> I. Gleeson, *The unknown force*, pp. 251-252; SADDCC, WD, Box 726, 4 NE Leave and Transit Camp UDF, 7-9 March 1945; SADDCC, WD, Box 726, 4 NE Leave and Transit Camp UDF, 12-14 May 1945.

<sup>139</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 39.

<sup>140</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 28/11/1944.

American swing music which to some, seemed out of place. Every hour, the music would change to a talk on how the Christians were fed to the lions and how the crowd of 45,000 could clear the place within one and a half minutes.<sup>141</sup>

The splendours of Rome were a welcome change from the battle-scarred villages that the men were used to. John Hodgson made the most of his visit to the Eternal City and in a letter to his parents recounts the whole experience providing a complete picture of the leave experience – although less cerebral soldiers may not have taken in as much detail. From the detail which Hodgson felt moved to share with his parents, it can be assumed that they (like most South Africans) had never been to Rome and were unlikely to ever go there.<sup>142</sup> Whereas Hodgson overdosed on the culture, Johnston’s Roman experience was typical. Much of his time was spent at the NAAFI although he did visit the Pantheon. He also saw the opera “Aida” which he described as “wonderful”. Wandering around the shops with friends, they were “picked up by two pros” and back at the Springbok Club, he was offered a double room and two women but he was too late to take up the offer.<sup>143</sup>



FIGURE 18: Rhodesian troops studying a map of Rome.  
FROM: Ditsong National Museum of Military History.

Number 3 UDF Officer’s Transit Hotel in Florence accommodated 90 guests and was opened on 4 October 1944. Located in the Lucchesi Pension, it comprised three adjoining buildings in Lungarno della Zecca, on the north bank of the Arno, just down from the Ponte Vecchio. The Germans had previously occupied the premises and the South Africans were surprised to find that it was in good condition apart from some broken windows, caused by blasts, and there had been little looting. The owners had however, taken the precaution of removing the silver and linen beforehand.<sup>144</sup> A staff of five South Africans under Captain A. Bell was assisted by 43 Italian men and women. The chef was a true professional. Army rations were

<sup>141</sup> *The Sable*, Lee R.W. & Wale L.S. (eds.), January 1945, p. 27.

<sup>142</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 26/8/1944.

<sup>143</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, 18-22 August 1944.

<sup>144</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726, No 3 UDF Officer’s Rest Camp CMF, 4 October 1944 to 28 February 1945.

supplemented by fresh food bought in the markets and direct from the farmers. Only the best Italian wines and spirits were stocked and where possible, were also obtained from the producers. The most popular drink, however, was South African (issue) brandy, and this was in short supply. Dances were held every night, to the music of a hired Italian orchestra – which apparently used to broadcast on the radio. The hotel catered mainly for officers of the 6 SA Armoured Division and women’s services, although all UDF forces were represented from time to time. Prominent visitors included the GOC, General Poole, himself.<sup>145</sup> The rates were subsidised for officers – it is unlikely that ordinary soldiers would have had an opportunity to stay at one of these establishments.

As the front moved north, new camps were opened in Prato on 2 December 1944 and Florence on 24 December 1944. These were named “Hofmeyr House”, “Albergo Springbok” and “Rusthof” respectively. At this time, the officers’ hotels were divorced from SA Rest Camp.<sup>146</sup> Among the many amenities in Prato, there was the “Albergo Springbok” centrally situated on the university campus, consisting of a main block and two wings four storeys high. Four hundred leave personnel could be accommodated in the hostels. The Albergo was first operated by the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division before being taken over by SA Rest Camp. It closed on 8 December 1944 and when it reopened on 2 February 1945, the new name was “Springbok Hotel” until it closed on 1 May 1945.<sup>147</sup>

During the static phase, infantrymen were rotated in and out of the line every four days to dry out and get some decent food. The army used the opportunity to give lectures on trench foot and frostbite. Men were rested in Prato, Castiglione, Camugnano and Lagaro where there were bath units. In addition to the UDF rest camps, various other establishments were used for their four day spells of R & R. Italian hotels and boarding houses were requisitioned complete with cutlery, linen and staff for the officers. Vacancies were circulated and allocations made to the various units. Regimental histories often give the impression that these were especially for the use of their particular regiments, but they were invariably UDF or British rest camps.<sup>148</sup>

Florence was the main leave destination during the winter. Number 2 Detachment SA Rest camp was located in the Villa Frassineto, No. 509, Via Aretino Rovezzano – four kilometers from the centre of Florence.<sup>149</sup> Villa Frassineto, which opened on 21 December and was later renamed “Rusthof”, was also available for the four-day passes to virtually all units. Four hundred leave personnel could be accommodated but usually no more than one hundred men at a time would be allocated from a single unit.<sup>150</sup> By May 1945, Rusthof had become mainly an educational centre and it was decided to amalgamate the AES School and No 2 Detachment under one command.

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<sup>145</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 726, No 3 UDF Officer’s Rest Camp CMF, 4 October 1944 to 28 February 1945.

<sup>146</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 726, No 3 UDF Officer’s Rest Camp CMF, 4 October 1944 to 28 February 1945.

<sup>147</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 726 SA Rest Camp UDF, CMF, 1-31 March 1945.

<sup>148</sup> A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer*, p. 145; A.C. Martin, *The Durban Light Infantry*, p. 368; SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1, OC Main, 6 SA Armd Div, Hot showers in Lagaro, 14/12/1944.

<sup>149</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 72; A.C. Martin, *The Durban Light Infantry*, p. 368; SADDDC, WD, Box 726 SA Rest Camp UDF, CMF, 1-31 March 1945.

<sup>150</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 93; SADDDC, Photographic Section, No. N369-N373.





FIGURE 19: SAWAS selling perfume at Villa Frassineto in Florence (Sampie de Wet at centre).

FROM: Ditsong National Museum of Military History.

In post-war Italy, there was much competition for the requisition of leave facilities between all the different Allied nations. Venice was particularly in demand and the South Africans were fortunate in getting a large quota of accommodation. Reconnaissance parties were always on the scout for new premises. On 16 May 1945, an advance party of No 3 Det SA Rest Camp under Captain R.G.I. Mathias arrived in Venice and established Det HQ at Villa Volpi, on Route 13, six and a half kilometres from Mestre and sixteen kilometres from Venice. The Villa Volpi could accommodate 150 personnel and had extensive gardens. A number of more central hotels were taken over in the Lido area which is about a kilometer from the main canal. However, because transport could not get into this area, the HQ remained at Villa Volpi and was named the “Outspan”.

Orchestras and canteens were provided in some of the establishments and on the Lido, entertainment included two free cinemas for Allied troops, opera and various soldier’s clubs and cafes. The price of Gondola rides was fixed by the military. British Welfare and UDFI sight-seeing tours were available.<sup>151</sup>

The OC of SA Rest Camp, Major D.C. Steytler, campaigned hard to establish a rest camp in Rapallo so that South Africans could experience Genoa and the Italian Riviera. The Excelsior Hotel was identified as an ideal location. In the end, it was decided to opt for Venice instead, and the British occupied the Excelsior. The facilities which opened in Rapallo therefore, were regimental rest hotels.<sup>152</sup> However, during their last few months in Italy, the divisional headquarters moved to Rapallo from Baveno.

#### **h) Money matters**

The only opportunity which the men had to spend their meagre pay was while on leave – and then it would be quickly depleted. Supplementary funds sent from home were always welcome, but being aware that times were tough at home, Bourhill and others were

<sup>151</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726, SA Rest Camp, UDF, 1-31 May 1945.

<sup>152</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box726, SA Rest Camp, UDF, 1-31 May 1945.

reluctant to ask for handouts: “I’m going on leave to Florence for a week on Monday. To the little villa again! I’ll have very little credit in my pay-book after all this wild living! No Mother mine, that’s not a hint, actually I’ve got more than enough, perhaps more than is good for me? No not that either, I always come back from leave with quite a bit over.”<sup>153</sup> Similarly, when Hodgson returned from leave in Alexandria where he spent twenty pounds on board and lodgings, he was “practically broke”. Rather than accept a hand-out from his parents, he asked for a loan and insisted on repaying it.<sup>154</sup>

Hodgson’s father sent regular remittances to his son, even though towards the end of the war, Hodgson himself was sending home substantial amounts of money. Furthermore, being a non-smoker, he was able to use his cigarette issue for bartering – sometimes exchanging them for beer.<sup>155</sup> As a private in the infantry, he was earning six shillings a day in October 1943 – which he found to be “quite sufficient” considering that there was nothing to spend it on. He saved much of his pay and by 1945 was sending home regular drafts of twenty to forty pounds.<sup>156</sup> Trooper Easton’s records show that he was granted an extra 6d per day proficiency pay which would have made little difference as he was relatively well-off and owned his own farm, looked after by his wife.<sup>157</sup> Some had to resort to desperate means to augment their army pay. When Johnston was in Florence on leave, at a place referred to as the “C of S” (possibly Church of Scotland) he and a female friend (probably a nurse), named Daisy “donated 200 cubic centimetres of blood for \$10.00 courtesy of Uncle Sam’s government.”<sup>158</sup>

Although a man’s paybook would reflect his pay in pounds and there were various currencies in circulation, it was necessary to exchange this for the legal tender in whatever country the division was located. The Egyptian pound was used by South African troops in Egypt as the only legal tender until the introduction of British Military Authority notes at the end of 1942. An Egyptian Pound was made up of 100 Piastres which amounted to 2 ½ Piastres (or six pennies) more than the South African Pound. Like the British Pound, the South African Pound consisted of twenty shillings and each shilling was valued at twelve pennies. It did not take the men long to become familiar with the Egyptian currency which was printed on poor quality paper and was consequently usually very frail and torn.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 14/3/1945.

<sup>154</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 14/3/1944.

<sup>155</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 20/12/1944.

<sup>156</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson 24/10/1944; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson 18/7/1944.

<sup>157</sup> SADDCC, Personnel records, G. Easton.

<sup>158</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, 5/4/1945.

<sup>159</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 10/10/1943.



FIGURE 20: Egyptian currency: Five Paistres.  
 FROM: Norman Smith Collection.

In Italy, currency was in short supply and Allied Military Lire (AML) was intended to supplement the Italian or Metropolitan Lire – not replace it. Following the appearance of AML, restrictions were immediately placed on the Italian Lire. One hundred thousand million AM Lire were issued by December 1945.<sup>160</sup> Soon after arriving in Italy, He sent home some examples of Egyptian and Italian currency, and in a letter to his father, explained how the rate of exchange had fallen from roughly 70 Lire to the pound to 400 Lire to the Pound. He also noted that the 500 lire and 1,000 lire notes were not the same as the 100 lire. The “original Italian money” was not much in circulation and there were no coins in use.<sup>161</sup>



FIGURE 21: Italian Metropolitan bank note, Ten Lire  
 FROM: James Bourhill Collection

<sup>160</sup> G. Rosignoli, *The Allied forces in Italy, 1943-45*, p. 13.

<sup>161</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 25/5/1944.

The Lira (singular) was pegged at 400 Lire (plural) to the Pound and was backed by the Allies. This applied to Allied Military Lire notes as well as Italian Metropolitan Lire. The pre-occupation rate had been about 90 Lire to the Pound.<sup>162</sup>

Allied Military Lire was the preferred currency. Metropolitan Lire could be easily forged. Mutilated or badly soiled notes were accepted at one's own risk. It was recommended that Metropolitan Lire only be used as small change. Men were warned especially not to accept denominations of 500 Lire or 1,000 Lire.<sup>163</sup>



FIGURE 22: Allied Military currency, one Lira.  
 FROM: James Bourhill Collection.

A good meal in Cairo was always expensive, as were most other things – except a taxi. In the numerous curio shops, one of the popular items was a leather watch cover to prevent sand and dust from getting into the works. One had to be wide-awake to avoid being overcharged.<sup>164</sup> At Smuts House, there were hot baths, hot and cold running water in all the bedrooms, lounges, library and a music room – “an excellent place to stay”. Bed, bath and morning tea cost 10 Pt, breakfast, 8 Pt, Lunch 10 Pt and dinner 12 Pt.<sup>165</sup> By comparison, the cost of almost all other goods was dear. When shared between six people, the price of 20Pt for an hour-long taxi ride was cheap. A very nice Khaki shirt cost 40 Piastres.<sup>166</sup>

At “La Americaine” and the “Royal”, two of the most popular watering holes, the food was cheap, but the drinks were not. The “hostesses” would flirt with the soldiers while ordering

<sup>162</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 83; E. Goetzche, *NMR History*, p. 279.

<sup>163</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 628, 4/22<sup>nd</sup> Fd Rgt, WD 1-31 December 1944; SADDCC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Standing Order (SO) 16/44, 7/4/1944.

<sup>164</sup> A.E. Blamey, *A company commander remembers*, p. 170; The Shepherd Hotel named after Samuel Sheapheard and built in 1841 is often mistakenly spelled “Shepherds”.

<sup>165</sup> James Bourhill Collection, Cairo information for U.D.F. Personnel, p. 2 “A new guide to Cairo” Lehnert & Landrock.

<sup>166</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 24/10/1944.

Champaign at £5 per bottle. The “Champaign” was simply coloured water. At the end of the weekend, men would invariably arrive back in camp totally fleeced.<sup>167</sup>

In the streets, urchins would offer the services of their “sister” or “mother” and escort clients to a house or brothel. Such an experience could involve a single prostitute servicing a long line of hard-up men of all nationalities and races. Alternatively, one could make a selection from a range of services and Gordon Mulholland recorded that sex with a seventeen year old prostitute in Cairo cost 2/6 including a little cake of soap and a condom.<sup>168</sup> By means of comparison, lodging at the officers transit mess in Siena was considered extremely cheap at 2/6 per day all included. A Sicilian prostitute in 1943 was similarly exploited at the price of 25 Lire (slightly less than a shilling).<sup>169</sup>

The shopping was far better in Italy than it was in Egypt and De Wet also found that the shopping was better in Florence than in Rome.<sup>170</sup> In Florence, Hodgson was also sufficiently tempted to do some shopping for the first time since Cairo and found that the shopping centre of the city was the best he had come across since leaving the Union and not dissimilar to what was available in Johannesburg.<sup>171</sup>

Amidst all the deprivation, the trade in luxury goods flourished. Silk stockings cost one pound in Naples but De Wet found them very expensive at about two pounds in Florence. Roman women crocheted their own woollen stockings coming to just below the knee. The availability of non-essentials was the sign of a nation which had not organized for war.<sup>172</sup> Even in South Africa, nylon stockings were unobtainable.

It would appear that the shortage of footwear was even more acute among the civilian population than it was in the military. This is illustrated by an anecdote related by Monnick where, following the battle of Monte Stanco, the dead were robbed of their boots.<sup>173</sup> Shoes were often made of used leather. Women’s wedge soles with cork, uppers, made of bad crumpled, second-hand leather cost 2500 to 3200 Lire; men’s brown suede shoes cost 5760 Lire (£16). By contrast, a stout pair of army boots at the officer’s shop cost £1. Other items of clothing, especially fashion items, exceeded even the cost of shoes. A plain blue cardigan made of good wool cost 4000 Lire and a brassiere: 1100 Lire.<sup>174</sup>

In a restaurant where the prices were not controlled by the military, Sampie de Wet paid 76 Lire for a cup of coffee. This seems exploitative in comparison the the labour intensive service of a shampoo and waterwave which also cost 75 Lire. Most civilian cafés were out-of-bounds to South African troops, both to avoid exploitation and also reserve some resources for civilians.<sup>175</sup>

A vast black market system had developed under fascism where goods mattered more than money. De Wet bought a guide book called *Wonders of Italy* priced at 900 Lire. The

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<sup>167</sup> “Do’s and Don’ts – while on leave”; W.L. Fielding, *With the 6<sup>th</sup> Div*, p. 28; J. Bosman, Providence was my guide, pp. 49-51.

<sup>168</sup> J. Crwys-Williams, *Mood of a nation: A country at war 1939-1945*, p. 192.

<sup>169</sup> R. Atkinson, *The day of battle*, p. 175.

<sup>170</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 233.

<sup>171</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 2/12/1944.

<sup>172</sup> A. Moorehead, *Eclipse*, p. 64.

<sup>173</sup> S. Monick, *A bugle calls*, p. 453.

<sup>174</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, pp. 83 & 223.

<sup>175</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 34.

bookshop accepted 400 cigarettes instead. Cigarettes and rations became the preferred media of exchange. It was a court-martial offence to trade these goods with the civilian population but officers turned a blind eye. Apparently, for some reason, nurses were particularly adept at bartering.<sup>176</sup> In the words of one man: “With half an hour to spare and a stubborn bit of arguing one can get practically anything.”<sup>177</sup>

Soon after arriving in Italy, it was realized that money was of little use in a country where goods were so scarce. Soldiers had items which cost them nothing but which were in great demand by civilians. Some cakes of rough old army soap could be exchanged for six eggs – which would normally cost nine pence (25 lire) each. On the black market soap was ordinarily 280 Lire per kilogram.<sup>178</sup> One group managed to get a whole sheep (still alive) for two old shirts, a pair of shorts and a hundred cigarettes. The only condition was that the skin had to be returned. One could also get a fowl for a pair of shorts. The impression gained was that there was no lack of food outside the towns in the agricultural areas, even the towns were fairly well-off, but there was a total lack of manufactured goods.<sup>179</sup>

Where cash was called for, it was found that black market price of processed food (particularly olive oil) was unaffordable for most. A tin of powdered milk cost 1600 Lire and sugar was 700 Lire per kilogram. Butter was 1000 Lire per kilogram while meat was relatively cheap at 700 Lire per kilogram.<sup>180</sup>

### i) Special occasions

There were some celebratory occasions which provided a break with monotony. Such special occasions included thanksgiving parades (although parades can hardly be considered to be “leisure time”), dedication ceremonies and public holidays – more especially Christmas and New Year. During the “festive season”, the division was in a static position in the Northern Apennines – known as the “Winter Line”. To be in Rome or Florence at Christmas or New Year at the end of 1944 was the experience of a lifetime, which was not the case for the forward troops who were living in icy foxholes and billets.

Up until a week before Christmas, there was not much of the festive spirit around. There had been a rumour circulating in the Union that the division was going to be sent home for Christmas but the men themselves were under no such illusions. Even the prospect of a spell of long leave seemed remote. When the ever-present wireless played “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas” or “I’m stepping out with a memory tonight”, the music only invoked feelings of melancholy and longing. Soldiers imagined the folks at home getting into the holiday mood and getting ready for a feast, while all they could expect was an extra helping of “Desert Turkey”, i.e. Bully Beef.<sup>181</sup>

For Christmas in 1944, the division (approximately 20,000 men) was allocated 260 fresh turkeys. The balance was made up with tinned turkey (at the scale of 113 g per man). Mince

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<sup>176</sup> E.P. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk*, p. 198.

<sup>177</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 19/5/1944.

<sup>178</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 154.

<sup>179</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 19/5/1944.

<sup>180</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 154.

<sup>181</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 13/12/1944; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 20/12/1944; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 20/12/1944; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 7/12/1944.

pies, Christmas cake, cigars and an extra one bottle of beer provided additional cheer. A special Christmas allocation was also made of various other supplies such as boot polish, handkerchiefs, cigarettes and razor blades.<sup>182</sup> At Christmas time, Johnston was in Montepiano with the rear echelons. The normal chore of fetching firewood and washing clothes was interrupted by heavy drinking sessions and a Christmas dinner which failed to impress.<sup>183</sup> While Johnston's experience may have been quite typical, Hodgson's positive personality appears to have ensured that his Christmas in the Italian Apennines was quite bearable, although due to "circumstances" it was celebrated a few days late. The midday dinner menu included roast turkey, roast pork and roast potatoes, followed by Christmas pudding and custard, this was closely followed by nuts and fruit and accompanied by beer and wine. Although all the food came out of tins it was "very good indeed... a very creditable meal for the army".<sup>184</sup>

Hodgson's news, positive as always, describes a New Year's Eve spent playing a marathon game of bridge – ending at 0230 hours.<sup>185</sup> At Montepiano, the highlight of Johnston's New Year was tea at Outspan Club.<sup>186</sup> Of course, each experience was different. At the Minerva Hotel in Rome, the pipe band of the Scottish Horse piped in the New Year and gave a "musical interlude" which went down well. In the small hours of the morning they serenaded the laughing elephant in the Piazza Minerva and were joined by a merry throng of revellers from the hotel.<sup>187</sup> Then they danced around the obelisk (which sits on the elephant's back and dates back to the 6th century BC).<sup>188</sup>

The war diary of 1/6 Fd Rgt relates that on New Year's Eve, midnight mass was heralded with a chorus of bell-ringing from the multitude of churches in the area, and a chorus of gunfire and fireworks joined in. From their positions at Pian di Setta, the 25-pdrs added their quota to the fireworks and the Ack Ack (anti-aircraft) put up "some very confident Vs". The Germans then put up an even more spectacular display.<sup>189</sup> Apparently the Scots Guards were scheduled to carry out an attack on the night of Hogmanay but much to their relief, it was called off.<sup>190</sup> Instead, they had a traditional evening of bagpipes, toasts in Gaelic and good Scotch whisky. An excellent band played Hungarian and Austrian music, also managing "The Merry Widow Waltz" and ending with "Lili Marlene".<sup>191</sup>

In their role as an army of occupation during the post-war period, the behaviour and turn-out of the troops was expected to be faultless to enhance their prestige and build respect for law and order. In order to impart "a general air of efficiency", there were regular displays of martial discipline, route marches and parades.<sup>192</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Brigade held a retreat ceremony on Union Day (31 May) at the sports arena in Milan. Another big

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<sup>182</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1, Rear 6 SA Armd Div, Christmas arrangements, 15/12/1944.

<sup>183</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, 24-26 December 1944.

<sup>184</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. & M.V. Hodgson, 28/12/1944.

<sup>185</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 8/1/1944.

<sup>186</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, 31/12/1944-1/1/1945.

<sup>187</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726 No 1 UDF Officer's Rest Camp CMF, 13-28 February 1945.

<sup>188</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 27.

<sup>189</sup> N. Orpen, *Gunners of the Cape*, p. 250; SADDCC, WD, Box 625, 1/6<sup>th</sup> Fd Rgt, 1-31 December 1944.

<sup>190</sup> N. Orpen, *Gunners of the Cape*, p. 250.

<sup>191</sup> A.B. Theunissen, Major-General W.H. Evered Poole, CB, CBE, DSO: 1902-1969 Personal Retrospects, p. 23; E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>192</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 189, File ceremonial Parades, AQ 3/9 (vol 2) 13 SA Mtd Bde Admin Instruction 3/45, 13 June 1945; SADDCC Archives, Box 647, War Diary of the RNC, 5 July 1945.

event at this time was a medal parade held by 13 Brigade on 22 June in the centre of Turin.<sup>193</sup> The mechanized march-past was attended by Field Marshal Alexander who was on a tour of inspection. One unhappy participant described the tedious preparations of cleaning and polishing up but had no knowledge as to the purpose of it all.<sup>194</sup>

While parades were held first and foremost to maintain discipline among the troops and the local population, entertainments and sports were organized to raise morale. Very often the men were left to their own devices and provided for their own amusements. Recreation and leisure is closely related to the subject of mental sustenance which was covered in the previous chapter. It is therefore also related to the issues of misconduct and vice which are discussed in the next two chapters.

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<sup>193</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 189, File ceremonial Parades, AQ 3/9 (vol 2), 13 SA Mtd Bde Admin Instruction No. 4/45, 20/6/1945.

<sup>194</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. & M.V. Hodgson, 20/6/1945.



## CHAPTER 6: MISCONDUCT

### a) General discipline

The military establishment is a work system and accordingly it can harbour the full range of deviant behaviour and crime which is found in civilian life. Furthermore, the strains of military life, especially combat duty, are great. The resulting anxiety and frustration cause some young men to desert or go absent without leave (AWOL or AWL). Others seek chemical release through alcohol and drugs. The fact that the military at the time was composed largely of young men, made it especially susceptible to the rebelliousness and aggression of youth. A high proportion of the typical military population is from the less educated, lower middle classes who are likely to be drafted.<sup>1</sup> This was, however, not the case in the purely volunteer 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division but in any wartime army there is a subculture of aggression.

The UDF as a whole and the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division in particular had a relatively low incidence of indiscipline. The following statistics are representative of crime in the UDF in Italy for a typical month (February 1945):

AWOL	61 (42 Europeans and 19 Non-Europeans)
Drunkenness	64 (31 Europeans and 33 Non-Europeans)
Being improperly dressed	30
Out of bounds	27
Traffic offences	40
Other	83
Total	310

Out of the 310 cases reported for the month of February 1945, 78 were from the Rome area, 118 from Bari, 51 from Florence, 42 from Prato, 21 from Jesi. It was noted that the number of cases of drunkenness was increasing and had recently overtaken cases of AWOL – probably due to the increased number of men on leave. It was noted that 44 out of the total of 64 cases of drunkenness occurred in Bari, where two base camps were situated. In addition, 270 persons were “pulled up” for dress irregularities. Of these, 143 were members of the SAAF.<sup>2</sup> Two soldiers who had repeatedly been AWOL, were given 12 months hard labour and for one case of culpable homicide, the sentence was eighteen months detention.<sup>3</sup> Due to the drives held in Prato to combat the typhoid outbreak, the number of arrests for being “out of bounds” increased dramatically.<sup>4</sup> It can be seen that the closer to the front line, the fewer were the cases of indiscipline.

The Civil Affairs Officer (CAO) in the Castelnuovo area told Eric Axelson that the South African troops were remarkably well behaved, especially in comparison with the Americans. There had been allegations of assault against the local population but no rapes in the Castelnuovo area. Very often the Cape Corps was unjustly blamed. The finger was also pointed at the sappers (engineers).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C.D. Bryant, *Khaki-collar crime*, pp. 6-41.

<sup>2</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>3</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1, 6 SA Armd Div Routine Orders (CMF), 11/12/1944.

<sup>4</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>5</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 41.

## b) Crimes against person

In spite of the seriousness with which the military views attacks against superiors, minor cases of insubordination regularly occurred in the military. There are however, no known examples of revolts, serious attacks on, or the murder of South African officers. According to Bryant, “the most prominent theme or factor contributing to such violence would seem to be antagonism attendant to class differentiation and conflict”. Furthermore, resentment was more prevalent in base camps where enlisted men become more aware of the authoritarianism of the system and privileges and luxuries enjoyed by officers. Yet both officers and enlisted men were doing essentially nothing in base camp.<sup>6</sup> The Helwan rioting which is discussed below, was more a crime against property and performance than a crime against person although it was ignited by the base camp dynamics.

The official crime statistics could not be found, but the Assistant Provost Marshal (APM) told Axelson at a briefing on 17 September 1944, that stories of disorderliness in the division were greatly exaggerated. There had been “two lots of murderings and only three rapings” since Rome. It was officially recognized that the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division had the “most orderly records” of all the divisions.<sup>7</sup>

Racial tension is prevalent in all armies and the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division was particularly exposed to this. Race was an underlying cause of various infractions and a disproportionate number of disciplinary cases involve members of the Cape Corps. As at the end of May 1944, the division included 1,678 Coloured troops and 14,028 White South African officers and men. (See Appendix D). Apart from being AWOL, the most common charges were those of “insubordination” or “using insubordinate language to a superior officer” and even “striking a superior officer”. One aggrieved Cape Corps soldier who accomplished all three in one night, (and as a result was awarded 28 days detention) was Corporal D. le Roux. His charge sheet revealed that at 1610 hrs on 27 November 1944, he removed some articles from the Cape Corps Club. On being lawfully ordered by Corporal Grant of 59 “Q” Coy Att UDFI, his superior officer, to replace the articles, the accused was heard to say “fuck the S/Sergeant, there is too much colour bar in this place” or words to that effect.<sup>8</sup>

Among the Non-European Army Services (NEAS) in Rome, discipline (especially AWOL) was always a problem. However, many of these cases went unreported as the Military Police (MPs) and guards were sympathetic to the problems at the Cavaletti Leave and Transit Camp. The officer commanding 4 NE Leave and Transit Camp, Captain R.F. Morris, instructed his staff to be very tactful regarding Non-European (NE) and Cape Corps (CC) Troops. Apparently, a certain amount of jealousy existed between Native Military Corps (NMC) and Cape CC troops and it was necessary to segregate them as far as possible. Especially with regard to disciplinary matters, the one group would not take orders from the NCOs of the other group and in the mess, one group would not serve the other group. The instructions were: “Except in an emergency, CC should refrain from arresting NMC and vice versa ... Whenever a soldier is to be arrested, two soldiers and NCO of his own colour should be called upon to effect that arrest. In only extreme circumstances should ENCO [European Non Commissioned Officer] place his hands on a NE, e.g. in self defence if assaulted.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C.D. Bryant, *Khaki-collar crime*, p. 110.

<sup>7</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 171, Discipline, return of illegal absentees and missing vehicles as at 31/7/1945.

<sup>8</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 172, Discipline and crime, Field Crime Sheets, Charge Sheet, Pte D. le Roux.

<sup>9</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 726, 4 NE Leave and Transit Camp UDF, Standing Order 5/45 issued by Capt R.F. Morris, OC, 23/4/1945.

All civilian places of abode were out of bounds to all members of the division, except when on duty and piquets were posted where possible, to enforce the rule. One crime that was very much frowned upon, was any assault on civilian inhabitants of Italy. In order to suppress such incidents, the sentence of whipping was recommended. It was not generally known that this was a legitimate sentence in certain specified cases.<sup>10</sup> After the troops started to be repatriated, complaints were laid with the Springbok Legion by Cape Corps troops saying that they had been subjected to corporal punishment in Italy. The chairman of the action committee (B.B. Bunting) requested an explanation for this irregular action against members of the Legion. When the division investigated and requested more specific details, none were forthcoming and the case was dropped.<sup>11</sup>

Among the Allied armies, the rape or murder of civilians was harshly dealt with. In the routine order 33/44 of 30 July 1944, all nationalities and all ranks, in every theatre, were informed of the conviction of three British soldiers on a charge of murdering a French civilian. The three, including a Cameron Highlander and a Scots Guard, had their names ranks and serial numbers mentioned. They were sentenced to suffer death by being shot and the sentences were duly carried out on 24 June 1944. All three are buried in the Dely Ibrahim War Cemetery in Algeria.<sup>12</sup> This would have been enough to deter most members of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division from committing a similar crime.

Eric Axelson wrote in his log that four members of the Rhodesian Battery of 1/6 Fd Rgt were arrested for rapes and murders which took place on the division's axis.<sup>13</sup> No specific reference was found to this in divisional documents. However, it was mentioned in a routine order that a man had been found guilty of rape and other offences. The unidentified man was sentenced to suffer imprisonment with hard labour for life. A corporal found guilty of assaulting two civilian women was reduced to the ranks and sentenced to six months detention. A soldier found guilty of housebreaking with intent was sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour for one year.<sup>14</sup> Any such convictions were required to be brought to the immediate attention of all ranks.

As at 1 December 1944, there had been only one conviction for rape. The sentence was "death" – later commuted to "life".<sup>15</sup> The culprit in question is not identified in the general orders but another person convicted of a serious crime was Trooper J.J. Hartley of the SSB who in August 1944 is known to have been charged with:

- a) Assault with intent to commit rape;
- b) Assault with intent to commit murder; and
- c) Assault.

He was found guilty with the exception of (b) which was replaced with "intent to commit grievous bodily harm" and was sentenced to be imprisoned without hard labour for seven

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<sup>10</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 168, File JA 1/3, Courts Martial, sentence of whipping, Rear 6 SA Armd Div, 5/7/1944.

<sup>11</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 162, File 4/2 Gen, Letter from B.B. Bunting to Director of N.E.A.S. 16/7/1945; SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 162, File 4/2 Gen, Alleged infliction of corporal punishment on members of the CC outside the Union, 2/10/1945.

<sup>12</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 34/44, 30/7/1944.

<sup>13</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 33/44, 23/7/1944.

<sup>15</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1, 6 SA Armd Div Routine Orders (CMF), 11/12/1944.

years and to be discharged with ignomy from His Majesty's service.<sup>16</sup> There were others charged with rape but not necessarily convicted. Axelson went to watch an identity parade near Milan on 15 May 1945 in a case of alleged rape. The comments of the onlookers included: "Anyone who wanted to rape her should be in the loony-bin" and "when it's an OR, its rape, when it's an officer it's seduction."<sup>17</sup>

While on leave, when there was no common enemy to fight, there was a higher incidence of disorderliness. A document circulated to Allied military police advised that the majority of brawling and interference with civilians comes from "drink taken" troops concentrating in large numbers in crowded areas while waiting for their liberty trucks to return them to their units. Shortage of military police personnel prohibited their use as car park attendants but it was recommended that car parking areas should be frequently visited by patrols. Furthermore, all drunks were to be cleared off the streets before they could cause trouble and all bottles of alcohol were confiscated and the contents poured into the gutter.<sup>18</sup>

During the post-war period, boredom was the big enemy and crimes against person continued apace. After a dance at the Pallazzo al Mare Hotel in Venice, a group of young British, American and South African officers went down to the Lido beach. The party met up with some girls. Some went swimming, and there was a certain amount of "horseplay". Others disappeared into the changing cabins. The two night watchmen continually walked up and down flashing their torches and were told to go away. One went to call the police and the other was allegedly assaulted. The night watchman laid a charge and was accompanied by the Military Police back to the hotel where he pointed out a bearded South African officer, Lieutenant J.L.B. Venn of the 15<sup>th</sup> Fd Regt, SAA. Statements were taken from a number of the group but nobody had seen an assault take place. One of the South African officers who signed himself "J. Thomas, Lt", refused to make any statement about his movements on the night of 20 August 1945.<sup>19</sup>

The very existence of the documents indicates that the military went through the motions of an investigation but it is unlikely that there were any consequences. Nevertheless, discipline was enforced until the very end. There were approximately twenty prisoners serving terms from six months to two years at No. 2 Forward Detention Barracks at the end of May 1945. All had been sentenced in April and May 1945.<sup>20</sup> By September 1945, there was another rape convict as well as a murder convict – Private H.F. Victor 159492V of the amalgamated infantry group RDLI/FC/CTH/WR/DLR serving fifteen years for rape plus another prisoner serving ten years for culpable homicide. At the end of hostilities, long term prisoners were in a relatively high priority "release group" for evacuation – to No. 1 Detention Barracks in the Middle East.<sup>21</sup>

Prisoners were repatriated via Genoa. In November 1945, two prisoners were being escorted from Rome to the Equipment Park at Genoa for evacuation to the Middle East when they jumped off the vehicle at a bridge near Pisa. The escort was unarmed and the prisoners were

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<sup>16</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 35/44, 4/8/1944.

<sup>17</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 226.

<sup>18</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 153, APM, Initial organization of police duties in large towns.

<sup>19</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 162, File General 4/2 Gen, Various statements, 22/8/1945.

<sup>20</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 723, No. 2 Fwd Detn Bk, May 1945.

<sup>21</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 723, No. 2 Fwd Detn Bk, September 1945.

not handcuffed – as per instructions. Gunner A.S. Botha was quickly recaptured but the other prisoner, Private G.S. Cloete, disappeared.<sup>22</sup>

### c) Crimes against property

The misuse or loss of military property has always been considered to be a serious offence, partly because of the high cost of certain types of equipment. A court martial or a court of enquiry would always result. The historical recording section was twice charged – once for a tyre and once for a stolen vehicle. In fact, the most common “traffic offence” handled by the provost was that of leaving a War Department (WD) vehicle unattended. Nine vehicles were reported lost or stolen in January 1945, and ten in December 1944.<sup>23</sup>

A list of stolen vehicles indicates that motorcycles were especially coveted, with Willy’s Jeeps, Ford and Dodge trucks not far behind. Most of these vehicles were stolen by Italian civilians but in one instance, a Ford 8 cwt utility was stolen by a person purporting to be a Sgt Freeman of the WR/DLR. The truck belonged to Major G.M. Daneel, a senior chaplain who was staying at the Red Tabs Club in Prato.<sup>24</sup> On 27 October 1944, a fellow officer asked for a lift to the aerodrome in Florence but there was no reliable driver to drop him off. The so-called Sgt Freeman who was staying at the Red Tabs Club volunteered. After dropping off his passenger (Lieutenant A.T.C. Palmer) and taking a message to the Voortrekker Club, he disappeared with the vehicle – which had an extra petrol tank and a luggage rack on the back. On enquiry, it was found that there was no Sgt Freeman in the WR/DLR but there was indeed a Private A.R. Freeman who had gone missing while on leave in Rome during the August rest period and had since been posted as a deserter. From the description, Major Daneel suspected that Sgt Freeman who drove his car to Florence, “was none other than Private A.R. Freeman who [had] a very bad record in the army”.<sup>25</sup> The vehicle was found abandoned on 4 December 1944 on a farm on the outskirts of Campi but Private Freeman remained a free man.<sup>26</sup>

Theft of military property by soldiers themselves is rife, especially in wartime and the court martial records of the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division contain countless examples. Axelson mentions a South African Major who had stolen his own typewriter as well as a valuable painting which had been taken in Siena.<sup>27</sup> Theft from other servicemen was not so rife, except in transit camps where men from many different units came together. Hay Paddock was one specifically mentioned. At Helwan in Egypt, the main culprits were Egyptians who were employed in the camp.

Opportunistic crimes in Castiglione included a raid on the officer’s mess at Albergo Appenino from which the cash box and a bottle of gin was stolen. Three soldiers were caught red-handed and court-martialed. On 11 April 1945, while everyone was watching an artillery concentration, Captain D.J. McQuirk suffered the loss of a pistol, compass, binoculars and money from a steel trunk in his room.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 163, Statement by Pte J.J. Retief, S.I.B. Pro Coy, 6 SA Armd Div, 22/11/1945.

<sup>23</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>24</sup> George Daneel was a Springbok rugby great during the years 1928-1932.

<sup>25</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 173, File HQS/23, Courts, Report by Maj G.M. Daneel (Senior Chaplain) to SA Armd Div HQ.

<sup>26</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 173, File HQS/23, Courts, statement by Sgt. L.I. Dreyer.

<sup>27</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 173, File HQS/23, Courts, Court of Inquiry 16/6/1945.

The theft of firearms was in fact not uncommon, even in the post-war period when firearms were not generally carried. When Private D. Peterson was taken to hospital on 1 June 1945, he left his rifle and bayonet in his room at Monza, from where it disappeared. While staying at the Albergo Bella Riva in Baveno, in June 1945, Trooper I. Thomas had his Thompson sub-machine gun stolen from his room. Such weapons would have fetched a good price on the streets of post-war Italy.<sup>29</sup>

Part of the division's work in post-war Italy involved general police work – investigating the theft of military supplies, especially fuel and food. Very often, it was the troops themselves who were selling the material in the black market. According to the statement made by one Elide Bassetti, two South African soldiers came into his garage and tried to sell him first a 6 volt battery, then a set of tyres and finally a whole Jeep which the civilian bought for 40,000 Lire.<sup>30</sup> On one occasion, a stash of petrol seized by the military police and the Carabinieri turned out to have been legitimately acquired or taken from the German army.<sup>31</sup>

Genoa was used as a port of embarkation for shipping the masses of vehicles and equipment back to the Union. A large vehicle concentration area was established at Arquata on the main line from Milan to Genoa (approximately 75 kilometres from Genoa) because there was no space big enough in Genoa itself to accommodate 5,000 vehicles. Already partly enclosed, a two metre wall was erected around the whole area and a 24 hour guard was mounted. Nevertheless, if the guards were complicit, entire truckloads of supplies could be smuggled through the gates. A certain Private N. Pendergast was arrested for “larceny” of a Dodge 3-tonner loaded with 770 pairs of boots. His defence was that he thought that the two soldiers with whom he had been drinking earlier that night had the necessary authority to take a vehicle from the park.<sup>32</sup>

John Hodgson restricted his looting to small souvenirs and appliances found in destroyed houses. The day after the Battle of Bagnoregio he wrote: “Also to add to our comfort we have got a Phillips radio in perfect condition; this we looted and are very pleased with our find. We have also got a big clock in the truck which works! It looks as if we have got everything that opens and shuts.”<sup>33</sup> On one occasion, in a ruined building, he found some stamps featuring Hitler and Mussolini which he sent to his sister for her collection.<sup>34</sup>

#### **d) Crimes against performance**

Crimes against performance include some of the most serious of all military crimes including cowardice and desertion but also include some of the least serious crimes such as deliberate ineffective performance, i.e. “loafing” or feigning illness. In the military, non-uniformity or inappropriate dress is considered to be serious partly because uniforms serve as a symbol of control. The uniform also emphasizes the solidarity of the group, ensures social distance from outsiders and projects a suitable image.<sup>35</sup> As the statistics in section (a) above show, a

<sup>29</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 173, File HQS/23, Courts, Court of Inquiry, 16/6/1945.

<sup>30</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 162, 4/2 General, 19/9/1945- 8/10/1945, Statement by Elide Bassetti.

<sup>31</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 162, Complaint: Petrol confiscated by Military Police, 25/8/1945.

<sup>32</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 159, Maj A.J. Mouton, 6 SA Armd Div Equipt Park, 24/6/1945; SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 163, Statement by Pte N. Pendergast RDLI, Attached 6 SAAD Eq Pk Genoa, 26/11/1945.

<sup>33</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 13/6/1944.

<sup>34</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 17/8/1944; At the time of writing in 2010, these stamps were still in the envelope in which they were sent.

<sup>35</sup> C.D. Bryant, *Khaki-collar crime*, p. 137.

relatively large number of Air Force personnel were charged with contravening the dress regulations. The projecting of one's personal characteristics was frowned upon but irresistible to the uniformed crowd.

In a theatre of war, unauthorized absence can result in severe sanction although the military recognizes shadings and nuances of unauthorized absence. The offender may simply become drunk on a week-end pass and return to camp late or most serious of all, he may try to desert permanently. Absence without leave (AWOL) is a situation in which any member of the armed forces is not where he is required to be at the right time. When a soldier misses the movement with which he is required to travel in the course of duty, there is usually a presumption of intent.<sup>36</sup> However, it appears that the division considered this to be “constructive desertion” rather than full desertion.

A string of cases of “constructive desertion” occurred when replacements were being routed to the front.<sup>37</sup> The reserve group was based firstly in Sant' Angelo d'Alife and by April 1945, they were in Monte Varchi (between Florence and Arezzo). There was much coming and going of men and equipment between the division and the reserve group where training was also carried out. In the case of a soldier having been hospitalized, he would first be sent to the reserves before being sent on to rejoin his regiment. In a document detailing the lessons learned from operations, it was recommended that replacements be fetched by truck from the reserve group. This truck could also be used to transport the files and kit of the evacuated personnel on the downward journey.<sup>38</sup>

In the British army, the issue of desertion and battle fatigue in Italy was hushed up. On average, ten British soldiers were convicted of desertion every day during the Spring of 1944. One source estimates that there were 30,000 “slinkers on the trot in Italy”. Another more realistic estimate puts the figure at 12,000 of whom 2,000 were British.<sup>39</sup> These may well have included escaped POWs who did not report back to the military as well as those who took an extra week of unofficial leave in Florence or Rome.

The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division boasted that there were only three deserters as at 5 November 1944, however many absentees had been AWOL for months at a time. A list was circulated which gave brief physical descriptions as well as characteristics and details of where they were last seen. A regular troublemaker, Gunner J.N. Hiniman of 1/6 Fd Rgt had been AWOL for four months. Private R. Rorich (FC/CTH) had been listed among those absent without leave for more than eight months by 31 July 1945 but was ultimately found to have been killed in action. A high proportion of absentees were from fighting units and many had disappeared while on leave.<sup>40</sup> Deserters were awarded sentences of hard labour and discharged with ignominy. All sentences were promulgated on parade with as large a part of the unit present as operations would allow.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> C.D. Bryant, *Khaki-collar crime*, p. 162.

<sup>37</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, 12 SA Mtd Bde, Report on Operations in the Italian Campaign for period August 44 to May 45.

<sup>38</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 640, PR, 1-30 November 1944.

<sup>39</sup> R. Atkinson, *The day of battle*, p. 508; P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 151.

<sup>40</sup> SADDDC Div Docs, Box 171, Discipline, Return of illegal absentees and missing vehicles as at 20/5/1945; SADDDC Div Docs, Box 171, Discipline, Return of illegal absentees and missing vehicles as at 31/7/1945.

<sup>41</sup> SADDDC Div Docs, Box 171, Discipline, Discipline – Desertion, message from the GOC to all Tps 6 SA Armd Div.

In the military context, crimes against performance include sexual “crimes” of which homosexuality and the contracting venereal disease are two examples. These issues are dealt with in the sections on sexuality and venereal disease below. Similarly, alcohol and drug abuse constitute crimes against performance but are dealt with in a separate chapter.

#### e) Crimes against civilians, and by civilians

Crime against civilians is termed “extra-occupational crime” and can encompass all three categories, i.e. crimes against persons, property or performance. A crime against performance could for example result from inappropriate interaction with civilians and bringing the military into disrepute. Another example would be a soldier who does not pay his debts in which case the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division would follow up diligently on any complaint from a civilian. The army was concerned about any activity which would bring discredit to themselves.

As mentioned above, the assault of civilians was viewed very seriously and could be punishable by flogging. According to Bryant, some degree of violation was tolerated or tacitly encouraged. However, an army of occupation does not want to anger civilian society, preferring to maintain public support.<sup>42</sup> Although the Italians were not enemy civilians at the time of the Allied occupation, feelings of hostility had not completely gone.

From the time that the division arrived in Italy, the theft of War Department (WD) property by civilians was a problem. The military police were trained to make civilian arrests – starting with the caution: “I am a police officer. I am making enquiries (into so and so) and I want you to tell me anything you know about it. It is a serious matter and I want you to be careful what you say.” One hundred and fifty two civilians were locked up in January 1945 for the unlawful possession of WD property.<sup>43</sup>

In turn, members of the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div did their fair share of stealing from civilians. The division took a “dim view” of looting and issued an order to that effect on 8 December 1944.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, there were cases of looting especially when it came to food and drink. The red tabs on the shoulders of South African troops made them easily identifiable by the civilian population who then knew where to go to report a crime. On the night of 28 November 1944, four soldiers drove up to a farm belonging to Guisti Giosite, near Camugnano. When a dog started to bark, they fired at it with a pistol and a Tommy gun. When the neighbour stuck his head out of a window and asked them what they were doing, he was also shot at. On this occasion, they stole two sheep, but the previous day, three soldiers wearing black berets and great coats with red tabs had come to the farm asking for wine.<sup>45</sup> In rear areas, the men were under strict orders not to “acquire by illegal means, any poultry or livestock from Italian civilians”. The sentence for such an offence could be up to eight months field punishment.<sup>46</sup>

Due to tensions prevailing in the post-war period, relations with the civilians were not always cordial and in northern Italy there were a number of nasty incidents. In August 1945 at Sanremo, some men of the Pretoria Regiment were escorting local ladies home after a dance

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<sup>42</sup> C.D. Bryant, *Khaki-collar crime*, pp. 195-239.

<sup>43</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 153, APM, Questions by Police.

<sup>44</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 628, 4/22 Fd Rgt, 1-31 December 1944.

<sup>45</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 153, APM, Military Police report, 6/12/1944, S/Sgt J.B. Van Wyk.

<sup>46</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 633, DSR, 1-30 April 1945, Order dated 22/4/1945.



when they were attacked by “a fairly large group of jealous Italian men”. A reprisal party then visited the local partisan HQ and one soldier apparently a little drunker than the rest, had brought a Tommy gun along, with which he shot an apparently innocent partisan through the leg. At another dance, a younger member of the RNC had allegedly slapped a girl and was ejected from the hall. It was noticed that Italian “lovelies” showed a definite reluctance to dance with the soldiers, preferring to stick to their regular Italian boyfriends. For a while, a curfew had to be introduced and piquets patrolled the town to keep the peace.<sup>47</sup>

A sensational story which made the headlines of a Milan newspaper, was the supposed murder of two young women, in which a South African soldier, Private A. Venter, also known as Alberto Ventori, was implicated – wrongly so as it turned out. The newspaper reported that the bodies of 22 year old Lelfa De-Regibus and 26 year old Maria Accornere were found in a quarry, bound with wire and covered by a blanket. Venter did have a passionate four month affair with one of the women, Maria Accornere, who was described in the newspaper report as an “adventurous type” as she had done four months prison time for theft in the last stages of the war and was now evading the law for a second offence – according to the report.<sup>48</sup>

The second woman, Lelfa De-Regibus had apparently been living a “rather a free life” while her husband was interned in France. According to the official translation of the article, “she did not reject the courtings of those belonging to the Black Brigade and the Germans and after liberation was seen on many occasions in the company of South African soldiers”. On 29 August 1945, the women left for Lake Maggiore – ostensibly to meet with Private Venter who had written on 28 August: “Maria, I need to know when you are coming here, because you told me you wanted to come with me and you liked me a lot...I am very sad because I am sleeping badly since I no longer sleep on a bed but on the ground, and without you, but I am pleased because now you will come and I need you with me.”<sup>49</sup>

It was established that the two women did go to visit Private Venter and another “Q” Services soldier in Porto Valtravaglia and were there at the time of the alleged murder. Clearly, the two bodies were not of the women named in the article and the South Africans had nothing to do with the case. It was a simply “outrageous journalism” and although a retraction was published the very next day, Private Venter felt his name had been slandered and the military authorities were also outraged at the negative publicity. Venter was advised by a legal officer that he had no leg to stand on because the negative publicity was as a result of his own indiscretion. The newspaper came close to being suspended but got off with the retraction and an apology.<sup>50</sup>

#### **f) Crimes against prisoners of war**

The procedure for the handling of POWs was regulated by standing orders to the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div. Certain items such as maps and documents found on prisoners were to be handed in. Compasses, blades and items which could assist him in escape or committing sabotage were confiscated but it was forbidden to remove private property from any POW – whether

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<sup>47</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 647, RNC, 20-29 August 1945.

<sup>48</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 168, Official translation of article in “Corriere d’Informazione” 7/10/1945.

<sup>49</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 168, Official translation of article in “Corriere d’Informazione” 7/10/1945.

<sup>50</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 168, Military Police Report, 11/9/1945; SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 168, Letter from Regional Publicity Officer to HQ 2 District CMF 15/10/1945; SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 168, Official translation of article in “Corriere D’Informazione” on 7/9/1945.

directly or by way of exchange. Police guards were instructed not to show any signs of friendliness but physical violence or ill treatment of prisoners was strictly forbidden.<sup>51</sup>

No account was found in the literature of South Africans perpetrating atrocities. Even when Eric Axelson published his daily log as *A year in Italy*, he omitted a story which was related to him by a SAPA photographer. The photographer (Sergeant Cöhn) said he had an argument with Lieutenant-Colonel Brits just after the Battle of Finale. Cöhn related how about twelve hours after the battle was decided, there were still groups of enemy holding out, because (they told him later) they would be shot if they surrendered. An SSB sergeant standing close to Cöhn, was shot by a sniper, and Cöhn called out in German, telling them to surrender. The two Germans, thinking he was one of them, revealed themselves to him. After Cöhn assured them they would not be shot if they surrendered, they surrendered to him. Both Germans were wounded. They were taken to the RAP [Regimental Aid Post], and there they received medical attention. Lieutenant-Colonel Brits heard of the death of his sergeant. He asked Cöhn to ask the Germans which one had shot the sergeant. One of the prisoners said that he had. The colonel ordered him to be taken outside and shot. Cöhn and the MO objected, but the prisoner was taken outside, and shot by a friend of the sergeant's, with a revolver.<sup>52</sup> Axelson's original log is stored in the military archives and in other aspects, is almost identical to the published version. This story is corroborated by the fact that there was an SSB Sergeant killed on 24 April. He was Sgt R. Moyes, a 37 year old Rhodesian volunteer.

This is the only known incident of a German prisoner being shot in cold blood although Hodgson admitted to shooting the enemy in retaliation for white flag outrages and other infractions of the rules of war in the heat of battle – as will be revealed in Chapter 10 below.<sup>53</sup>

#### **g) Enforcement**

Since the army was operating in a foreign country where the legal system was different to that of South Africa, and civilian courts were not appropriate or available, it was necessary for the army to carry with it, its own legal system just as it carried its own supplies and equipment.<sup>54</sup> Disciplinary matters were dealt with by the various units and only cases of exceptional gravity were referred to the divisional HQ. Defending and prosecuting officers were in short supply but units would help each other out.<sup>55</sup> Many of those who formed part of courts martial or courts of enquiry were lawyers in civilian life and include some well-known names in legal circles. All officers had to be fully capable of taking their place as a member of a court.<sup>56</sup>

Because of a shortage of manpower, the military police preferred not to be used in a static role on guard duties at car parks, canteens, garrison HQs or officer's hotels. They were also instructed not to get involved in maintaining order among the civilian population except when Allied service personnel or WD property were involved.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 152, Standing Orders, 19/4/1944, 6 SA Armd Div Standing Orders for N.C.C.'s, CMF, performing P.O.W. Guard Duties 19/4/1944.

<sup>52</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 599, Recording Officer, Daily log, 9/5/1945.

<sup>53</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 14/7/1944.

<sup>54</sup> C.D. Bryant, *Khaki-collar crime*, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 159, Discipline, Rear 6 SA Armd Div, 13/7/1944.

<sup>56</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 168, File JA 1/3, Minor offence reports, 14/6/1943; SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 168, File JA 1/3, Courts Martial, from GOC, 10/5/1943.

<sup>57</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 153, APM, Initial organization of police duties in large towns.

Other responsibilities of the police were to apprehend absentees who could be classified as short term or long term absentees. The former could usually be rounded up in canteens or transit camps, but the latter were usually arrested in road blocks when gravitating to the towns. Like the Bobby on the beat, the military policeman had to be able to give directions to the “public”.<sup>58</sup>

The Military Police (MPs) who were responsible for enforcing discipline were themselves known to be involved in criminal activity. A few days before the end of the war, in the vicinity of Padua near Venice, Axelson noticed that the MPs were most active in the looting. They were “in a state of considerable intoxication”, they took all valuables off the POWs, and frisked passing civilians, “calmly annexing their money”. The matter was reported but nothing was done about it. Axelson also suspected an MP of siphoning petrol out of his petrol tank before the long drive to Milan.<sup>59</sup>

Regular troops were also employed in a law-enforcement role, particularly in preventing goods from France from reaching the black market. Counter-smuggling road blocks were set up all along the French-Italian border. Some smugglers were caught and among them were some American soldiers and civil police. An American truck driver was stopped at a South African check point and forty litres of olive oil was confiscated. One American officer refused to have his Italian girlfriends searched and was consequently turned back. Italian civilians were so desperate for olive oil that they were “beginning to trade on their sex by secreting quantities of olive oil in various intimate parts of their anatomy”.<sup>60</sup> A car which ran a road-block was shot up and the driver wounded in the foot. The vehicle was immobilized and was found to have special fixtures for carrying olive oil. Soap was also being smuggled and it was found that not every apparently pregnant woman passing through road-blocks was indeed pregnant.<sup>61</sup>

In the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division, the military disciplinary code (MDC) was harshly applied. General Poole’s personal instruction to all officers was to apply sentences which would act as a deterrent to others. A stricter sentence was preferable to a more lenient sentence, because, if the convening officer determined that the sentence was too harsh, he had the power to commute or mitigate the sentence – but could do nothing if he felt that the sentence did not sufficiently punish the offender for the crime committed.<sup>62</sup> The provost ran punishment centres at Rome, Florence, Prato, Bari and Jesi. During February 1945, 135 Europeans and 129 Non-Europeans, were admitted to punishment centres.<sup>63</sup>

#### **h) Redress of grievances**

As far as it is possible for the military, the 6<sup>th</sup> Division was a democratic organization. If any person felt that he had been unfairly treated, he could air his grievances – through the right channels. It was not uncommon for a soldier to have recourse to Section 43 of the MDC for the injustice of not being given the opportunity of serving in the front line. The examples

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<sup>58</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 153, APM, Initial organization of police duties in large towns.

<sup>59</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, pp. 218-221.

<sup>60</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 646, RNC, 20-30 July 1945.

<sup>61</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 646, RNC, 20-30 July 1945.

<sup>62</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 168, File JA 1/3, Minor offence reports, 14 June 1943; SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 168, File JA 1/3, Courts Martial, from GOC, 10/5/1943.

<sup>63</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

below are a further illustration of the organizational culture as well as the high standards expected from officers in particular.

Matters concerning rank and pay were also often raised. Sometimes the two issues were linked as in the case of Trooper Loxton who had reverted from commissioned rank to trooper in order to serve with the 6<sup>th</sup> Division. Loxton had served in East Africa and North Africa, after which he returned to his job as a journalist at the *Cape Argus*. He re-attested on 19 June 1944 at the age of 39, and being too old to serve in an armoured regiment, found himself as a Trooper in the reserve group. His appeal to have his rank restored was favourably considered.<sup>64</sup>

During the rest period at Lucca in March 1945, Captain Vaughan was informed by his CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Gordon Gray, that he would shortly be promoted to battery commander of 15/56 Battery – the position which had been temporarily filled by him since January. However, when Lieutenant-Colonel Gordon Gray went to hospital and was replaced by Major H. Greenwood, the appointment was turned down. Reasons given were that although he had been an efficient troop commander and battery captain, he was not popular with the officers of the battery and his appointment was “not practical”. The commander of the artillery (CRA), Brigadier J.N. Bierman, gave the explanation that Lieutenant-Colonel Gordon Gray’s recommendation was just that, and any appointment above the rank of Captain was made by the general officer commanding (GOC). The trial period had apparently shown him to be a “square peg in a round hole” and Captain Vaughan was advised that he could take the matter to a higher authority. In the end, Captain Vaughan considered that the matter was handled with “prompt, considerate explanation by the CRA” and because of the ongoing operations, it was “not a suitable time for the consideration of unimportant applications”.<sup>65</sup>

The only redress which was sought by Lieutenant S. van Deventer, was to clear his name. He had been removed from his post as a troop leader in the SSB and was described as “an officer in whom no confidence can be placed in action”. In an adverse report, he had been criticized as being an “excitable type”, too familiar with his men and unable to control his troop. Once, while at Stanco, in an infantry role, he had been sent out on night patrol, he had lost radio contact and did not provide the required information.

Van Deventer was told by the squadron commander that his written report was “worth nothing”. In his defence, he explained how he had consistently requested that he be given an opportunity to prove himself in battle. On one occasion, on 27 July 1944, his tank had been knocked out by anti-tank fire. On another occasion, he took the leading tank “hoping to get the chance to which [he] was looking forward but resistance was poor and nothing exciting happened”. He admitted that he had been “excited” once. Not because he was in trouble, but men were attacked by the enemy and reinforcements under Major Lindsay’s command were awfully slow in arriving. Van Deventer was operating the wireless at the time and knew the danger the men were in. Colonel Brits had made the request that Van Deventer be employed in another branch of the service – preferably clerical. In a classic “Papa” Brits type comment,

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<sup>64</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 180, File AQ 9/1, Redress of wrongs, Tpr A.G. Loxton, 6/3/1945.

<sup>65</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 180, File AQ 9/1, Redress of wrongs, 7/23 Med Rgt Capt K.V. Vaughan, 13/4/1945.

the colonel had said: “Van Deventer, you are young and have enough brains, do not let your brains run away with you.”<sup>66</sup>

### i) The Helwan Riots

In July 1945, the GOC had expressed his satisfaction that behaviour of the troops in the Middle East was exemplary – except for saluting: “Apparently a number of men have decided that they will salute only officers of the 6<sup>th</sup> Div and none other. Such small-mindedness must be checked as it is not in keeping with our tradition.”<sup>67</sup> Yet barely a month later, the division was shocked by the Helwan riots.

It was mainly repatriation problems which gave rise to the ugly riot in the Helwan transit camp outside Cairo on 20 August 1945. In this camp, which was designed to accommodate 5,000 men, there were now 9,000 crammed forty or fifty into a bungalow designed to take twenty five. Because there were only fourteen mess halls (22 were required) men would queue all day to get a place at the table. The quality of food had declined since Egyptian cooks had been employed and the standard of discipline had also slipped. With a total lack of consideration, groups who had been together for years, were split up at the depot, first alphabetically according to surnames and then according to their categories. Adding insult to injury, the 26 July edition of the *Springbok* carried a statement from the Director General of Demobilization (DGD) which indicated that his organization was unable to cope with the situation at home. He called for 500 volunteers who would be taken home as top priority to assist in the demobilization process. This created the impression that people “back home” were not interested in the welfare of the returning troops.<sup>68</sup>

The cinemas at South African reserve and transit depot (Helwan) were the flash points. Films were shown continuously, and some people would simply remain sitting until the next show began, while others vainly waited their turn. Fifteen minutes after the start of a film at the Colosseum theatre, someone stood up and shouted that there would be a meeting at 2130 hrs at the Dooley Briscoe Memorial Ground. Bottles started flying and an Egyptian shop outside the cinema was looted. A fire was then started one and a half kilometres away when the canvas and rush walls of the Pall Mall open air theatre were set alight. The soldiers also set fire to one of their own messes and looted the NAAFI store. When the Helwan Fire Brigade arrived to put out the fire, the hoses were cut. An appeal was made to the New Zealand Fire Brigade at Maadi, but their hoses were also cut. Apparently the Kiwis thought it was a big joke and sided with the rioters. Next, the Royal Air Force and Tura Fire Brigades came to their assistance and by 2315 hrs, the fires were brought under control. By destroying two cinemas and other facilities, the men had made their lot temporarily harder.<sup>69</sup>

Colonel E.P. Hartshorn was sent to Helwan to investigate the matter. He was satisfied with the explanation that the event was triggered by the exploitation of the troops by one Mr Shafta who had the concession to operate the open air theatres and a number of shops. Apparently, the cinema was set alight as a diversion and when Shafta's employees ran to put out the fire, the shops were broken into and robbed of the days takings. Hartshorn was given

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<sup>66</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 180, File AQ 9/1, Redress of wrongs, Adverse Report, Lt T.I.S. van Deventer, December 1944.

<sup>67</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 171, Discipline, 6 SA Armd Div troops in Union, HQ SA Armd Div, UDF, CMF, 23/7/1945.

<sup>68</sup> S. Webster, The Helwan riots: August 1945, *Journal of Military History* 12(3), 2002.

<sup>69</sup> S. Webster, The Helwan riots: August 1945, *Journal of Military History* 12(3), 2002.

the assurance that it was “just a bit of justifiable burglary...nothing more criminal than over-exuberance on the part of the troops”, and the UDF paid £11,000 to Mr Shafta who at first claimed £50,000.<sup>70</sup>

A court of enquiry implicated the Springbok Legion. The riot had taken place while a delegation from the Springbok Legion was in Helwan. Private R. Levin, a Springbok Legion organizer, was the main speaker on the night. However the military authorities did not press the Legion’s role in the rioting. In a much more recent post-mortem, Neil Roos came to the conclusion that the rioting was due to the white troop’s understanding of social justice and the breach of the social contract implicit in the act of volunteering.<sup>71</sup>

The South African government was horrified at the negative publicity, and General Poole flew in from Italy to address the troops. Some changes were made, including the installation of a public address system to keep everybody up to date of the latest news thereby preventing the spread of rumours. Outdoor cinema shows would be free and a tea garden was established at the swimming pool.<sup>72</sup> It is unlikely that such cosmetic changes would have had much effect since according to Sampie de Wet, the UDFI Club, “Ouma’s Club”, in Cairo was superior to anything for ORs in Rome or Florence.<sup>73</sup>

On hearing the news of the riots, General Poole, although uncertain if any 6<sup>th</sup> Division personnel had been involved, stated that the “revulsion of feeling which is the inevitable outcome of wholesale indiscipline, whether [organized] or not, is utterly repugnant to an honourable body of soldiers”. All unit commanders were instructed to inform the men of the correct method of seeking redress for considered “wrongs” and to instil in them pride in their unit and their country.<sup>74</sup>

For the sake of expediency, disciplinary issues were discussed in this chapter according to the nature of the crimes which typically occur in a military environment. For example: crimes against person, performance or property. This might be appropriate for military authorities but the ordinary soldier would have made the distinction according to the punishment involved. Major crime was rare in the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division and the punishment was harsh. The division prided itself on its high standard of discipline although in any military organization, a certain amount of deviation was tolerated – especially crimes against property or persons.<sup>75</sup> Some minor crimes such as “foraging” were overlooked while anyone could fall foul of dress regulations. Discipline can be distinguished from vice in that vice did not necessarily contravene the Military Disciplinary Code (MDC) and therefore did not necessarily invite sanction.

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<sup>70</sup> E.P. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk*, p. 206.

<sup>71</sup> N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and social injustice*, pp. 96-99.

<sup>72</sup> S. Webster, The Helwan riots: August 1945, *Journal of Military History* 12(3), 2002.

<sup>73</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, pp. 237-240.

<sup>74</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 578, HQ SAA 6 SA Arms Div, Discipline 21/8/1945.

<sup>75</sup> C.D. Bryant, *Khaki-collar crime*, p. 67.

## CHAPTER 7: VICE

The slogan of the South African Medical Services was VINO -VENUS – VD, which drew attention to the link between alcohol, licentious sex and venereal disease.<sup>1</sup> This catchy slogan provides a useful framework for the analysis of some unspoken aspects of life which prevailed in the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division.

### a) **Vino**

The general perception is that soldiers are heavy drinkers. According to Bryant, drinking is part of the culture of the military, and even the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division was tolerant of heavy drinking provided that a man would not incapacitate himself or become unruly. Drinking was a way of life and part of the masculine mystique.<sup>2</sup> While on leave in Rome in August 1944, Douglas Baker, who was obviously a deep thinker, wrote in his diary: "At its best alcohol smothers out and makes acceptable the inequalities of rank and authority, the atrociousness of human conduct, the challenges to courage, the grief of bereavement, the imposition of chastity and the tolerance of boredom and exhaustion. At its worst alcohol aggravates all these with a debasement of personality that constitutes outrage even to the ego."<sup>3</sup>

In the theatre of war, drinking was quite acceptable provided that it did not interfere with one's duties but at Khatatba, in Egypt, women and alcohol were scarce commodities and their procurement was not only illegal but sometimes fatal. On 20 December 1943, Trooper J.W. Davidson allegedly took an armoured car from the motor pool, picked up his friend, Trooper A.L. Whittle, and went for a joy-ride to a watering hole called "Half-Way-House". After getting very drunk they drove to Bir Victoria near Wadi Naturn. The armoured car bumped into a hut and the men got out, roughed up a security guard and according to one witness, demanded "bints". The evidence relates that a bottle of "Zibib" Brandy was acquired and then things become blurred. The military and civil police were called and by the time they arrived, Trooper Davidson was dead, his skull crushed by the back wheel of the armoured car. It is not clear how or when it happened but an autopsy was carried out and Trooper Whittle was acquitted of culpable homicide at a subsequent court of enquiry.<sup>4</sup>

In Italy, alcohol was always available, either at a cheap price or as part of the ration. The price of alcohol varied according to availability, quality and source. In Altamura in April 1944, the cost of liquor in military-approved establishments was 15 Lire per bottle of ordinary red wine (40 Lire for special wine). Vermouth was 6 Lire per bottle and by comparison, coffee cost 5 Lire per cup. By the end of the war, at the Pretoria Regiment canteen, the price of vermouth had risen to 15 Lire per bottle – still cheap compared to cognac, rum and gin which cost 25 Lire.<sup>5</sup>

In the destroyed villages, troops looked for (and usually found) a quantity of exotic liquors in the cellars of deserted houses. After capturing the town of Acquaviva, the RNC took a break behind the lines, from where Hodgson described living in a beautiful country manor which

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<sup>1</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, Medical Administrative Instruction, 16 May 1945, ADMS 6 SA Armd Div, CMF.

<sup>2</sup> C.D. Bryant, *Khaki-collar crime*, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 439.

<sup>4</sup> SADDCC, Medical file, Tpr J.W. Davidson 226046V, Proceedings of a court of enquiry held at Khatatba.

<sup>5</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 624, 1/6 Fd Rgt, DRO 87/44, 21/4/1944.

belonged to “a count or something like that”. The plush furniture was all intact and for those who had a liking for wine (unlike Hodgson), the cellar was full of casks.<sup>6</sup> During the early part of the campaign at least, Hodgson and his immediate circle appear to have been relatively abstemious although he pointed out that others generally were not:

...there is plenty of cheap wine here, and when the opportunity arises the chaps give it a bit of a flap. Occasionally I have a glass of wine but I prefer my beer much more and will always stick to it...In fact in our whole platoon there are very few chaps who drink and those who do, do it properly so we do not experience any drunkenness as one so often finds in the army.<sup>7</sup>

In a routine order issued on 16 July, while the division was in the heart of Chianti country, the danger of buying wine from unauthorized sources was stressed. This danger was evidenced by the recent death of a member of the division who bought wine from a private house.<sup>8</sup> South Africans were warned about poisoned alcohol. This was a danger in all theatres. The US Army Medical Corps found that during the period October 1944 to June 1945 there were more deaths in the European theatre due to a single agent, alcohol poisoning, than to acute communicable disease. In Florence at 107 SA General Hospital there were two cases of urinary suppression due to cortical necrosis, probably produced by local Italian spirits or wines.<sup>9</sup> In the week after the war ended, there were three admissions for “acute alcoholism”, whereas there had been none the week before.<sup>10</sup>

One way of overcoming the problem of toxic liquor was to supply all officers and NCOs a ration – whether they wanted it or not.<sup>11</sup> Axelson wrote that on 17 July 1944, NAAFI supplies had arrived and there was a half bottle of whisky, half bottle of gin for all of the rank of sergeant and above. The quantity, though small, “can for a short time alter one’s outlook on the war. It arrives unexpectedly and for a while inspires the camp.”<sup>12</sup> Enlisted men were less fortunate and while in Egypt, Hodgson had written that the ration of “Chandlers” beer was a treat, but as the saying went, it was a matter of “A quart per week per man per-haps”.<sup>13</sup> In April 1945, Hodgson, now a corporal, was getting a weekly ration of Canadian beer. He would swap his cigarettes with his sergeant and thereby end up with six pints a week.<sup>14</sup> Although rare, there is evidence of enlisted men receiving a brandy issue.<sup>15</sup> Bourhill mentioned receiving a ration of three bottles of Canadian beer which tasted nice enough but had no effect on the mind. However, it seems that the alcohol content was adequate, judging from the general tone of the letter, and the amicable feelings towards everybody – even the enemy.<sup>16</sup> Being part of the American Fifth Army, it is likely that this was in fact the 3.2 per cent alcohol beer which was commonly rationed to the troops.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 1/7/1944.

<sup>7</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 17/5/1944.

<sup>8</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Routine Order 32/44, 16/7/1944.

<sup>9</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>10</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, Medical Administrative Instruction, 16/5/1945, ADMS 6 SA Armd Div, CMF.

<sup>11</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>12</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 3/10/1943.

<sup>14</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 6/4/1945.

<sup>15</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, 12/2/1945.

<sup>16</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 16/11/1944.

<sup>17</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 103.





FIGURE 23: Wine being rationed at Acquafondata. Picture captioned “Cassino vino”.  
 FROM: James Bourhill Collection.

In the winter line, alcohol was not as plentiful as it had been in Chianti although it could usually be obtained one way or another. Shortly before Christmas, Johnston went to Castiglione to fetch alcohol. When he returned to his troop empty handed, there was “a bit of a row”. In this case, there was added stress because the troop had been shelled that night while Johnston was having “chestnuts and brandy in front of a fire”. On Christmas Eve, his diary states, he was having a party in Montepiano to the rear of Castiglione, with “much booze”.<sup>18</sup> After a spell in a forward area in the winter line, Hodgson told of a drinking session where he and his comrades sat in a circle passing bottles of alcohol around. Every man took a swig and passed it along. When that bottle was finished, another bottle of whatever was available went around. In a 2008 interview, Hodgson confessed that he passed out in the snow that night but somehow survived the cold.<sup>19</sup>

During periods of extreme cold or when on night duty, commanders could at their discretion, not as a daily routine, issue a tot of rum or a hot drink of cocoa or tea. The rum issue was not intended as a comfort but as a stimulant in case of extreme fatigue. Rum was not to be given to men already so wet and cold that only rest and shelter could revive them. Those who had received the rum ration were to be kept warm and dry thereafter.<sup>20</sup> Exposure to the elements as well as the violence could induce a powerful craving. From his cold, wet “casa” in Poggio above Grizzana, after a night under shelling, on 17 October 1944, Captain H.H.H. Biermann wrote to a friend behind the lines: “If there is anything in the line of booze on issue or to buy, please ask the Fwd Press Officer/s to keep some for me. I really feel like a drink, in fact like several.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, 19/12/1944.

<sup>19</sup> J.F. Bourhill, *Come back to Portofino*, p. 353.

<sup>20</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 1. Appendix “A” to 6 SA Armd Div. Routine orders 34 (CMF) 13/11/1944.

<sup>21</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Letter from Capt H.H.H. Biermann, military observer attached to 12 SA Bde, to the war correspondent Harry O’Connor, 17/10/1944.

Men of all nationalities used alcohol to cope with mental and physical pain of shelling. An American at Anzio found that “a slug of the old vino” taken before retiring was sufficient to provide a “catacomb of courage for the shellings of the night”.<sup>22</sup> Relating his experiences at the Battle of Monte Catarelto, a Scots Guardsman told Axelson that: “The Germans were doped. They wandered around in the fire, hands in their pockets singing, they were doped.”<sup>23</sup> There were other instances such as at Monte Stanco where the Germans were suspected of being doped or drugged. It is more likely that it was the courage of the SS that made them seem doped but many different types of drugs were available in the theatre of war. Drugs were of sufficient concern for the division to issue an order stating that: “The possession of hashish, opium, cocaine, or any drug in any form by any member of the UDF is strictly prohibited.”<sup>24</sup> It cannot be said whether or not alcohol enhanced the fighting capability of the men but it is worth noting that over the festive season, those in the front line were advised not to get drunk in case of an attack.<sup>25</sup>

As the discussion on discipline in the previous chapter showed, alcohol was to blame for many acts of disorderliness – especially crimes against person. Without doubt, alcohol was also to blame for many of the road accidents which occurred, especially after the cessation of hostilities. There was also a link between alcohol and sexually transmitted disease. According to Bryant, alcohol served the function of blunting the sex drive, acting as a type of sexual anaesthetic. It also made prostituted sex more acceptable. The Americans were not opposed to prostituted sex and in fact ran military brothels.<sup>26</sup> The South Africans however, took a dim view of it and made a link between alcohol and VD in their “Vino – Venus – VD” campaign slogan.

## b) Venus

Victorian taboos still lingered in the 1940's. Sex before marriage was taboo as a social discourse but of course it happened. Young women who wanted to appear respectable played “hard to get”. Contraception was not reliable and pregnancy was a great fear. Regardless of the puritanical and hypocritical society, the basic needs of young people were being met in different ways. Magazines and the cinema, which was enormously popular, created a heightened textual and visual discourse about glamour and desire. Whether sexual behaviour changed during the war years is open to debate, but there was heightened apprehension about the behaviour of girls.<sup>27</sup>

South Africans in particular had been strictly brought-up and young school-leavers were painfully innocent. Although sex was an important part of their experience, few ever wrote about it. Consequently, it is necessary to draw inferences from international studies. Although carefully avoided in military history, the subject of masturbation and rampant libidos in a wartime situation is well documented in the more liberal international literature. Masturbation was frowned on by the military authorities but sometimes openly practiced.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 101.

<sup>23</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 129.

<sup>24</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 181, Standing Orders, Camp standing orders, UDF Adm HQ MEF.

<sup>25</sup> J.F. Bourhill, *Come back to Portofino*, p. 353.

<sup>26</sup> C.D. Bryant, *Khaki-collar crime*, pp. 174-176.

<sup>27</sup> S.O. Rose, Girls and GIs: Race sex and diplomacy in Second World War Britain. *The International History Review*, (19) 1, 1997, pp. 146-160.

<sup>28</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, pp. 110-114.

In a chapter entitled “Drinking too much, copulating too little”, Fussell discusses the sexual deprivation in a “bizarre context of male bonding with a vengeance”.<sup>29</sup> The average age in the U.S. Army during the Italian campaign was 26 years and there is no reason to believe that the composition of the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division was much different.<sup>30</sup> The wartime hedonism which existed in theatres of war and at home was considered by some forces to be good for morale – while others tried their best to control immorality.<sup>31</sup> Although the morality of South African troops appears to have been relatively high, the circumstances which existed in wartime Italy presented special temptations.

Statistics on sexual preferences suggest that homosexuality was more prevalent in the armed forces than in society as a whole.<sup>32</sup> However, this data would have included the navy and remote Atolls in the Pacific. The situation in wartime Italy was a different matter altogether. Italian girls were plentiful and uninhibited, while food was scarce – a combination which presented unlimited opportunity for sex. Homosexuality was especially taboo and apart from the abovementioned instances and in accounts of POW camps, it is virtually absent from the literature. There are examples where homosexuality was acknowledged and tolerated by career officers to whom nothing was surprising in the army.<sup>33</sup> Whereas some homosexuals went to extreme lengths to hide their sexuality, even suicide, Douglas Baker revealed an episode where he allowed a friend to “explore”.<sup>34</sup>

Michael Howard, who became a history professor later in life, was a captain in the Coldstream Guards (attached to the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div) and won the Military Cross (MC), was homosexual. According to a colleague, B.H. Reid, he never tried to conceal it and because of this “operated on the fringes”. It can be assumed that even during the war he was openly gay because he was treated by the establishment “with a certain reserve”.<sup>35</sup>

Apparently the Shepherds Hotel in Cairo, which was so familiar to Allied military and diplomatic officers, (including the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division) was a rendezvous for a wide circle of homosexual elite. It was also a favourite watering hole for the elite Long Range Desert Group (LRDG). According to Costello, Cairo and Alexandria were “meccas of sexual adventure for servicemen of all proclivities. In back streets, Arab boys lurked who were willing to provide for the sexual satisfaction of many a serviceman whose inhibitions about homosexuality were not as great as their fear of catching venereal disease from a Cariene tart”.<sup>36</sup>

More than anything, South African soldiers craved the company of South African women and the few nurses, Women’s Army Auxillary Services (Waasies) and South African Woman’s Auxiliary Services (SAWAS) were in great demand whenever there was an organized dance. Inevitably, the women were vastly outnumbered. The American equivalent of the WAAS was the WAAC. A survey found that forty per cent of unmarried WAACs were celibate, fifty five

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<sup>29</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 114.

<sup>30</sup> R. Atkinson, *The day of battle*, p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, p. 293.

<sup>32</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, pp. 155-156.

<sup>33</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, pp. 160-163; P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 109.

<sup>34</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> B.H. Reid, Michael Howard and the evolution of modern war studies, *The Journal of Military History* 73 (3) 2009, p. 874.

<sup>36</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, p. 169.

per cent were sexually active on occasion and five per cent were promiscuous.<sup>37</sup> The main source of female company was from the nursing profession.

Inevitably, many soldiers (mainly officers) married nurses. The first wedding reception to be held at the Minerva Hotel was that of Lieutenant-Colonel Harpur and Nursing Sister Thelma Trew of Pietermaritzburg.<sup>38</sup> Pat Lyster, the Springbok winger now promoted to captain, also married a Pietermaritzburg lass, who was a Nursing Sister from 108 SA General Hospital. The wedding took place in December at the Methodist Church in Rome. Best Man was Captain P.J. Frank. The men were dressed in winter battledress and the wedding cake was cut with a bayonet.<sup>39</sup> *La Stella d'Oro* of 15 July reported on the marriage of Lieutenant George Shaw of Pretoria Regiment to Beth Lategan of 107 General Hospital. Both were in uniform. The ceremony took place at the Holy Trinity Church in Florence and from there the wedding party went back to a reception at their favourite watering hole, the Roma Hotel. Lieutenant N.R. Thompson, MC (Military Cross as opposed to Master of Ceremonies) was Best Man, the bridesmaid was M. Hopwood.<sup>40</sup>

It has been said that one in three wartime marriages was not worth saving. Hasty embarkation marriages often ended up on the rocks, although due to the morality of the time, some chose to live with their mistakes.<sup>41</sup> A long term study of Californian university students and recent graduates who joined the American armed forces showed that indeed, marriages were at greater risk during the war years. In 1946, there was a spike in divorces. Marriages established during the war were however no more likely to dissolve than marriages begun at other times. It appears therefore that it was the long separation rather than the lack of courtship which caused the problems. Couples who wed after the war had begun could better anticipate the stresses than those who had been married in a time of peace. The risk of divorce was also greater among those who enlisted relatively late in life and those who experienced combat. Older men were more likely to feel the social costs of their service.<sup>42</sup>

During December 1944, the military authorities in Rome intervened in a love triangle, showing that the army did have a heart. Lieutenant B.L. Goldsworthy of the Pretoria Regiment had recently married an eighteen year old WAAS who was serving with the entertainment group, "The Sundowners". When it was discovered that she was having an affair with a certain Sergeant Choen, the leader of "The Sundowners", Mrs Mellville, made a plea to Goldsworthy's commanding officer to grant him fourteen days special leave so that the pair could spend fourteen days together in Rome in an attempt to save the marriage.<sup>43</sup> The outcome of the affair is unknown but it is known Choen was removed from his unit and Goldsworthy's superiors in the Pretoria Regiment did grant him leave to travel to Rome.

Although the men may have craved the company of South African girls, many Italian women were sensuous and also deprived. Furthermore, the male Italian population had been much depleted by the war and a large number were in South African POW camps. It is not

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<sup>37</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, p. 89.

<sup>38</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 726 No 1 UDF Officer's Rest Camp CMF, 13-28 February 1945.

<sup>39</sup> E.Goetzsche, *The official Natal Mounted Rifles history*, p. 279; SADDDC, Photographic section, C53.

<sup>40</sup> *La Stella D'Oro*, 7, p. 8, 5/7/1945, Ditsong National Museum of Military History, B 412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Arm'd Div.

<sup>41</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, p. 360.

<sup>42</sup> E.K. Pavalko & G.H. Elder, World War II and divorce: A life course perspective, *American Journal of Sociology* (95) 5, 1990, pp. 1213-1234.

<sup>43</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 177, File AQ/317, Private Correspondence GOC, Letter to Col Ollemans from GOC, December 1944.

surprising therefore that many a South African soldier returned home with fond memories and romantic stories. When the division was halted south of the Arno, Gunner Peter Johnston found time to have a quick fling with a girl who came to do his laundry. “Lovely girl Guilietta” he wrote in his diary, “beautiful hair and face, fine figure and complexion, wonderful teeth. Quite a long chat and coffee. Must see her again”. The pair managed to get together a number of times and on one occasion a dance was organized but there were too many soldiers there for Johnston’s liking. Just before moving out, Johnston walked the three or so kilometres up to Monterappoli to see her. It was “a very interesting session”, the “Jerries bombed and strafed nearby”. It seemed to him that the girl was in love but “Pa was too cautious”.<sup>44</sup>

It was while on leave and during the post war period that enlisted men found time for romance with Italian girls. Dances were held on a regular basis and these were well attended by local girls. Food was the main attraction and the Italian men were understandably resentful. Hodgson described at length the preparations for a dance which he and his friends organized at Diano Marina. Although Hodgson claimed to have no time for Italians, he finally found a love interest. Three sisters from a well-to-do Milan family, more French than Italian, were holidaying on the Italian Riviera and Hodgson wrote volumes to his mother, describing this period as being a “milestone” in his life:

...these three girls were outstanding from the rest, mainly because they appeared alive and full of fun, always laughing, joking and romping around, which one does not find in the average Italian. When the dance came, I made a point of making their acquaintance, so from that day onward we used to spend a good deal of time together on the beach, which was very pleasant as I had not spent much time in female company since leaving Durban.<sup>45</sup>

Personal anecdotes of holiday romances at Rapallo are many, but one story which was published in *La Stella d’Oro* concerned an anonymous South African who lost his towel and found his love on a cold, drizzly day at the beach. While swimming, he noticed a female form step out of a bathing booth and take his towel. At first, ready to confront the thief, he found out that her name was Anna and she had simply brought his towel in from the rain. After that, they had a glorious swim together and then tea at the Albergo Savoia. Totally smitten and thinking marriage, the boy wrote: “Over that cup of tea, sprung a friendship and love entirely devoid of the nauseating sentimentality which I had grown accustomed to expect from Italian women.”<sup>46</sup> The outcome of the affair is unknown.

A few South African soldiers brought home more than just memories of romance, they brought home their Italian wives and children. The records show that newly married couples had to deal with more than the usual amount of red tape. Every member who contracted a marriage in Italy with a civilian female or service woman of other Allied forces, was required to obtain visas and passports for their wives.<sup>47</sup> Due to a lack of facilities, only a handful of the 49 men who had recently married Italian women and were waiting to be evacuated in December 1945, could be accommodated in Bari, the other wives would have to remain at their fixed abodes until departure. There were a further 24 couples who had married without

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<sup>44</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnson, personal diary, 28/8/1944-4/9/1944.

<sup>45</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 29/9/1945.

<sup>46</sup> *La Stella d’Oro*, 3 (4), p.8, Italian Riviera, 11/11/194, Ditsong National Museum of Military History, B 412 (68) 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div.

<sup>47</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/1/1/3, Move Order, 23/11/1945, Message from Rear 6 SA Armd Div.

approval and they were notified that the men would be evacuated in the normal way and that the Rear Div HQ would not take responsibility for the evacuation of their wives.<sup>48</sup>

In the formal application to marry, the applicant's commanding officer was required to make an assessment of the couple, their backgrounds, education, compatibility, religious differences and their ability to become useful, productive citizens of South Africa.<sup>49</sup> It can be assumed that a fair proportion of prospective wives had been engaged in prostitution of some sort.

Naples is an extreme example, however, it was estimated that out of a nubile female population of 150,000 in this city, about one third were engaged in prostitution. Apart from the professional prostitutes, so many women had lost their men folk that the only way to survive was by selling their bodies.<sup>50</sup> Mothers sometimes encouraged their daughters to pay for food in kind. Sampie de Wet believed that some of "our boys got very upset because when they were looking after trucks or cars [outside the Minerva Hotel in Rome], young Italian girls of fourteen or fifteen would offer to spend the night with them for a tin of bully beef."<sup>51</sup> After a girl of about thirteen offered herself to him for a tin of bully beef, a British officer wrote in his diary: "It was a revelation what hungry people will do".<sup>52</sup> Not all men were prepared to take advantage of the situation but Baker was more pragmatic:

Occasionally a woman would come back to the billets with a soldier and spend the afternoon alone with him. The event might only last half an hour...men being men, and soldiers being what they are, his friends would be invited to keep the kettle boiling and she would be willing to continue because more food and luxury items would be forthcoming and so on.<sup>53</sup>

Parker explains that months of close male company created a type of "stag night" license in many groups but not all succumbed, and those who did succumb, found that the reality of the situation was far from erotic. As has been mentioned, a venereal infection was the most likely outcome. For the Americans at least, there was no moral judgment.<sup>54</sup>

Prostitution was more prevalent in the Italian campaign, than in any other campaign in the Second World War, however from contemporary accounts, it seems that in Egypt, the sex industry was even more impersonal and sordid. The full range of services offered at an Alexandria brothel was described by Johnny Bosman in his unpublished memoirs. The charge for the company of a "pretty young maiden" in a private room was ten Ackers plus a tip of five Ackers. For anyone not desirous of indulging in sex, a special exhibition of five minutes duration would be put on for the group at three Ackers per head. The show turned out to consist of a poor rendition of belly dancing, followed by a fat naked woman who came into the "entertainment area" and asked one of the soldiers to lie next to her. On this occasion there were no takers.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/1/1/3, Move Order, Disposal – Personnel married in Italy, Rear SA Armd Div, 16/12/1945.

<sup>49</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol 3, Appendix "A" to Div RO 206, 2/4/ 1945.

<sup>50</sup> M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, pp. 217-221.

<sup>51</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 34.

<sup>52</sup> J. Swaab, *Field of fire, diary of a gunner officer*, p. 129.

<sup>53</sup> D.M.Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 402.

<sup>54</sup> M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, pp. 217-221.

<sup>55</sup> SADDDC, J. Bosman, Providence was my guide, p. 33.

If a soldier was young and innocent when he joined up, he was not the same person on his return. The men had grown used to a life of adventure, living in the now. Moral and social taboos had been broken and there was no way of restoring them. The changed attitudes were reflected in the post-war publications including *The naked and the dead*, *The young lions* and *From here to eternity*. These novels told the story of the ordinary foot soldier in his own explicit language and were appreciated by millions of ex-servicemen for “telling it as it was”. According to Costello, it was this type of writing which “prepared the public for the language necessary for a more open and explicit discussion...one of their main themes – the confrontation between human sexuality and man’s technological capacity for self destruction, was to become the focus of much contemporary literature”.<sup>56</sup> Thus were the seeds sown for the sexual revolution twenty years later. Costello believes that there is a connection between bold sexual talk and the deep-seated fear of death – illustrated by this verse from Jocelyn Brooke.<sup>57</sup>

Browned off with bints and boozing,  
 Sweating on news from home.  
 Bomb-happy and scared of losing,  
 This tent of flesh and bone.

### c) VD (venereal disease)

Sexually transmitted disease has been a curse for armies of occupation throughout history. Boredom and desperation have been the main ingredients in the toxic mix. Immediately following the invasion of Sicily, the Allies were confronted with the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases. Consequently, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division had its own medically certified brothel in Trapani under a supervising officer who was called “Madam”. A Sicilian prostitute cost 25 lire – the same price as a bottle of gin or one single egg.<sup>58</sup> While the Americans had a more liberal attitude towards prostitution, the British had a “morality squad” attached to civil police. The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division put all brothels out of bounds and the whole area would be out of bounds if it was purely a red light district.<sup>59</sup> Soon after landing in Italy, while at the base camp at Altamura, the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armd Div was issued a general order which contained dire warnings about the dangers of venereal disease:

In Italy, the VD sickness rate has been greater than the casualty rate. Italian women are causing as much damage as German men. At least four out of every five women here who will go with a soldier, are infected with gonorrhoea or syphilis or both. Many of them are suffering from a very virulent form of Gonorrhoea.

Uncured syphilis means insanity, heart disease, palsy, blindness, defective children, infected wives and results in inability to earn a living and enjoy life. Uncured gonorrhoea leads to damage and deformity to sex organs and to sterility.

All men are reminded that in the interests of the Div, of their wives and children, and of themselves, they MUST avoid infection. The risk of infection when going with any woman who offers herself in this country is nearly 100%.<sup>60</sup>

It appears that in the pursuit of morality, the anti-VD message got slightly confused. A medical administrative instruction to the division quotes an “experienced commanding

<sup>56</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, pp. 358-359.

<sup>57</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, p. 124.

<sup>58</sup> R. Atkinson, *The day of battle*, p. 175.

<sup>59</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 153, APM, Initial organization of police duties in large towns.

<sup>60</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 624, 1/6 Fd Rgt, D.R.O. 87/44, 22/4/1944.

officer” as having written “...it is my firm opinion that in a good unit there is practically no VD ...each CO must occupy his men when they are not actively working, since boredom is the chief reason for drunkenness and wantonness....they must educate their soldiers medically”.<sup>61</sup> To the contrary, some of the top fighting regiments of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division had the highest incidence of VD – even after the war had ended. During the period, 5 May 1945 to 16 June 1945, the top places went to the following units:

<u>Place</u>	<u>No. of cases</u>	<u>Unit</u>
1	28	WR/DLR
2	20	55 Coy QSC
3	19	ILH/KimR
3	19	59 Coy QSC
5	18	PAG (V)
5	18	NMR/SAAF
7	17	PR (PAO)
8	16	4/22 Fd Rgt
9	15	HQ Div Sigs
10	14	1 RNC
10	14	57 Coy QSC
12	13	1 SSB
13	12	FC/CTH
13	12	RDLI
13	12	1/11 A/Tk Rgt SAA

The rear echelon units, including the military police and even medics, had their share of infections. In 17<sup>th</sup> place was 20 Field Ambulance with five infections and 1/6 Fd Rgt was in 19<sup>th</sup> place with three infections.<sup>62</sup> As will be shown in Table V below, CC troops had the highest infection rate and these troops were scattered throughout all units. It was estimated that twenty per cent of all leave personnel who left 4 NE Leave and Transit Camp to return to their units, were infected with venereal disease (VD).<sup>63</sup>

The war in Italy ended on 5 May 1945 and there were five new VD infections for the week ending 5 May. The following week, (ending 12 May) there were 34 new cases of VD plus an increase in scabies and other skin infections. In the weeks following the cessation of hostilities, numbers of infections continued to rise with 70 fresh cases during the week ending 26 May, 106 for the week ending 9 June and 92 during the week ending 16 June 1945.<sup>64</sup> Hospital admissions for a typical week, expressed as a rate per 1,000 troops per day, were as follows:

<sup>61</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, Medical Administrative Instruction, 16/5/1945, ADMS 6 SA Armd Div, CMF.

<sup>62</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, Medical Administrative Instruction, 16/5/1945, ADMS 6 SA Armd Div, CMF.

<sup>63</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 726, 4 NE Leave and Transit Camp UDF, Standing Order 5/45 issued by Capt R.F. Morris, OC, 23/4/1945.

<sup>64</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 180, File AQ 13/9 (vol 4), Medical reports, monthly/weekly, Weekly Medical Report, No.109, 16/6/1945; SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 180, File AQ 13/9 (vol 4), Medical reports, monthly/weekly, Weekly Medical Report, No.108, 9/6/1945; SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 180, File AQ 13/9 (vol 4), Medical reports, monthly/weekly, Weekly Medical Report, No.106, 26/5/1945.



6 SA Armd Div	All Causes	Accidents	Fresh VD	Other Sick
UDF European	1.60	0.24	0.46	0.90
UDF Cape Corps	3.75	0.36	2.05	1.34
Total	1.76	0.25	0.57	0.94

At 107 SA General Hospital in Florence, a conference was called to discuss the incidence of VD which was of great concern in early 1945. During February there were 59 admissions for VD compared to 266 medical and 238 surgical. This is despite intensive anti-VD propaganda, rounding up prostitutes and placing certain localities out of bounds. According to the monthly report of the provost for the month of January 1945, the campaign against VD was being prosecuted with “unrelenting zeal”. Measures included carrying out brothel patrols. Men who were hospitalized with VD could expect a visit from a provost corporal, who might then ask them to accompany them to find and arrest the prostitute who got them infected. Thirteen women were arrested and tested in Prato, nine tested positive.<sup>66</sup>

Military police had been warned to exercise the greatest discretion when arresting suspected prostitutes. This came after a certain Anna Di Serio was escorted from Matera to Taranto for the purpose of a medical examination as an alleged prostitute. The examination revealed that she was “virgo intacta”. It was respectfully pointed out to the APM (Assistant Provost Marshal), that an accusation of this nature against innocent civilians can have serious repercussions.<sup>67</sup>

When the division was in the Milan area, nearly 90 per cent of women arrested on “suspicion of infection” were found to be suffering from syphilis. During the second week of June 1945, most of the VD infections (seventeen) had been contracted in Milan, twelve in Turin and eleven in Como. Although Lucca and Florence were frequented by men on leave, only one case originated in each of these centres. By August 1945, the cases in Milan, Monza and especially Turin came right down as the prostitutes were removed from the streets. The most common venereal disease was gonorrhoea.<sup>68</sup>

Men returning from leave were subjected to FFI (free from infection) inspections also known as “short-arm” inspections and in high risk areas such as Milan, weekly inspections were required.<sup>69</sup> A pamphlet entitled “do’s and don’ts - while on leave” strongly advised men not to risk venereal disease (VD), but if they had done so, they were urged to visit the clinic AT ONCE. “Don’t delay” it read, “safety is allied to speed.”<sup>70</sup>

When the prolonged stay in Italy became apparent, the anti-VD propaganda machine was cranked up. Cartoons and slogans as well as a booklet entitled *As you were – Soos jy was*

<sup>65</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 180, File AQ 13/9 (vol 4), Medical reports, monthly/weekly, Weekly Medical Report, No.109, 16/6/1945.

<sup>66</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>67</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 153, APM – Civilians, arrests etc. Letter from D.A.P.M. H.Q. 52 Area to APM 6 SA Armd Div, 28/4/1944.

<sup>68</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 180, File AQ 13/9 (vol 4), Medical reports, monthly/weekly, Weekly Medical Report, No.109, 16/6/1945.

<sup>69</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, Medical Administrative Instruction, 16/5/1945, ADMS 6 SA Armd Div, CMF.

<sup>70</sup> James Bourhill Collection, “Do’s and Don’ts – while on leave”.

emphasised the importance of going home to one's family free of venereal disease.<sup>71</sup> Re-integration into civil society and the interaction between soldiers and civilians will be the subject of the following chapter.

It may be that some consider the term “vice” to be a value judgement, but it is not intended to be so. Perhaps it is more of a legal term encompassing behaviour which a society designates as sphere of law enforcement. Almost certainly, the powers of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division took a dim view of the abovementioned behaviour – even if it was not frowned upon by the men themselves. The use of alcohol was part of army culture and, in United States Army, even prostitution was accepted. Morality became a disciplinary matter when it resulted in venereal disease of incapacitation through substance abuse.

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<sup>71</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, message from ADMS 6 SA Armd Div, CMF, 30/8/1945.

## CHAPTER 8: INTERFACE WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

Military historians have emphasised that war is more culture than politics and culture goes to the combat-heart of military history. The newest incarnation of military history has a cultural emphasis because military reality is culturally dependent.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the “war and society” school examines the nexus between armies and the societies which spawn them. It is therefore entirely relevant to examine the relationships between the men in the field and the civilian populations within the theatre of war and at home in South Africa. While examining the experience of Italy and attitudes towards the Italian people, reference is made to the geography of the country, its climate and cultures. Ultimately, the re-integration of returned soldiers into civil society would have political, economic and social implications.

### a) Citizen soldiers

#### i) Interaction with the home front

The volunteers in the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division were citizens first and soldiers second. From their communications with the home front it is evident that their interests and concerns are the same as those of the civilian. If anything, their military service made them better citizens and more appreciative and mature. There is no evidence of brutalization of ex-servicemen or an increase in crime rates when they returned. In fact, there is no evidence that soldiers returning from any war were more prone to violence. It appears from an American study that pre-service factors and early background accounted for the violent veteran stereotype. A number of ex-soldiers of different cultures said that their war-time experiences made them less aggressive.<sup>2</sup>

It was inevitable, however, that those trained in the science of killing and having succumbed to “habit, discipline, propaganda and mass psychosis”, had undergone certain changes as identified by Costello. The returning soldier was likely to personify “a myriad of vices, virtues and traits including profanity, vulgarity, chronic complaining, scepticism, irritability, brutality, respect for rights of colleagues, disrespect and envy of civilians, loneliness, hatred of monotony, a type of fatalism, despair, animalism....”.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the conditioning and communal living had brought about changes in everyone. At the height of the battles for Florence, while Hodgson’s own section was being decimated, and he longed for the simple pleasures of home life, he made the realization of how much he had grown:

One thing this war has done and that is to make me realize and appreciate the wonderful home that I have got to return to, and how much happier we will all be. You will see a difference in me in that you will find I am no longer the fussy and finicky little devil I used to be, and with a broadened outlook on life, so broadened that it would have taken at least ten years to accomplish the equivalent without this war, no longer with the main focus of my mind on work and play, but on the much more important things of life. I will still enjoy my sport and amusement just as much as before but they will not be uppermost in my mind.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J.A. Lynn, The embattled future of academic military history, *The Journal of Military History* 61 (4), 1997, pp. 87-89.

<sup>2</sup> J. Bourke, *An intimate history of killing*, pp. 356-360.

<sup>3</sup> J. Costello, *Love, sex and war, changing values*, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 30/7/1944.

Soldiers needed to hear news of everyday life at home as it provided a link with normality. Hodgson was kept fully up-to-date on his father's business and the family home.<sup>5</sup> Soldiers were kept abreast of the war effort on the home front. The sacrifices and shortages being experienced at home were made known in the press and in letters from home.<sup>6</sup>

Personal and business problems followed a soldier into the theatre of war ensuring continued interaction with the home front. On New Year's Eve in 1944, Sergeant L. Jeanes wrote a letter applying for compassionate leave. He was divorced from his wife in 1942 and within one month of the divorce, she had married a Royal Air Force mechanic. When Jeanes refused to allow her to take the children out of South Africa, she apparently intended abandoning them, having made vague arrangements for them to be looked after for a few weeks. After requesting that he be allowed to return to the Union to find a place for the children, Sergeant Jeanes stated that he would settle the matter as quickly as possible as he was "extremely desirous to remain with the division until the successful conclusion of hostilities".<sup>7</sup> Official reaction to his passionate plea is unknown.

If a soldier was concerned about the welfare or health of his family, they would be checked up on by a social welfare officer but business problems were more difficult to deal with.<sup>8</sup> During his four and a half years service, Trooper G. Oosthuysen had been running his business by proxy and now needed to take agricultural leave to rescue what was left of his farming operation situated six miles out of Carolina. His application was motivated by the fact that since September 1944, there had been no one to manage the farm. His sister who was a teacher in Carolina had problems of her own and the farm had been left in the hands of the labourers.<sup>9</sup>

Trooper Oosthuysen also mentioned that he was the executor in his brother's estate which consisted of a 400 morgen farm and 90 Aberdeen Angus cattle. The first "ossies" were about ready for sale. His brother was Lieutenant N.J. Oosthuysen of the RNC (son of Marthinus and Jacomina Oosthuysen of Carolina) who had been killed on 20 October 1944.<sup>10</sup> Once again, the outcome of the application is unknown.

In the final stages of the war, due to normal "wastage", there were many members of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division who found themselves back in the Union. Few of these were on compassionate leave, however, unless psychological casualties could be considered compassionate cases. Hodgson's father wrote that he was seeing "quite a few" fellows from the division on leave in the Union and speculated that they were at home "for the sole purpose of leave". It was explained to him, however, that they were all fellows who had been sent home with wounds, or on compassionate leave, "as there is no leave to the Union from here whatsoever".<sup>11</sup> Once

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<sup>5</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson & W.A. Hodgson, 19/1/1944; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 12/1/1944; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 28/10/1944; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 21/11/1943.

<sup>6</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 16/9/1944.

<sup>7</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 173, File HQ/14 Staff, letter from S/Sgt L. Jeanes to 6 SA Amd Div HQ, 31/12/1944.

<sup>8</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 208, Res Armd Rgt, Welfare 35309V Sgt Riley Capt J Martin UDF, Admn HQ, MEF – OC 6 SA Armd Div Res Gp, 23/5/1944.

<sup>9</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 173, File HQ/14 Staff, letter from Tpr G. Oosthuysen to OC HQ Sqn, 6 SA Amd Div, 6/11/1944.

<sup>10</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 173, File HQ/14 Staff, letter from Tpr G. Oosthuysen to OC HQ Sqn, 6 SA Amd Div, 6/11/1944.

<sup>11</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 24/3/1945.

a man had volunteered and taken the oath, he was there for the duration – although there were instances of compassionate leave. Theoretically a man was entitled to home leave once he had been out of the Union for three years.

“Home leave”, compassionate or otherwise, was considered an entitlement (especially by the married men) in the early days of the war. Baker in his blunt way wrote: “It wasn’t long before bleating wives and mothers began to call for their men in Egypt”. He opined that the issue of home leave caused “a hornet’s nest of discontent and resentment”. Captain Blamey of the NMR confirms that even Field Marshal Smuts approved of family men being sent home.<sup>12</sup> Glen Easton, being a married man in his late 30s, with two children and a farm to look after, was a prime candidate for home leave. His personnel record card shows that he was sent home from Egypt on compassionate leave from 14 November 1943 to 11 January 1944. This meant that he did not go to Italy with the main body of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division. On 26 June 1944, after spending six months with the Transvaal Scottish languishing at Hay Paddock, he was “attached out to unknown destinations” to become cannon fodder for the Natal Carbineers.<sup>13</sup>

It seems that many requests for compassionate leave were initiated by worried mothers. Hodgson’s mother spoke of using all her influence to get him out of the army citing his father’s ill health as a reason. Hodgson, however, was determined to see out the campaign with his comrades. In another instance of countervailing pressure, Mrs Ploos van Amstel of West Krugersdorp wrote to General Poole saying that she had recently been widowed and needed her son at home. She had never wanted him to join up and had given her consent although it broke her heart. She stated that her son’s health was “rather poorly” and “only God can know what sorrows I have to endure knowing that he is not well”.<sup>14</sup> In reply, General Poole personally wrote: “I regret that your son cannot be granted his discharge, as you request, until the war is over. We all wish him a safe return home in due course.”<sup>15</sup>

There was no end to the expectations which civilians had of the military. On the last day of the war in Italy, Mrs H. Grobler (a widow), from Mayfair, Johannesburg, wrote to General Poole to request permission for her fiancé, Private J.F. Schoeman (a widower), to get married by proxy. She was convinced that he would be sent to Burma as he had taken the new oath. She told the General about all her trials and tribulations, even mentioning her difficulty in getting a telephone installed. Then she requested that the general promote Private Schoeman to corporal. She wrote: “I’m sure he’s doing his best”.<sup>16</sup> The only possible outcome to this would have been a polite rejection.

Naturally, almost all interaction with South African civilians took place remotely by correspondence but it should be noted that there were some civilians serving in the war zone as war correspondents and journalists – some of them women. Politicians and welfare workers also visited Italy, thereby strengthening the ties with home. As has been explained in the section on reading matter, there were various newspapers and magazines in circulation which carried news of what was happening in the Union. These contained some personal

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<sup>12</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 102.

<sup>13</sup> SADDDC, Personnel files, Private G. Easton.

<sup>14</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 177, File AQ 3/17, Private Correspondence GOC. Mrs H.E. Ploos van Amstel – GOC, 25/7/1944.

<sup>15</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 177, File AQ 3/17, Private Correspondence GOC. GOC – Mrs H.E. Ploos van Amstel, 17/8/1944.

<sup>16</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 177, File AQ 3/17, Private Correspondence GOC. Mrs H. Grobler – GOC, 3/5/1945.

messages and hometown news. Likewise, when journalists visited the theatre of war, they provided a link between the soldiers and their families at home.

Two South African wartime publications which conveyed the images and news which the division wanted to communicate were *Outspan* and *Libertas*. Constance Stewart was a photo-journalist for *Libertas* and managed to get further forward than any other female war correspondent.<sup>17</sup> Elegantly dressed in a mixture of military garments of all nationalities and shapely “slacks”, Constance Stewart caused a stir wherever she went. Not least when she dropped in at the dugouts of South Africans on the front line and said in a South African accent “Hello boys, I’ve come to take some photographs of you.” During the invasion of Southern France, she moved to France, taking photographs of South Africans wherever she met them and spent time with the *maquis* (the French resistance). Sometimes in the field she would stay with nurses at casualty clearing stations (CCSs) or field hospitals. At other times, she was the only woman in the area.<sup>18</sup>

The quality of photographs taken by Constance Stewart is clearly far superior to any of those taken by the public relations department, which is not surprising considering that she studied at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London and had a photographic studio in Pretoria. After a visit to the South African FDLs (forward defence localities) in the Winter Line she wrote: “After lunch I plough through mud to [censored]. Here men are living in dugouts and they represent the men I’d meet in any town in the Union in peacetime. They have made themselves as comfortable as possible; but living in a dugout in the Apennines in winter is very different from living through a winter in South Africa. It is strange to find people I know – to meet them again in this part of the line.”<sup>19</sup>

## ii) Separation and homesickness

Homesickness was a condition which affected every soldier and cannot be over-emphasised. It is a theme so overriding that it can be considered the one experience which united all men away from home. Whether they were on the front line or in some base camp – homesickness pervaded their entire existence.

As much as the men missed home, it was not acceptable for a soldier to cut short his duty and leave his comrades to finish the job without him. In Hodgson’s case, a misunderstanding arose when he expressed in a letter to his sister (in December 1945) that he would be prepared to come home and help his father with the family business – if he could get him out of the army. His mother took this as a plea for them to use all their influence to get him a discharge. However, this was just Hodgson’s way of trying to be helpful and in his next letter he had to clarify that he was pleased with having gone so far and that it would be very hard to “leave the chaps to carry on” while he went home, adding “Not that I think that I make such a difference, it is just the principle”.<sup>20</sup>

Such principles were reinforced by the knowledge that the war would soon be over. “All we are waiting for now is that ‘one last heave’ as Mr Churchill puts it”.<sup>21</sup> Realizing that his parents would find it hard to understand his reluctance to leave the front line in the

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<sup>17</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, pp. 175-178.

<sup>18</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, pp. 175-178.

<sup>19</sup> *Libertas*, Springboks in the Apennines, C. Stewart, January 1945, pp. 46-47.

<sup>20</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 3/11/1945.

<sup>21</sup> John Hodgson collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 24/3/1945.

Apennine winter, Hodgson went on to stress that although he was longing for home and normality, the bonds of friendship were just too strong.<sup>22</sup> One needs look no further than this to understand the primary motivations to carry on fighting – a topic which will be further examined in the section on morale in Chapter 10.

Due to the long separations, children grew up without their fathers and likewise, the fathers missed out on the child's formative years. Sergeant O.O.M. (Kippy) Sangster was a farmer from Alicedale in the Eastern Cape. In his role as a remote parent, he promised his daughter that he would bring her something nice if she went to sleep by herself at night, and soon after the Battle of Monte Cassino, he wrote: "Mommie tells me that you are a big girl now and can open gates for the motor car; so when I come home you and I will be able to go to Alicedale to see Grannie and Grandpa and you can open all the gates... ." <sup>23</sup> Sergeant Sangster was killed at Chiusi less than a month later.

Many ex-soldiers remember their time in post-war Italy as being the best time of their lives. Truly, the surroundings were magnificent, be it the mountains, the lakes or the sea. Although it was still six months before his eventual homecoming, and life was good while stationed in the Aosta valley, Stephen Bourhill was pining for home:

It's bar none, the most beautiful place you've ever seen and you've only got to lift your eyes off the ground to see the Gran Paradiso from where ever you are. But Mom how tired I am of foreign hills, and cobbled streets, of quaint towns and alpine bells, of mountain girls with their hefty legs and strong teeth! Boy what wouldn't I give for a "special" at the O.K. milk bar or a cushion on the front steps and Northcliff just over there with a storm coming up. Hell I'm sick for home.<sup>24</sup>

One might well ask why it is that these men were not happy living it up in post war Italy, with the spoils of war so freely available. An anonymous poet ponders the same question in a poem called "In exile". The first of seven verses asks:

Oh tell me why I always long for home,  
Why not satisfied that I can so freely roam.  
What is it that calls me, and will not let me be,  
That saddens me– that maddens me – in this land across the sea.

Subsequent verses continue questioning: "Is it a wood fire, lit when the day's begun... The cheerful chant of a native girl singing in the kitchen... the fields of cosmos, the white road winding down from the highveld to the sea... my wife's voice talking of this and that, the cost of kiddies clothing, the antics of the cat". And in the final verse:

Or is it something – something that's in the soil;  
Put there by our forefathers with life and strife and toil;  
Turned in – churned in – making a magnetic entity,  
That's fed into us – bred into us – and will not let us be?  
So let us rather pray to God, to God so kind and fair;  
That we may soon be travelling home to solve the mystery there. <sup>25</sup>

In addition to the pull factor of home, there were also some push factors. The primary push factor was the Italian people themselves. Although there were those who had love affairs with

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<sup>22</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 3/11/1945.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, O.O.M. Sangster – D. Sangster, 27/5/1944.

<sup>24</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, no date.

<sup>25</sup> E.N. Tucker & P.M.J. McGregor, *Per noctem per diem*, pp. 250-251.

Italian women, many had no time for the Italian people – as will be explained later in the chapter. Understandably, relations were tense in a country where the population had suffered unspeakably at the hands of the Germans and the Allies. Emotionally, economically, and physically, the country was in ruins and it was not the most pleasant place to be.

### iii) Announcement of casualties

Perhaps no aspect of war has as devastating an effect on people as the death or injury of a family member. Next-of-kin would invariably receive the news of the death or injury of a loved one by telegram. The telegram would be followed by a letter of condolence from the Officer in Charge, War Records, Hamilton Street, Pretoria. The lasting impact of these notices is manifested by the fact that they have invariably survived in the family archives for all time. Corporal Lionel Wulfsohn was hit by a barrage of mortar fire on the start line before the attack on Monte Stanco. His entire section was wiped out but Wulfsohn survived with serious wounds. The telegram which his parents received five days later would have caused untold anxiety:

Department of Defence regrets to inform you that your son 38929V Cpl Lionel Mendel Wulfsohn was wounded in action sustaining head injury and multiple wounds and was placed on seriously ill list on 15 October.<sup>26</sup>

Lionel Wulfsohn recovered well after lengthy hospitalization in Italy and in the Union. After the war he established a motor dealership and as an amateur historian published a book on the Anglo-Boer War in the Rustenburg. He died in 2009 aged 90.

In the case of Sergeant O.O.M. Sangster who was killed in the *teatro* at Chiusi, the Ministry of Defence first sent a “missing in action” notice. This is because the bodies could not be recovered for a number of days. Two days later, there followed a letter from the Officer-in-Charge, War Records in Hamilton Street, confirming the death in action of her husband on 22 June 1944. The language used is slightly clichéd and sprinkled with terms such as “deepest sympathy for your sad loss” and “In this hour of trial, the profound hope is expressed that you may derive comfort from the knowledge that his noble sacrifice was made in answer to his country’s call at the moment of its urgent need”.<sup>27</sup>

More personal and sincere letters of condolence were received from Sangster’s commanding officers and comrades although it would be a year before Sangster’s company commander, Major F.R. Bartlett, or the 2 i/c, Captain E.S. Rivett-Carnac, would be available to write as both had been taken prisoner at Chiusi.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the battalion commander did write the obligatory letter on 28 June 1944 and other letters of condolence poured in from his comrades. Close friends mentioned how much he would be missed and superior officers attested to his best soldierly qualities. Everyone expressed their sincerest condolences to his wife and baby daughter, Denise. As usual, the notion of any suffering was downplayed:

I was with him at Chiusi, indeed was wounded twice myself that same day. I was with him when he died and his last words were to send you his love and to his baby. We had morphine with us and none of the men suffered much pain. Kip [Sgt Sangster] was badly wounded with multiple injuries, and was in a

<sup>26</sup> L.M. Wulfsohn Collection, Post Office telegraph from the Department of Defence, 18/10/1944.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, Officer-in Charge, War Records – M. Sangster, 6/7/1944.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, F.R. Bartlett – M. Sangster, 13/8/1945.



coma so I am quite satisfied he did not suffer – he did not live for more than half an hour, during which time I was with him, as was our medical corporal – Fentham.<sup>29</sup>

Even today, 67 years after the event, the lives of the descendants of these First City/Cape Town Highlanders killed at Chiusi are intertwined. Similarly, Private Glen Easton (RNC) was also a father whose offspring still live with the after effects. Five days after he was killed in action in Italy, Easton's wife Ellen received the telegram from the Department of Defence. That night she wrote to her two sisters:

Tonight everything has come to a dead end for me. God above knows how I am going to live through the rest of my life. My darling Glen has been killed in action on 3rd November. Had a wire from the department of defence. The poor children are clinging to one thread that is there has been a mistake. [That] he was only wounded. But personally, I know it is too true.<sup>30</sup>

In South Africa, only those who were badly injured and the families of the few who died, were touched by the real tragedy of war. According to one source, a community would go into mourning when it was announced that a local boy had been killed.<sup>31</sup> When the casualties at Chiusi were announced, the telephone lines in the Grahamstown district would have been ablaze. However, if Fussell is to be believed, humanitarian feelings had been depleted by the end of the war, nobody pretended to care anymore (in the event of a death), unless they were one's close friends or relatives.<sup>32</sup> It was a case of rather you than me. It can be assumed that every parent who had a son on active service, lived with a level of underlying worry which is hard to imagine.

To people in South Africa, war was something either very personal or something far-off and foreign. It either lived in the home night and day, "reflected from the photograph on the mantel, evident in the dusty hat in the hall, the empty chair, or else it is a thing detached, outside private life, something that is only brought home in newspaper headlines and map arrows."<sup>33</sup> Because there had been no bombing, no common danger, there was thus no common kinship. In an obituary to Laurence McNicholas, the readers were reminded that since no families were taxed equally, the lucky had cause for thanksgiving and humility. "The quiet man who sits next to you in the bus may be nursing grief over the loss of a son. Or he may be thinking that if the war lasts for another year, he'll be made for life".<sup>34</sup>

Soldiers went to extreme lengths to shield their families from stress. Sergeant Colin Border was wounded at Chiusi but did not report to the medical post because he would have been listed as wounded in action and wanted to spare his ailing mother the anxiety. In this particular case however, he was listed as wounded and missing and his mother got the telegram anyway.<sup>35</sup> When in hospital, Douglas Baker refused drugs because he needed a clear head to write to anxious friends and relatives. Hodgson comments on a namesake who was listed as a casualty. The other John Hodgson was in the Prince Alfred's Guard and was a distant acquaintance.<sup>36</sup> This may have caused some alarm and it shows how the casualty lists were the subject of much scrutiny and discussion.

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, E.S. Rivett-Carnac – M. Sangster, 14/6/1945.

<sup>30</sup> Glen Easton Collection, E. Easton – Her sisters, 8/11/1944.

<sup>31</sup> Kalk Bay Historical Society, Bulletin No. 6, March 2002, p. 132.

<sup>32</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 193.

<sup>33</sup> *The Southern Cross*, Obituary to L.G. McNicholas.

<sup>34</sup> *The Southern Cross*, Obituary to L.G. McNicholas.

<sup>35</sup> J. Kros, *War in Italy*, p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 27/8/1944.

Casualties were announced in the local newspapers in a roll of honour – once or twice a month beginning with: “The Department of Defence regrets to announce the following South African Casualties.” The name, initials and rank would be listed under the following sub-headings: Killed; Died of wounds or injuries; Died of natural causes, Drowned; Died; Missing; Missing, believed prisoners of war, and wounded or injured. Separate lists were given for the South African Air Force and South African naval forces. No indication was given of the person’s regiment or date of death. Where the families had placed a death notice and photograph in the newspaper, the date of death would be stated but not the regiment. If the person was serving with the Sixth Division, this would be mentioned.

#### iv) Repatriation and demobilization

Demobilization procedures and policies were of concern to both the military and the general public. From the point of view of those soldiers stranded in Italy, the repatriation process was a fiasco, mainly due to the shortage of transport, although the intentions were good. Before 1945, demobilization had been fairly unsystematic, but on 3 January 1945, the demobilization plan or “Springbok Charter” was introduced. The scheme was designed to be simple, reasonable and not open to wangling but flexible enough to allow for exceptions. It was administered by the directorate of demobilization.<sup>37</sup>

The first and most disorganized phase of the demobilization process was repatriation. By September 1945, John Hodgson was caught in limbo unable to get home to start his studies and yet already having to deal with tax matters, which is indicative of the extent to which soldiers were still tied to their home country. The frustration is plain to see:

This whole repatriation scheme is in such a confounded mess, that I don’t think anybody could give a very accurate estimate. I have done everything in my power to facilitate my earliest possible return, which is not really much. Namely, I have made absolutely certain that my present job will not delay me at all – both the others in this job have lower demob priority than myself so I am quite alright on that score. At the moment I stand 9<sup>th</sup> on our NCO’s priority list, this is done according to attestation. There is absolutely nothing I can do about coming home before my turn.<sup>38</sup>

From a letter written at the end of May 1945, it appears that soldiers had been well briefed on what to expect from the demobilization process. On their arrival at the Union Grounds, they would hand in items of uniform and receive a clothing allowance of £30 plus a gratuity of thirty shillings for every month of service – the latter in the form of Union Loan Certificates. Prospective university entrants were also promised an additional grant of two hundred and fifty pounds.<sup>39</sup>

Although he would have to wait six more months to be repatriated, Hodgson’s information was substantially factual. According to more official sources, benefits were categorized as immediate and long-term benefits. Tax free gratuities were paid at the following rates:<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> F. Oosthuizen, The demobilization of white Defence Force soldiers during and after the Second World War, pp. 46-47.

<sup>38</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 9/9/1945.

<sup>39</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 28/5/1945.

<sup>40</sup> There were no “Natives” in the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division although there were non-divisional black troops in Italy; F. Oosthuizen, The demobilization of white Defence Force soldiers during and after the Second World War, p. 60.

- European males: £1.10 for each completed month of service plus a clothing allowance of £30.
- Servicewomen: 10 shillings for each month and £9 for clothing.
- Natives: £2 plus certain items of clothing plus 2 shillings per month of service.

It appears that the £30 clothing allowance consisted of £25 for clothes and £5 for immediate necessities. This compared favourably with the United Kingdom, where returning soldiers received a clothing allowance of only £12. The ex-soldiers were allowed to keep all items of army clothing and were entitled to pay in lieu of leave. Long term benefits varied greatly and included vocational and technical training, university and professional training. Then there was farming and agricultural training – which was very popular. Some speculated that army life had imbued men with a love of the outdoors. Agricultural colleges around the country provided the training and there were approximately 2,000 plots and 1,000 individual farms made available to ex-servicemen.<sup>41</sup> As has been mentioned above, books on poultry farming were the most in demand by ex-servicemen from the Johannesburg library.

In many ways, civilian life is an extension of army life, where new skills and good habits, such as punctuality and teamwork, were learned which could be put into practice after demobilization. In practice, not all ex-soldiers were able to get the jobs for which they felt they were qualified. Those who stayed at home were more likely to have received the promotion.<sup>42</sup>

Preference was given to ex-soldiers when it came to government employment and pressure was put on employers to reinstate ex-soldiers in their jobs under conditions no less favourable than when they left. Regardless, no soldier would be discharged if he had no job to go to. The question of housing was a vexing one and was addressed in various ways. These included priority for building permits, rent controls and the conversion of military camps into model villages where ex-volunteers and their families could rent at a nominal rent ranging from £4 to £6 per month.<sup>43</sup>

Those who had been injured or otherwise disadvantaged could apply for financial assistance in the form of a £250 grant or a loan of up to £1,250. The intention was to reinstate the soldier, as far as possible, in a position he might have occupied, had he not been engaged in military service. There is no doubt that white men received greater benefits than their coloured or black comrades. Oosthuizen reasons that the less affluent and younger men, who had no homes, or jobs, were more inclined to be discontent. This is borne out by the testimony of interviewees and was given expression in the change of government in 1948.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> F. Oosthuizen, *The demobilization of white Defence Force soldiers during and after the Second World War*, p. 60.

<sup>42</sup> F. Oosthuizen, *The demobilization of white Defence Force soldiers during and after the Second World War*, p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> F. Oosthuizen, *The demobilization of white Defence Force soldiers during and after the Second World War*, pp. 71-73.

<sup>44</sup> F. Oosthuizen, *The demobilization of white Defence Force soldiers during and after the Second World War*, p. 121.

Despite the fact that lectures were held to acquaint the men with the government's demobilization scheme and inform them of their rights, it appears that the military information section failed in its task. Many were unaware of these lectures and there was apparently a general lack of knowledge.<sup>45</sup> This was not through lack of trying. A supplement to *The Springbok* of December 1944 was entitled "The Demobilization Machine" and clearly set out all the processes, procedures and benefits available. These included details of 10,064 vacancies in the South African Railways and Harbours. Land settlement and the extensive vocational training programmes were dealt with in the publication. Agricultural colleges including Cedara and Potchefstroom were reserved exclusively for returning servicemen. A national readjustment committee dealt with the needs of the physically or mentally disabled.<sup>46</sup>

Although there was general satisfaction with the grants, there was great dissatisfaction with the demobilization scheme – especially with regard to repatriation. The ideals of fighting for a greater good were now forgotten as soldiers agitated to get home and get a "square deal" for themselves. It appears that ex-soldiers were antagonistic and wanted to cut all ties with the military – hence their lack of interest in staying in the converted military camps or model villages. The delays in the demobilization process were attributed mainly to a lack of suitable personnel although there was lack of capacity in other areas such as shipping. The principle of first in first out (FIFO) was subscribed to.<sup>47</sup>

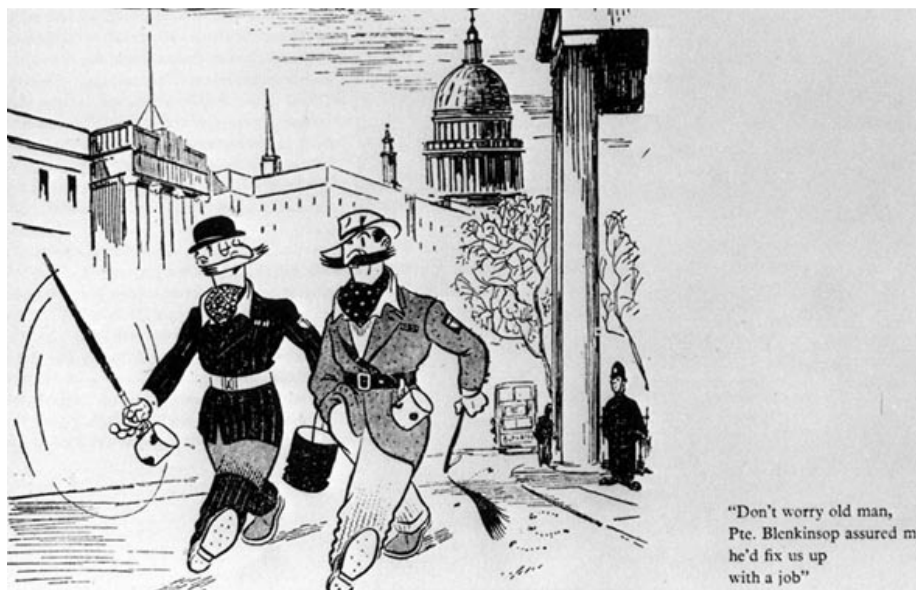


FIGURE 24: Jon Jones cartoon illustrating the concerns of reverting to civilian life captioned, "Don't worry old man, Pte. Blenkinsop assured me he'd fix us up with a job"

FROM: *Union Jack*, Northern Italy, Special Victory Edition.  
 Tuesday, 8 May 1945 (Norman Smith Collection).

<sup>45</sup> F. Oosthuizen, *The demobilization of white Defence Force soldiers during and after the Second World War*, p. 92.

<sup>46</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 79, File MA 143, *The Demobilization Machine*, Supplement to "Springbok", December 1944.

<sup>47</sup> F. Oosthuizen, *The demobilization of white Defence Force soldiers during and after the Second World War*, pp. 102-110.

There is evidence to support the argument that returning soldiers felt that their country owed them special privileges and advantages in return for their services to the country – especially if they had been wounded. This is simply human nature and has nothing to do with race. One of the reasons given is that the nature of army life engenders an attitude of dependency in that a soldier’s every need is taken care of by the “great machine”. These expectations may have been caused by recruiting propaganda and promises (explicit or implied) made by the authorities.<sup>48</sup>

It appears from American studies that servicemen are generally not placed in a better position than non-servicemen. According to the literature, whites were less likely to benefit from military service than blacks. In a study examining the income disparities between Mexican American, African American and white veterans, Browning et al. found that military service has a varying impact, depending on the racial background of the veteran. There are a number of good reasons why economists have viewed veteran status as a depressant on both current and lifetime earnings. These include the interruption to their studies and interruption of continuity in the individual’s work career. People of different classes are stripped of old identities and coerced to accept new military roles in which they attain new skills and competencies through training, travel and experience. It provides a bridging environment for ethnic minorities and by inference, for the disenfranchised or those from a low socioeconomic background. They learn to cope with bureaucratic systems and in the case of Mexicans, mastering of the English language was believed to be a major factor. Anglo veterans, on the other hand were at a disadvantage compared to Anglo non-veterans. Certain occupational categories such as clerical workers, sales workers and labourers were less affected by continuity than professional, technical and managerial occupations. Those white veterans who seemed to benefit from their service were from a lower socioeconomic group. An interesting exception was that white doctors and dentists also did better than their non-veteran counterparts.<sup>49</sup> As the cartoon of the “Two Types” on the previous page shows, nobody felt secure about their post-war prospects:

Ex-soldiers in the middle-to-upper income groups generally had less reason to complain than those in the lower income groups. They had the benefit of education and the financial support of their families. Those in the lower income groups suffered as a result of delayed demobilization and processing of their applications for financial assistance. Ironically, many of these men had been better off in the army with regard to benefits and standard of living.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>F. Oosthuizen, The demobilization of white Defence Force soldiers during and after the Second World War, pp. 26-28.

<sup>49</sup>H.L. Browning, S.C. Lopreato and D.L. Poston, Variations among Mexican Americans, Blacks and Anglos, *The military and society – a collection of essays*, (ed. P. Karsten), pp. 280-290.

<sup>50</sup>F. Oosthuizen, Soldiers and politics: The political ramifications of the white Union Defence Forces soldiers’ demobilization experience after the Second World War. *Scientia Militaria* (24) 1, 1994, p. 21.

**b) Army of occupation**

**i) Experience of the country and climate**

As a prelude to a discussion of the attitudes to and interaction with the Italian people, it is useful to provide a geographical overview of the campaign. The geography of the Italian peninsula, in particular the topography, profoundly impacted on the nourishment, transport, tactics, casualties and overall experience of the South Africans.

If there is one word which describes the Italian terrain, it is “mountains”. The Apennine range runs virtually the entire length of the country like a spine. Winters in these mountains are particularly harsh. By the time the 6<sup>th</sup> Division arrived on the front line, the spring flowers were peeping through and the trees were budding. The nights still had a bite but the days were comfortable.

By 7 June 1944, while the division was just north of Rome, the weather was perfect, with cloudless skies, and “delightful” temperatures.<sup>51</sup> Towards the end of June, the weather was hot and dry and the fields of tall wheat provided good cover for the Germans especially in the Chiana River valley.<sup>52</sup> In the hills to the north of the Chiana River valley, in the mountainous Monte San Savino area, the creative author of the 1/6<sup>th</sup> Fd Rgt War Diary, mentioned that this area would “make the Valley of a Thousand Hills look like an open plain” and then speculated on what the staff at the Potchefstroom Artillery School might have to say about the precarious gun positions.<sup>53</sup> On the advance to Florence, the South Africans were active over a wide area in the woods, valleys and along the streams north east of Sienna.<sup>54</sup> This was Chianti country, very rough, but the weather was perfect, if not a bit too hot.

The River Arno was crossed at the beginning of September and on the night of 5 September, it began to rain heavily, causing some flooding in this fertile plain and limiting movement. North of the River Arno, the Gothic Line was encountered. Twenty two kilometres deep, and about 200 kilometers long, it extended from Pisa in the west to Rimini on the Adriatic coast.<sup>55</sup> It rained virtually non-stop during the month of October, causing untold misery and ultimately stalling the advance in the northern Apennines.

The northern Apennines form an unbroken 220 km barrier with a depth of 80 to 90 kilometers between the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian coastal belts. The crossings in the South African sector were reasonably good depending on the season. Route 64 from Pistoia to Bologna was a fairly good road, just over 100 km long and route 6620 from Florence to Bologna via Prato. Route 65 through Futa pass was the most direct route between the two cities.<sup>56</sup>

Based at Castiglione and Lagaro astride Route 6620, the 6<sup>th</sup> Division remained in the mountains south of Bologna for the winter. A light covering of snow fell on 10/11 November

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<sup>51</sup> W.L. Fielding, *With the 6<sup>th</sup> Div*, p. 90.

<sup>52</sup> N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 120.

<sup>53</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 642, War Diary of 1/6<sup>th</sup> Fd Rgt, 4/7/1944.

<sup>54</sup> W.L. Fielding, *With the 6<sup>th</sup> Div*, p. 136.

<sup>55</sup> M. Jenkins, *The last ridge*, p. 130.

<sup>56</sup> N. Orpen, *War in Italy*, p. 183.

(only on the higher peaks) accompanied by a biting wind.<sup>57</sup> Speculation about what the height of winter would be like was a favourite topic of discussion.<sup>58</sup>

As the thin layer of snow melted, the ground turned to slush, making conditions in the line unspeakably miserable. Even in December, there was apt to be mist, rain and a biting wind as opposed to snow and the following extract epitomises the conditions experienced in the winter line:

As usual there is mud everywhere and mud which has to be seen to be believed; this we have more-or-less got used to by now as we have had ten weeks of it. A few days ago the mud was frozen solid and it just crumbled under one's foot; it was very slippery as it was much like ice.<sup>59</sup>

The beginning of 1945 was cold enough to freeze Brylcream in one's hair and while on patrol, one's water bottle had to be carried under a jacket to keep it from freezing. A new problem arose for patrols. After a period without fresh snowfalls, a crust formed on the snow and it was almost impossible to move silently. A covering of around fifty centimetres of snow lay in most places although it was not unusual to fall into a snowdrift up to one's armpits. Stretchers were pulled on sleighs.

A few warmer days in mid-February had some thinking that spring was around the corner. The thaw had started and some February rains had already turned the positions into a sea of mud. Fortunately, by the end of February, the division was out of the line and recuperating in the warmer regions of Tuscany. The geography would present no further obstacles or discomforts. Even the River Po was overcome without much exertion and during the summer of 1945, the men were able to enjoy the best of what the environment had to offer.

## ii) Administration of civilian affairs

Civilian life in wartime Italy was harsh. In addition to the usual hazards of being caught between two warring armies, the civilian population was not safe from the partisans, many of whom were thugs – looting and extorting. Where partisan activity was prevalent, German reprisals followed soon after. Spies watched the German traffic movements. Many were captured and shot for their efforts.<sup>60</sup> The discovery of atrocities was not unusual, but this is discussed in Chapter 10 below in the section on the myths and taboos around killing.

Once an area had been liberated, the fascist rulers melted away or faced the wrath of the partisans. To fill the administrative vacuum, and to keep the organs of state running, the army put in place the Allied Military Government (AMG) structures immediately upon liberating an area. Its functions included getting agriculture, industry and finance up and running, collecting taxes, paying civil servants, rationing of food, preserving of monuments and fine arts.<sup>61</sup> Allied Military Government was fairly draconian and when necessary, supplies could be requisitioned for Immediate Operational Use (IOU).<sup>62</sup> This branch was irreverently referred to as the “Organized Looting Brigade”.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> C.G. Starr, *From Salerno to the Alps*, p. 273.

<sup>58</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 14/11/1944.

<sup>59</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 13/12/1944.

<sup>60</sup> I. Origo, *War in Val D'Orcia*, pp. 156-160.

<sup>61</sup> *A Military Encyclopaedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, pp. 539-560.

<sup>62</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 79.

<sup>63</sup> *A Military Encyclopaedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, pp. 549-566.

The laws of supply and demand did not work in wartime Italy and it was necessary to fix prices of necessities and imported goods. Maximum price scales were set for foodstuffs but early efforts to freeze prices at pre-invasion levels failed completely. To prevent hoarding and selling on the black market, the fascist procedure of amassing grain and olive oil was continued – although the word “*Amasso*” was dropped in favour of “*Granai del Popolo*”. Ration scales were set for different classes such as heavy workers, hospital patients, prisoners, refugees and forest guards. Under the fascist administration, with the assistance of the Germans, all farm products were registered, stockpiled and redistributed. In massive drives known as *rastrellamenti*, farms were ruthlessly searched to break up the resistance.<sup>64</sup>

It was a pleasant change therefore, when Allied soldiers were there to help, to trade and show an interest. South African soldiers who came from an agricultural background, like Sergeant Sangster, admired the Italian farmers. Despite primitive methods, the land was extremely productive. No piece of ground, however small, was left uncultivated. For the most part, people lived in small villages “many of which cling to the sides of mountains like a colony of swallows’ nests” and farmed the lower slopes and the level ground. “Everyone works in the lands, women and children included and it is a common sight to see women hoeing and generally doing any work pertaining to agriculture. Lots of them walk barefooted and carry loads on their heads, just like our native women.”<sup>65</sup>

Throughout the campaign, much of the interaction with the locals took place on the farms. During August 1944 Hodgson wrote volumes about helping with the harvesting, cleaning and sorting of beans and maize. He even helped sort fine wheat stalks about 46 centimetres long for the making of Panama hats.<sup>66</sup> Towards the end of February 1945, while the division was at rest in the Lucca area, he described helping with the olive harvest and learning something of the olive oil industry.<sup>67</sup>



FIGURE 25: Farm work continuing in what is described in the original caption as the “front line”.

FROM: James Bourhill Collection

<sup>64</sup> *A Military Encyclopedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, pp. 559-576.

<sup>65</sup> *The Eastern Cape Herald*, 3/6/1944, From the mailbag.

<sup>66</sup> John Hodgson Collection, M.V. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 27/8/1944; John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. & M.V. Hodgson, 28/8/1944.

<sup>67</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 23/2/1945.



According to one South African observer, the cattle were nearly all Brown Swiss and were of a very high standard. The sheep were of a large variety, not unlike the merino but with coarse wool. Horses, mules and donkeys were the most popular means of farm power and transport and realize very high prices – donkeys £20-£40 and horses, anything up to £40.<sup>68</sup>

The Allied Military Government (AMG) officer was the liaison between the division and the Italian population; he had extreme powers and was the civil governor in the area. Known as the Civil Affairs Officer (CAO), he posted proclamations upon entering a *comune* and was empowered to establish summary courts to try violations of them. Possession of Allied property was one of the more common violations.<sup>69</sup>

Civilians were usually glad to work for the Allied armies and often did so at considerable personal risk. Many civilians preferred army doctors and dressing stations to their own civilian equivalents.<sup>70</sup>

However, not all interaction between soldiers and civilians was amicable. Even after the cessation of hostilities, tensions ran high at times, resulting in a number of altercations and accusations wherever the Allies were stationed. Naturally, escaped POWs who were aided (and occasionally betrayed) by the local population have their own incredible stories to tell about surviving in the Italian countryside.

Understandably, the language barrier limited interaction to the bare essentials. Hodgson's Italian improved markedly during the five week affair which he had with an Italian girl – to the extent that he considered his Italian to be better than his Afrikaans.<sup>71</sup> It appears that there was no pidgin-Italian in use and communication was carried out in broken Latin, French and Italian. Most South Africans learned a smattering of Italian but the division was far from being “trilingual” as some suggested. In a letter to his people at home, Laurence McNicholas listed the phrases which he as a front line soldier found the most useful:

(1) Asking for Gerries line of retreat. (2) Asking if there were any stray Gerries knocking about. (3) Asking for *uova, pane, and galenas*. (4) A place to *dormire* and (5) explaining that thanks to my gallant efforts what few *Tedeschi* [Germans] are not *morte* have gone *via* but that if their chimneys *fumore* or if their *finestras* emit any *luminare*, they'll get *bombardimento*'d. If the bewildered Italian grasps all that, I am encouraged and continue to say that there is no cause to *temere* as the *perlanto* is largely *finite*.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *The Eastern Cape Herald*, 3/6/1944, From the mailbag.

<sup>69</sup> *A Military Encyclopaedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, pp. 570-574.

<sup>70</sup> *A Military Encyclopaedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, p. 576.

<sup>71</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 29/9/1945.

<sup>72</sup> Alison Sulentic Collection, L.G. McNicholas – Miss O'Donoghue, 1/7/1943.



FIGURE 26: Tanks outspanned in an Italian farmyard.  
FROM: South African Department of Defence Document Centre.

### iii) Attitudes towards the Italians

Considering that the Italians had been engaged in total war against the Allies for almost four years, and given the experience of Allied POW's at the hands of their Italian captors, it is not surprising that relations were less than cordial at first. The advancing allies revelled in their roles of conquerors and liberators.

In the early days of the war, the Italians appeared arrogant, the fascists and children were especially cruel to captured Allied soldiers. The account of one ex-POW illustrates why feelings of animosity existed: "Street children danced along the sidewalks on either side of us, yelling and jeering and shouting words the meaning of which we discovered later to be excessively unedifying. When our guards were not looking, they threw stones, and cackled with unholy joy if they hit someone. They were excellent fascists, much better than their mothers who wept and their grandfathers who shook with grief."<sup>73</sup>

The British war correspondent, Alan Moorehead, was disgusted by the depravity of the Italian population of Naples and admits that it would be unfair to say that all Italians, especially the peasants, had fallen so far but claimed that "the rottenness ran through the country." Children of ten and twelve were being offered in brothels as "beautiful signorina". Raw spirit mixed with flavouring was sold in dirty bottles with fake labels as "good brandy, verra cheap, only fife hundred Lire."<sup>74</sup> Moorehead explained:

What we were witnessing in fact was the moral collapse of a people. They had no pride anymore, or any dignity. The animal struggle for existence governed everything. Food. That was the only thing that mattered. Food for the children. Food for yourself. Food at the cost of any abasement and depravity. And after food, a little warmth and shelter.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> P. Ogilvie & N. Robinson, *In the bag*, p. 49.

<sup>74</sup> A. Moorehead, *Eclipse*, p. 63.

<sup>75</sup> A. Moorehead, *Eclipse*, p. 63.

The Allies had mixed feelings towards the Italians. On the one hand, they were the subject of contempt and ridicule for their lack of fighting spirit. On the other hand, if this was the price of staying alive, maybe it was worth it. Then of course there was the cuisine. Fussell quotes a British soldier who had just been served a wonderful meal in Tarranto, in June 1944, and wrote in his diary. "...Steak – eggs – cherries – white wine – macaroni – and marsala...we should never have fought these people."<sup>76</sup>

Nevertheless, not all Italians were friendly to the Allies as Hodgson saw first hand during the interrogation of fascists who were suspected of still collaborating with the Germans. These suspects were often uncooperative, but could be "tripped up" by using cross-questioning techniques through an interpreter.<sup>77</sup>

Considering that the Italians had only a short time before been enemies and had been defeated, it is understandable that the troops felt like conquering heroes. There is no doubt that the Italian soldiers and the Carabinieri were scorned but towards the ordinary civilian, feelings were ambivalent. Time and again, Hodgson expressed his disgust for the state of towns and villages in the south but Hodgson for one could not help admiring the farming practices found in the rural areas.<sup>78</sup>

The *Eastern Cape Herald* of 3 June 1944 published a letter from Sergeant O.O.M. Sangster who was to be killed in action later that same month. His observations were restricted to the southern part of Italy. He was clearly not impressed and referred to the rural people as "a queer lot":

The people on the farms live very frugally; their relaxation seems to be drinking wine and having children. The latter particularly seems to be the popular sport, as every village or inhabited locality is simply swarming with "kids". They are fine healthy looking little blighters too, although very poorly clothed, and just about everyone is bare now, as clothing is a terrific price and is practically unobtainable.<sup>79</sup>

The cartoonist Bill Maudlin, who was apparently no friend of the Italians, wrote: "There is no doubt, the Italians are paying a stiff price for their past sins."<sup>80</sup> The journalist Ernie Pyle noted that American soldiers were slightly contemptuous of the Italians and did not trust them yet felt sorry for them.<sup>81</sup> Hodgson had no qualms about taking goods from Italians as his contention was that they were partly the cause for taking him away from his lovely home, "...so they can suffer, they deserve nothing better."<sup>82</sup> Likewise, McNicholas had no sympathy on hearing complaints about *Tedeschi* (Germans), food shortages and looting. When Italians expressed their "whole-hearted agreement with the Allied war sins", he wrote: "They are all now ardently anti-fascist, all partisan and slayers of Germans. What a turncoat rabble".<sup>83</sup>

As has already been revealed, South African soldiers were not averse to fraternizing with the women, no matter what their opinion of the people in general. In post war Italy, Hodgson

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<sup>76</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>77</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 27/8/1944.

<sup>78</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 13/5/1944.

<sup>79</sup> *The Eastern Cape Herald*, 3/6/1944, From the mailbag.

<sup>80</sup> M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 60.

<sup>81</sup> E. Pyle, *Brave men*, p. 81.

<sup>82</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 8/7/1944.

<sup>83</sup> Alison Sulentic Collection, L.G. McNicholas – Miss O'Donoghue, 1/7/1943.

had his first romantic relationship with an Italian girl, but felt the need to qualify his feelings in a letter to his mother:

I have had absolutely no time whatsoever for any Italian since I came to this country; so marked has been my dislike for them been that it has become a very distinctive characteristic to all my friends. If anything, I have always despised them, and to be quite frank I still do.<sup>84</sup>

The South Africans were ordered not to fraternize with the local population and as a compromise, dances were organized in rear areas and the local women were invited. Snacks and food was the inducement and indeed the only interest of the women who stuffed all they could into bags to take home to the “bambinos”.<sup>85</sup> Relations between young Italian men and the Allied soldiers were aggravated by the fact that Italian men were unable to provide food and other items which the soldiers were able to do. When some local girls were invited to a dance at Hofmeyr House in Rome, many came for the food. Savouries consisted of chunks of bread covered with bully beef mashed up with margarine or cheese. According to Sampie de Wet, the Italian men were resentful of these occasions.<sup>86</sup>

Food was a powerful attraction. At Cavrigila, the reserve group held a children’s day, providing food, sweets, Coke and an animated film show. It was apparently difficult to decide which they enjoyed most. About 300 children were filing past the feeding point and when approximately two thirds of them had passed by, a hoard of about 4,000 adults, who could not be kept away even by a squad of men detailed for this duty, caused the table to collapse and general chaos to ensue. Similar children’s days were held at Montevarchi and Castelnuovo where groups of up to 2,000 children were treated but things went more smoothly thanks to learned experience.<sup>87</sup>



FIGURE 27: General Poole attending a children’s Christmas party  
FROM: Ditsong National Museum of Military History

<sup>84</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 29/9/1945.

<sup>85</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 401.

<sup>86</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 196.

<sup>87</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 599, HQ 6 SA Armd Div Res Gp, 26/1/1945.

Where interaction with civilians took place on a more personal level, it was not unusual for relationships to develop into something deeper. Shortly before leaving for the front, after the rest period at Lucca, Johnston stayed with a family in a “casa” just south of Vaiano, near “B” Echelon HQ which was at the University of Prato campus. In the evenings he played draughts with “the family” and had dinner with a certain Silvana.<sup>88</sup> While billeted with an Italian family near Pistoia, Stephen Bourhill wrote: “Anna, a little girl, hurt her nose the other day just above the upper lip. We rushed her to the quack and he stitched it up. She has eyes like stars. She is only six years old”.<sup>89</sup> There was also an older girl called Silvana Vardi. On 4 April 1945, soon after returning to the front line, Stephen Bourhill wrote about his emotional parting from “the family”:

It was a very sad parting from the family there. Anna wanted to come with us and the old folk cried like blazes. Marisa the girl, couldn't face it, and didn't come to say goodbye. It's quite an event in their quiet lives to have four soldiers in their house for so long. There the war only swept past them, and only left them wondering and puzzled and scared. But we shook the place up. They liked us and as the girl said to me “Steve, it was far better that we'd never know you”. The more I see of these Wops the more time I have for them. It's not a “good thing” because I'd hardly have the heart to carry on fighting. I've seen their hearts absolutely bare as only people in conditions like me can see them.<sup>90</sup>



FIGURE 28: Bill Mauldin cartoon captioned “Papa, I think we have been liberated”.  
 SOURCE: <http://www.stripes.com/02/nov02/mauldin/index.html>.

In the north of Italy, the population was highly politicised and soon after the war in Italy had ended, Stephen Bourhill noted: “The girls are not so pretty but better dressed and better off all round than those south of the Po. They are on the whole not so friendly, some Wops are very bitter. Darned fools don't know what they want.”<sup>91</sup> This hostility could be partly due to ignorance. Rosignoli who was a child at the time of the liberation of his village (also in the north) by the New Zealanders realized for the first time that his “enemies” were not the

<sup>88</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, diary 6-9 April 1945.

<sup>89</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 13/3/1945.

<sup>90</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 4/4/1945.

<sup>91</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 10/5/45; G. Rosignoli, *The Allied forces in Italy 1943-45*, p. 153.

bloodthirsty savages that the Germans had told them about. They had no idea what their enemies looked like, they had seen only the Germans, Russian Cossacks and Mongols and Yugoslav Chetniks with long hair.<sup>92</sup>

In their role as an army of occupation in post war Italy, it was considered crucial to maintain discipline and morale. The behaviour and turn-out of the troops were expected to be faultless to enhance their prestige and build respect for law and order. In order to impart a general air of efficiency, there were regular displays of martial discipline, route marches and parades. The conduct of the South African army of occupation was epitomized by an order relating to the use of firearms in keeping the peace. The order stated that women and children will not be fired upon in any circumstances. This is despite the fact that a number of South African military policemen had been shot by civilians in the days following the German surrender.<sup>93</sup>

The two main groupings of civilians with whom the 6<sup>th</sup> Division interacted, were those on the home front and those in the war zone. For many soldiers, fighting a war in a densely populated country, and seeing the suffering which they were inflicting on the civilians, was traumatic. Nevertheless, it was only during periods of rest and relaxation that the South Africans really got to know their hosts in a civil way. In some instances, the Italian people became surrogate families to the soldiers, but the discontent which was felt during the post-war period was often due to culture clashes.

Throughout the period of separation, contact with and support from one's secondary group, the family, was vital. It helped overcome the stresses of combat and feelings of homesickness. Trauma and stress were not restricted to the war zone. Sacrifices were also made on the home front in the form of commodity shortages and austerity. In this chapter, the focus was on the interface with civil society. Sub-themes include demobilization, and how the awful news of a death was brought home. In the following chapter, the question of casualties will be analysed quantitatively and empirically.

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<sup>92</sup> G. Rosignoli, *The Allied forces in Italy 1943-45*, p. 8.

<sup>93</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 243, Use of firearms, Appendix "B" to SAA 6 SA Armd Div, Co, No. 113, 8/6/1945.

## CHAPTER 9: COMBAT AND BECOMING A CASUALTY

As John Lynn explains, the essence of military history is combat, and death or injury is a consequence of combat. The life and death nature of war defines attitudes and practices within militaries, even in peacetime and even in elements of the military which are not directly in harm's way.<sup>1</sup> The extent to which death or injury was part of the soldier's experience can best be determined with reference to the casualty statistics. Casualty figures also shed light on terrain, tactics, enemy resistance, weapons, resources and many other aspects of the campaign.

Before the war had even ended, a leading historian of the day, A. Vagts, published a paper postulating the importance of studying the causes, ratios, and relative severity of combatant casualties:

The analysis of casualty statistics, if they were fully and reliably reported on all sides, would of course shed a great light on many aspects of war, such as a) forms of tactics and strategy, b) the effectiveness of weapons, and c) the forms and states of morale of the participants.<sup>2</sup>

It should be pointed out that a full battlefield analysis of casualties is beyond the scope of this social history. The categories of analysis used are primarily cultural and experiential.

### a) Contextualising casualties

To understand the probability of death or injury which the South African soldiers faced in the Italian campaign, it is enlightening to use a quantitative approach, beginning with a look at the casualty rate of other formations in the same campaign.

The casualty figures for any formation will obviously vary according to what units are included and whether battle accidents and non-battle accidents are included in the analysis (see definitions below). Estimates of casualties vary according to the source and can be confusing because time periods differ and in some cases, casualty numbers include wounded and missing. In the whole of the Second World War, the South African land forces lost 6,215 killed or died on service outside the Union and 3,317 died in South Africa. Another source puts the number of South Africans killed at 6,498 of whom 6,003 were white. This is in comparison to over 40,000 Australians and 45,000 Canadians.<sup>3</sup> The total of all casualties in the land and air forces, including killed, wounded and POWs was 38,208.<sup>4</sup>

Thousands of South African troops, including complete regiments, never saw active service and there were never more than 45,000 deployed in an operational area at any one time – and many of these were in reserve.<sup>5</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division in Italy numbered approximately 15,000 (exclusive of foreign contingents). The number varied from day to day.

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<sup>1</sup> J.A. Lynn, The embattled future of academic military history, *The Journal of Military History* 61 (4), 1997, p. 783.

<sup>2</sup> A. Vagts, Battle and other combatant casualties in the Second World War, *The Journal of Politics* (7) 3, 1945, p. 271.

<sup>3</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour: English-speaking South Africans in World War II. *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939-45*, p. 347.

<sup>5</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour: English-speaking South Africans in World War II. *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, p. 67.

At the thanksgiving parade held near Milan on 4 May 1945, General Poole stated that 711 South Africans had been killed during the twelve months of operations, lasting from 4 May 1944 to 4 May 1945. At the start of operations in May 1944, the total strength of the South African contingent was 15,706. The total strength of the division as a whole, was 20,373 including 24 Guards Brigade but excluding 4/13 FFR who joined in August 1944.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of overall numbers, the figure of 711 South Africans killed over the period of a year appears modest. This number can be looked at in comparison with other nationalities involved in the Italian campaign. According to General Mark Clark, the total number killed of all nationalities under command of the American Fifth Army was 31,886 from the landing at Salerno on the Italian mainland to the end of the war. These were made up as follows:<sup>7</sup>

	Killed	Total Casualties
American	19,475	109,642
British*	6,605	47,452
French	5,241	27,671
Brazilian	275	2,411
Italian	290	1,570
	-----	-----
Total	31,886	188,746

\* British figures include Imperial, South African and other Dominion troops serving under the American Fifth Army but do not include the British Eighth Army itself.

Out of the total US 5<sup>th</sup> Army strength of 750,000, the figure of 31,886 represents a fatality rate of approximately 4,3 per cent. German losses are more difficult to determine. The *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* gives the total number of Germans buried in Italian war cemeteries in Italy as 107,276.<sup>8</sup> In order to make a meaningful comparison with another national army, it would be necessary to include all UDF troops in Italy. Non combatant and support troops numbered at least 10,000 and also suffered casualties, but very few as a result of enemy action.

During the period in which 24 Guards Brigade was with 6 SA Armoured Division, they suffered 229 deaths bringing the total for the division to 1,110. Once the casualty figures of 24 Guards Brigade, 4/13 FFR and other non-Union troops who formed a part of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division for shorter or longer periods have been added, the casualty rates can be calculated as follows:

4,5% As a percentage of South African members of 6 SA Armd Div (711/15,706).  
 5,6% As a percentage of the division as a whole (1,110/20,000).\*\*

\*\* The casualty figure of 1,110 for the division as a whole, up until August 1945 includes 59 post-war deaths, 31 of which were as a result of air crashes. (See Appendix E).

Comparisons can also be made with another fighting division. The American 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, for example consisted of 19,000 men (the original 14,000 plus 5,000 replacements)

<sup>6</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 192, File AQ 21/4 Vol 2, Units under command, Nov 1943 – Oct 1945.

<sup>7</sup> M.W. Clark, *Calculated risk*, p. 411.

<sup>8</sup> G. Hobbs, *From Sicily to the Alps*, pp. 256-257.



and in its four month long campaign lost 978 dead.<sup>9</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division arrived in Italy for the final phase of operations. They were extremely keen and almost oblivious of casualties, because they were an elite unit which had not yet had the opportunity to prove themselves. Assuming an average fighting strength of 14,000, the fatality rate is approximately 7%.

The New Zealand 2<sup>nd</sup> Division fought in Italy for six months longer than the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division and were heavily involved in the Battle of Cassino. The division also numbered approximately 35,000 men. This accounts for their comparatively higher casualties which totalled 1,825 killed.<sup>10</sup> A fatality rate of approximately 5.2 percent can therefore be inferred.

Vagts also turned his attention to the Italian campaign where operations began with a war of movement at Salerno and turned into months of trench and mountain warfare, much like the shift from 1914 to 1915, casualties reflected these trends and returned to those of nearly thirty years before, particularly in the ratio of dead to wounded. The perception that South African forces sustained a lower casualty rate than other nations may be due to the fact that they missed out on most of the fighting at Monte Casino where the Americans suffered, up to 7 March 1944, 5,749 killed, 23,035 wounded and 10,274 missing. The British losses (to 12 February 1944) were 7,636 dead, 23,283 wounded, and 5,708 missing. A comparison in the number of missing is striking but Vagts offered no explanation for the higher number of American missing.<sup>11</sup>

It must be pointed out that the 711 fatalities mentioned by General Poole at the victory parade does not include those who died of wounds after 4 May 1945 and those who were originally listed as missing and were later declared dead. The following are also excluded from the 711: Those attached to the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division Reserve Group, members of 24 Guards Brigade and other non-South African units under command, South Africans seconded to British units, SAAF personnel, accidental deaths after 30 May 1945, and all non-divisional troops and POWs. It is now possible to take a closer look at exactly who these casualties were, and what factors had an influence on the casualty rate.

## **b) Battle casualties**

A Battle Casualty (BC) was defined as: (a) All wounds or injuries caused by hostile enemy action; (b) All wounds or injuries which occur in action or in close proximity to the enemy provided they are not caused by or contributed to by the misconduct of the injured soldier.<sup>12</sup> The different categories of Battle Casualties are as follows:

Killed in Action;

Died of Wounds; or from injuries (where injuries are classed as BC);

Wounded (nature of wounds to be stated);

Wounded - remained on duty;

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<sup>9</sup> M. Jenkins, *The last ridge*, pp. 244-255; According to R. Atkinson in *The day of battle: The war in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944*, there were 23,501 American deaths.

<sup>10</sup> W.E. Murphy, *The official history of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945*, Wellington, 1966. <http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly>.

<sup>11</sup> A. Vagts, Battle and other combatant casualties in the Second World War, *The Journal of Politics* (7) 3, 1945, p. 272.

<sup>12</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 181, File 15/0, Div Adm Instrs, 6 SA Armd Div, Medical Adm Ins, 7/7/1944.

Injured (where injury is classed as BC and nature of injury stated);  
Missing (Believed Killed, Believed Drowned, Believed POW, Believed Wounded,  
Believed Injured, as the case may be).

According to Orpen, who cites medical corps records, 57,4 per cent of South African casualties in Italy were caused by high explosive shelling and the next highest by mortars.<sup>13</sup> A comprehensive report by the American Fifth Army compiled in 1945 estimated that German artillery caused forty per cent of Allied casualties and enemy mortars caused about 25 per cent of the total.<sup>14</sup>

Dinter underplays the effect of artillery fire by demonstrating that the probability of a soldier being hit by chance (from artillery fire) in the field is extremely remote. Using a model, he calculates that it would take two and a half million rounds to hit 1,000 soldiers dug in over an area of five square kilometres. Target acquisition is the key. It is the laying of fire, not its amount, which has the desired physical effect. Dinter concludes that it is (flanking) machine gun fire from covered positions which had the most devastating effect of any weapon in the Second World War.<sup>15</sup> This was not the case in Italy.

Considering that virtually every man carried a rifle or machine gun, a surprisingly small number of men were killed by a bullet. Mortars were the most feared weapon as far as the infantry were concerned, even more so than artillery. Mortars were lethal because of their accuracy and the type of wounds which they inflicted.<sup>16</sup>

A large proportion of casualties were also caused by booby traps and anti-personnel mines which the Germans were highly proficient at using. In November of 1943, forty per cent of Fifth Army casualties came from mines and booby traps. Favourite locations for the placement of booby traps included doorknobs, toilet seats, grapevines, haystacks, water wells, fruit trees and under dead bodies. From the biggest mines that could disable a tank to the anti-personnel mines which were designed to blow off a foot or a testicle – no road, path or trail was safe.<sup>17</sup> Any door or lid which could be opened was a favourite for German engineers.<sup>18</sup>

In the war diaries and other documents, there is seldom any elaboration about how a man died. If a man was killed outright, a simple KIA next to his name is the extent of information provided. Accidental deaths on the other hand, always triggered a court of enquiry and if a man died of wounds, it is possible to piece together the full story from his medical records.

With reference to Table III below, it can be seen that the highest casualties and the most intense fighting, occurred north of Rome and south of Siena. The hilltop towns of Bagnoregio and Chiusi were costly to take – and it should be mentioned that although their casualty figures are not included in the table, the Guards Brigade losses were considerable at Bagnoregio. The going was particularly tough in this area because of booby traps and anti-tank guns lying in ambush. During this phase, the casualty rate among the armour (especially the NMR) was particularly high. All of the armoured regiments together bore thirty per cent

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<sup>13</sup> N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> *A Military Encyclopedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns*, p. 229.

<sup>15</sup> E. Dinter, *Hero or coward*, pp. 29-31.

<sup>16</sup> M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> R. Atkinson, *The day of battle*, p. 253.

<sup>18</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 153, 6 SA Armd Div Int Summary No. 224.

of the division's casualties for the period 8 May to 7 August 1944 as opposed to seventeen per cent for the period 22 August 1944 to 27 January 1945.<sup>19</sup>

Period	Killed or Died of Wounds (DOW)	Area of Operations
June	187	Celleno, Bagnoregio, Allerona, Chiusi
July	136	Acquaviva, Castelnuovo, Radda, Panzano, Greve, Impruneta (Paula Line)
August	27	Florence, Sienna, Empoli
September	47	Arno River, Monte Pozzo del Bagno (Gothic Line)
October	151	Monte Vigese, Monte Stanco, Monte Salvaro
November (up to 24 Nov)	14	Winter Line
Total	562	

It is often mentioned in the war diaries that the period of the October battles in the northern Apennines was the hardest which the South Africans experienced in the Second World War. This may have been true as far as the weather was concerned. However, it can be seen that in terms of casualties, the months of June, July and August were worse than the three months which followed. The advance to Florence was also the hardest period for 24 Guards Brigade considering that they suffered 153 deaths for the four months to 7 August as opposed to 75 for the period 22 August to 27 January. Clearly, the Gothic Line was not as formidable as it was made out to be.

### c) Life expectancy according to unit and branch of service

If the general trend for the Allied armies in the Second World War applies, then no more than twenty per cent of South African enlisted men ever saw the front line. In other words, of the 70,000 Red Tabs who were on active service during the entire war, 14,000 were combatants.<sup>21</sup> The remainder would have been non-combat engineers, headquarters staff, military police, medical, quartermaster and other service personnel.

The composition of an American armoured division is almost identical to a South African division and the breakdown of casualties follows the same trend. One American study found that infantry soldiers suffered 92 per cent of a typical division's battle casualties – as opposed to four per cent for the artillery.<sup>22</sup> In a typical American division, approximately fifteen per cent of all riflemen were killed and 56 per cent wounded. In one particular division, nineteen

<sup>19</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 163, Casualty returns, Battle casualties and Battle Accidents for the period 4/5/1944 to 27/1/1945.

<sup>20</sup> Compiled from SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 163, Casualty returns, Battle Casualties, 6 SA Armd Div, including Officers, ORs and CCs (UDF Personnel only).

<sup>21</sup> S. Monick, *A bugle calls*, p. 324.

<sup>22</sup> J.C. McManus, *The deadly brotherhood*, p. 3.

per cent of riflemen were killed and 62 per cent wounded.<sup>23</sup> The casualties of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division would have followed this trend.<sup>24</sup>

According to Atkinson, the infantry accounted for fourteen per cent of the American Army's overseas strength but sustained seventy per cent of the casualties. A study of four infantry divisions in Italy found that it was quite rational for an infantryman to wonder "not whether he would be hit but when and how bad."<sup>25</sup> The life expectancy of new replacements was shorter than most. Veterans scathingly remarked that replacements were under the illusion that they were going to finish the war off. They were unwilling to listen to the advice of experienced men and did not keep their heads down until they had seen a friend being killed.<sup>26</sup>

The likelihood of a man becoming a casualty also relates to his own efficiency. Dinter identifies four phases of efficiency in a sixty day period. The first phase is a period of adaption during which the soldier becomes battle-wise. Then follows a long phase of great efficiency during which anxieties can be controlled fairly well. This is followed by an extended phase of exhaustion where the soldier's capacities are reduced but he overestimates his capabilities. During this stage he over-reacts to any stimuli. If the soldier is not relieved, his mood turns to apathy in what Dinter calls the vegetative stage. Physical injuries are most likely to occur during the overconfident stage.<sup>27</sup>



FIGURE 29: Bill Mauldin cartoon illustrating the precarious existence of the infantryman, captioned: "I feel like a fugitive from th' law of averages."

FROM: <http://www.stripes.com/02/nov02/mauldin/index.html>.

<sup>23</sup> J.C. McManus, *The deadly brotherhood*, p. 131.

<sup>24</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 156.

<sup>25</sup> R. Atkinson, *The day of battle*, p. 508.

<sup>26</sup> M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> E. Dinter, *Hero or coward*, p. 66.

The second highest number of casualties in the division was incurred by the tank regiments. Even within a particular regiment there were different grades of participation. According to Douglas Baker, the vast majority never saw an enemy in anger. “There were troopers shot out of four different tanks and others who never saw an enemy tank in anger”.<sup>28</sup>

In a report by Colonel Johnstone (Pretoria Regiment) on tank and personnel casualties, dated 29 June 1944, it is revealed that during the first month of operations, the regiment had lost forty Sherman tanks and twelve Stuart tanks. Nine Shermans blown up on mine fields, nine overturned on steep slopes, nine had mechanical defects and the rest were knocked out by enemy fire. The total number of men killed, wounded and sick was 65. Three officers and thirteen other ranks had been killed. Colonel Johnstone calculated that one to two casualties resulted from every knocked out tank (three in the case of a Stuart) and approximately thirty per cent of the casualties occurred outside the tank while carrying out reconnaissance on foot.<sup>29</sup> Very often, casualties were not fatal thanks to the protection afforded by a tank. Understandably, tank crews were reluctant to bail out of a burning tank because they were shot as they emerged.

Motorised infantry units such as the ILH/KimR lost more than fifty per cent of their strength and accounted for 55 per cent of the division’s total casualties.<sup>30</sup> As can be seen from Table VI below, among the branches of the service which suffered proportionally the highest number of casualties were the engineers and signallers who lost 21 per cent and eighteen per cent of their strength respectively – which is not dissimilar to the losses in armoured regiments. The artillery by comparison, lost approximately ten per cent of their own strength and also contributed ten per cent of the division’s total casualties. It can also be seen from the table that the Technical Services Corps (TSC) and medical services escaped lightly, each contributing less than one per cent of the division’s casualties. Surprisingly, the quartermaster or “Q” services lost six per cent of their strength, mostly due to road accidents. Nevertheless the job of bringing up ammunition was a dangerous one as they were a target for enemy artillery.<sup>31</sup> A number of military policemen (MPs) were shot and killed or wounded by civilians in the normal course of their duty after the war and in a notice from the division dated 6 June 1945, MPs were instructed to operate in pairs and carry firearms at all times. Permission was given to fire without challenging if they felt the situation required it.<sup>32</sup>

One of the many statistics which were analysed by Vagts was the number of officer casualties compared with those in other ranks. Apparently a ratio of twenty non-officers to one officer is considered normal. A relatively high number of officers taken prisoners, or missing, is a sign of crumbling morale. With the “riskier” services like the air forces, greater officer losses are to be expected since most pilots are of officer rank. During the Second World War, the number of senior officers killed was high in comparison to previous wars but many of these were due to accidents.<sup>33</sup> As can be seen in Table IV below, the ratio for the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division between 1 May 1944 and 7 August 1944 is twelve other ranks to one officer.

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<sup>28</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 391.

<sup>29</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 243, 11 SA Bde, Tank and personnel casualties, 29/6/1944.

<sup>30</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 163, Casualty returns, Battle casualties and Battle Accidents for the period 4/5/1944 to 27/1/1945.

<sup>31</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 163, Casualty returns, Battle casualties and Battle Accidents for the period 4/5/1944 to 27/1/1945.

<sup>32</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 243, “B” to SAA 6 SA Armd Div CC No. 113.

<sup>33</sup> A. Vagts, Battle and other combatant casualties in the Second World War, *The Journal of Politics* (7) 3, 1945, pp. 271-286.

Vagts' findings confirm that the infantry was the most risky of all the branches of the army. He found that in the North African and Italian campaigns, the infantry represented 19.8% of the total strength but suffered 70% of the casualties. Military aviation remains the riskiest service and the ratio of fatalities to other casualties is highest.<sup>34</sup>

#### d) Culture and the attitude to casualties

In cultural history, the emphasis is on belief systems and practices of everyday people. Reality is culturally defined or "culturally constructed" and military reality is also culturally dependent. Quoting Keegan, John Lynn argues that war is more culture than politics. Battle styles are not simply the pragmatic products of technology but cultural choices. Consequently, attitudes towards casualties are also cultural. The ancient Greeks preferred to fight infantry battles which were brief and decisive in contrast to other forms of warfare which were perceived as less risky to the individual.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the lower casualty rate of the South Africans has also been attributed to cultural and political factors.

In the opinion of Neil Orpen, the corps commander, Lieutenant General Sidney C. Kirkman, deliberately avoided the allocation of tasks which could result in severe casualties, as this could cripple the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division as a fighting formation. In Orpens' words, "...volunteers for service anywhere in the world were not besieging the recruiting depots in South Africa".<sup>36</sup> There appears to be some truth in this as during a meeting at American Army HQ in Siena on 22 September, Axelson was told by an American officer that: "The C-in-C had to treat the 6 SA Armoured Division tenderly in its advance from Rome to Florence, because of the lack of reinforcements. He had purposefully saved it casualties where possible".<sup>37</sup> Axelson added that: "Some officers of the Div are of the opinion that the Guardsmen are given a disproportionate share of sticky jobs."<sup>38</sup>

The casualty statistics, however, do not support this assertion. The Guards Brigade group was one of two infantry brigades. In addition to the infantry brigades, there was an armoured brigade which suffered a lower casualty rate than an infantry brigade. As can be seen from Table IV below, the Guards Brigade incurred approximately one third of the total killed during the drive to Florence. Considering that the Guards Brigade was one of three brigade groups, the casualties were fairly equally distributed. On the other hand, UDF casualty figures include the formations under divisional control (not attached to one of the three brigades), such as the artillery – which suggests that the Guards Brigade did in fact incur slightly more than their fair share of casualties, especially in the case of fatal casualties.

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<sup>34</sup> A. Vagts, Battle and other combatant casualties in the Second World War, *The Journal of Politics* (7) 3, 1945, p. 290.

<sup>35</sup> J.A. Lynn, The embattled future of academic military history, *The Journal of Military History* 61 (4), 1997, pp. 787-788.

<sup>36</sup> Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 171.

<sup>37</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 121.

<sup>38</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 126.

	Killed		Wounded		Missing		Total	
	Offrs	OR	Offrs	OR	Offrs	OR	Offrs	OR
UDF Tps	31	331	152	1816	5	78	188	2225
24 Gds Bde	10	145	41	621	0	9	51	775
	41	476	193	2437	5	87	239	3000

The Guards Brigade group, including their support units, numbered 4,667 officers and men. It can be seen from Appendix E that for the entire period during which the Guards Brigade was under command of the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division, it suffered 229 killed (4,9 per cent of their total strength). This is very similar to the South African casualty rate despite the fact that the Guards Brigade was not under command during the final phase from February 1945 onwards. Based on the casualty figure of 711 and the division strength of 15,706, the fatality rate of the South Africans was 4,5 per cent.

The statement of Lieutenant C.J. Beaumont, quoted by Kros in *War in Italy*, reflects a commonly held opinion, but there appears to be no substance to it. Beaumont noted a marked difference between the attitudes of the South African infantry and a brigade of Guards – the officers in particular:<sup>40</sup>

I admired the courage of the Guards officers but not their suicidal methods of attack, which resulted inevitably in heavy casualties. Time and again, the direct frontal attack was used when enemy positions could have been taken just as effectively and with far fewer casualties by seeking out the enemy's flanks and weak points and making full use of the cover available.

There were occasions when the South African units also suffered heavy casualties in situations where there was no alternative to a direct frontal assault. But nearly all the Guards brigade officers belonged to an "officer class", supremely brave but with inadequate training, whereas most of our South African officers had come up through the ranks, and our tactical training seems to have been more thorough.<sup>41</sup>

During the First World War, where the South Africans were under the command of the British, they suffered losses disproportionately high for such a small population. According to Hartshorn, the response was to adopt the "Boer" method of fighting, characterized by the following basic approaches: "Reconnoitre; find the soft spot; find the way round; use cover; better to sweat than bleed; be mobile constantly; ensure speed of movement."<sup>42</sup> Hartshorn believes that in the frontier wars and Anglo-Boer Wars, where numerically small armies opposed vast hordes, a military tradition and a way of thinking developed "by which careful manoeuvre and taking full advantage of the camouflage qualities of rock and bush compensated for the inadequacy of numbers".<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 163, Casualty returns, Battle Casualties and Battle Accidents for the period 1/5/1944 to 7/8/1944.

<sup>40</sup> In order to obtain a commission in a Guards regiment, an officer was still required to have an independent income.

<sup>41</sup> J. Kros, *War in Italy*, p. 78.

<sup>42</sup> E.P. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk*, p. 21.

<sup>43</sup> E.P. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk*, p. 21.

In the words of Brigadier Hartshorn, this “Boer training brought victories with so few casualties that, in the early days, senior Allied officers were frequently to question whether the enemy had actually been fighting. As the war progressed, however, they realized that there was something worthwhile in the methods “those damned Boers used”.<sup>44</sup> The recipe seems to have been British discipline combined with colonial cunning.

During the last month of the war, most battalions remarked on how light their casualties had been. The 4/13 FFR, an Indian regiment, contributed a relatively high proportion of casualties during this period. They lost 22 killed or died of wounds and they are buried at Castiglione together with the other 6<sup>th</sup> Division casualties.<sup>45</sup> In terms of missing and captured, the numbers were also comparatively slight. Since the disaster at Tobruk, the surrender of South African troops had become a sensitive matter. General Poole had possibly been informed that any further significant act of surrender would have serious political and military consequences.<sup>46</sup> There were no large scale surrenders of South Africans in Italy. There were also no major friendly fire incidents such as one which caused great losses to the Polish troops. Neither were there big blunders such as the dropping of parachutists into the sea off Sicily which cost hundreds of American lives.

The role of armour was not the same for each phase of the campaign, and within a particular tank regiment, experiences were individualized. Douglas Baker wrote that even within his own regiment, the Natal Mounted Rifles, there were men who never came into contact with the enemy, whereas other had numerous tanks shot from under them. An article in the *Rand Daily Mail* of 7 July 1944 tells of one such person. Lieutenant B. Rightford had nine tanks blown up or burned up under him since he first went into action in Italy. He had cost his government £160,000 but his comrades in the Natal Mounted Rifles said that he was worth every penny. Trooper Dennis May of Durban lost three tanks in three weeks, including one twenty hours after he received it.<sup>47</sup>

In human terms, the casualties of 11 SA Armoured Brigade as a whole for one month showed that the only infantry regiment in the Brigade (ILH/KimR) suffered many more deaths than the individual tank regiments involved in the same operations. In terms of wounded, however, the SSB tops the list, suggesting that armour prevented fatal casualties, but did not give total protection.

	Killed			Wounded			Missing		
	Offrs	O/Rs	CCs	Offrs	O/Rs	CCs	Offrs	O/Rs	CCs
PAG	1	3		7	28			3	
PR	3	12		3	48	2		1	
SSB		7	1	13	71	2			
ILH/KimR	3	20		10	67				
19 Fd Amb					4				
Total	7	42	1	33	218	4		4	

<sup>44</sup> E.P. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk*, p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> W.E.H. Condon, *The Frontier Force Rifles*, p. 269.

<sup>46</sup> A.B. Theunissen, Major-General W.H. Evered Poole, CB, CBE, DSO:1902-1969 Personal Retrospects, *Military History Journal* 9(3) 1994, p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 7/7/1944, S.A. tank officer “worth £160,000”.

<sup>48</sup> SADDCC,WD, Box 540, PR, 1-31 August 1944. Report by Col A. Johnstone.



## e) Battle Accidents

Besides analysing modes of warfare through the ages and military attitudes towards casualties, Vagts examined how changing technology had an effect on the nature of casualties and improvements in medical treatment. One result of the merger of war with science and industry was a new category of battle accidents involving the machinery used in battle, before or afterwards.<sup>49</sup> During one week in December 1943, when fighting was not very active, four times as many British soldiers in the Italian theatre of war were injured as were wounded at the front. Causes given were road accidents involving military vehicles, burns from gasoline fires, dockyard accidents and falls.<sup>50</sup> In his final analysis, Vagts points out that accidents in the armed forces and the losses resulting from them are similar to those occurring in industrial society.<sup>51</sup>

Battle accidents occurred during training, at work, at play, while on the move, and while getting up to no good. A battle accident is defined as an accident which occurs within a theatre of war and is defined as:

(a) Accidental injuries sustained in specific operational areas, but not occurring during action or in close proximity to the enemy.

(b) Accidental injuries sustained in action or in close proximity to the enemy, but caused by or contributed to by the misconduct of the injured soldier.<sup>52</sup>

Accidents continued to take their toll throughout the campaign and during the post-war period and make up a high proportion of the total war dead and wounded. The relationship between battle accidents and battle casualties can be analysed with the help of Table VI below. It can be seen that 25 per cent of the all wounds and injuries suffered by the division were classified as battle accidents. This proportion was far lower for the infantry. On the other hand, in non-combat units such as the Quartermaster Services Corps (QSC) and Technical Services Corps (TSC), battle accidents far exceeded battle casualties. Considering the dangers inherent in working with big machinery, the percentage of accidents in the armoured units is surprisingly low. The artillery units were also involved with vehicles and equipment and their battle accidents numbered approximately fifty per cent of their total injuries.

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<sup>49</sup> A. Vagts, Battle and other combatant casualties in the Second World War, *The Journal of Politics* (7) 3, 1945, p. 271.

<sup>50</sup> A. Vagts, Battle and other combatant casualties in the Second World War, *The Journal of Politics* (7) 3, 1945, p. 289.

<sup>51</sup> A. Vagts, Battle and other combatant casualties in the Second World War, *The Journal of Politics* (7) 3, 1945, p. 294.

<sup>52</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 181, File 15/0, Div Adm Instrs, 6 SA Armd Div, Medical Adm Ins, 7/7/1944; The whole of Italy was classified an Operational Area for this purpose.

**TABLE VI**  
**Battle Casualties and Battle Accidents (excluding “Remained On Duty” – including all ranks) 8 May 1944 – 27 January 1945 in the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division.<sup>53</sup>**

	X	Y		Z	TOTAL	% Div Cas	% Strength
		BC	BA				
Armd	91	410	94	11	606	17	25
ILH/KimR	104	350	12	33	499	14	[57]
Motd Inf	269	996	145	84	1494	41.5	47
Arty	38	226	122	1	387	10.8	10
NMR/SAAF	47	147	18	10	222	6.9	[22]
Eng	25	81	28	4	138	3.8	[21]
Sigs	7	20	37	1	65	1.8	18
QSC	7	9	71	2	89	2.5	6
TSC	2	13	20	-	35	1	[5]
Med	1	10	10	-	21	0.6	7
Misc	6	7	23	-	36	1	-
Total	599	2269	580	146	3592	100	-
24 Gds Bde	228	1000	112	60	1400		44
Div + Gds Bde	825	3269	692	206	4992		
Total CCs	23	76	71	7	177		

- X Killed  
 Y Wounded (excluding “Remained on Duty”)  
 Z Missing  
 BC Wounded Battle Casualty  
 BA Injured Battle Accident  
 % Div Cas Percentage of total casualties of the division  
 % Strength Percentage in relation to WET (War Establishment Tables) strength of respective branch of service within the division. Numbers in brackets may be incorrect due to illegibility of the source document.
- Note: During the period in question, the number of sick evacuated was 9,063 of whom 2,101 were British members of the division.

As early as April 1944, the careless handling of firearms was a concern to the division. Already there had been enough casualties for HQ to threaten court-martial to any offender. It seems that at this stage, the novelty of being in a theatre of war had not yet faded and soldiers were shooting indiscriminately at power line insulators and transformers.<sup>54</sup> While in the thick of operations, accidents were still occurring. On 9 July 1944, the ILH/KimR diary records: Private P.N. Smith died as a result of accidentally shooting himself. Again on 17 July, Corporal E. Satchell accidentally shot himself while cleaning his Tommy gun.<sup>55</sup> On 16 May,

<sup>53</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 163, Casualty returns, Battle Casualties and Battle Accidents for the period 4/5/1944 to 27/1/1945.

<sup>54</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 624, 1/6 Fd Rgt, 624, D.R.O. 88/44, 22/6/1944.

<sup>55</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 635, ILH KimR, File B8 60.

Private R.J. Britz accidentally shot himself while cleaning his Thompson sub-machine gun (TSMG) in preparation for a parade.<sup>56</sup>

Along with firearms, vehicles were the most common cause of accidents – especially during periods of rest. Among the number of accidental deaths during the rest period at Lucca, was that of Private K.R. Adams (RNC) who fell from a moving truck on 31 March 1945. On the first day of April, two were killed including a 25 year old Military Policeman, Corporal W.D. Viljoen of Wynberg in Cape Town. Corporal W.J. Cottam (WR/DLR) who had won the American Bronze Star leading a patrol in pursuit of the enemy beyond Monte Stanco. On 9 April 1945, Troopers H.A. Liebmann and A.C. Coetzee of the NMR were killed in a vehicle accident on their way back from the training exercise “Klip”.<sup>57</sup>

At the end of the war, officers, with their Jeeps or 3-tonners, had the opportunity to tour extensively in Italy and France, but were being unaccustomed to the narrow coastal roads cut out of the mountain sides.<sup>58</sup> Although not all were fatal, the division reported that during the week ending 24 August 1945, there were five vehicle accidents. Four of the five involved a vehicle being driven by a military policeman – three of the vehicles were Jeeps. In each case, the driver of the other vehicle was an Italian civilian.<sup>59</sup> Motorcycle accidents were, as always, more likely to be fatal. Six kilometres south west of Monza on 17 May 1945, Lance-Corporal P.J. Griggs of 17 Fd Pk Sqn, SAEC, while riding his Matchless motorcycle, swerved to avoid some children in the road and hit an Italian man who was standing on the pavement. Griggs cracked his skull and died on the scene.<sup>60</sup>

The reckless driving of certain dispatch riders (DRs) or “Don Rs” was also blamed for a number of accidents. While it was appreciated that DRs wanted to complete their journey in the shortest time possible, they were prone to driving at “excessive speeds with a definite lack of caution”. Although the bad roads were partly to blame for the high incidence of accidents, squadron commanders were requested to warn their DRs to “temper their ardour with caution”.<sup>61</sup>

A number of deaths and injuries occurred from falling out of windows. On 20 April 1944, while the division was in the Altamura area, after three or four glasses of wine, Sergeant W.D. Boast who was sent to Italy as a photographer for the historical recording section, fell out of a window and landed on his back on the pavement, six metres below. It appears that he was unfamiliar with the billets which he had entered that day, and when he woke in the middle of the night needing a urinal, forgot he was not on the ground floor and climbed out of the window, falling five to six metres. With multiple fractures and close to death, Boast was taken to hospital in Bari. He took six months to recover from his injuries and it was therefore necessary for another photographer to be assigned to the section.<sup>62</sup> At least three similar accidents are known to have occurred.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> SADDCC, Personnel files, Pte R.J. Brits, Court of Enquiry, 18/5/1945.

<sup>57</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 161, Casualty index, 1945.

<sup>58</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 647, RNC, 14/9/1945.

<sup>59</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 162, 14/18 Bde Signals, Traffic Accidents.

<sup>60</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 164, File 6 ADE/5/3/2, Military Police report.

<sup>61</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 240, HQ Sqn 6 SA Armd Div Sigs, Memorandum, Dispatch Riders, 8/7/1944.

<sup>62</sup> SADDCC Div Docs, Box 173, File HQS/27 Battle Casualties, Sgt W.D. Boast; SADDCC, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, Letter to Officer in Charge of Historical Records, 23/4/1944.

<sup>63</sup> SADDCC Div Docs, Box 171, Discipline, C of I – Death of No. 281666V Pte Robinson D.G., Rear HQ SA Armd Div, 4/5/1945.

During the months of July and August 1945, the UDF in Italy would suffer an accidental death almost every second day – a disproportionate number of which were NEAS or CC troops. The week ending 25 July 1945 was a particularly bad for the MEF when thirteen returning soldiers were killed in a plane crash on 17 July 1945.<sup>64</sup>

A total of 31 people died in air crashes in July during the repatriation phase. No fewer than four aircraft crashed at Kisumu on Lake Victoria, Kenya, where General Dan Pienaar's plane had gone down on 19 December 1943. Elsewhere in Kenya, there were crashes at Nairobi and Jubuti. Many of these men had survived five years of war. During a visit to the RNC on 29 July, General Poole impressed on everyone the necessity of taking a “calm and reasoned view” of the recent air tragedies.<sup>65</sup> Still, on 28 September, a Dakota crashed near Broken Hill. Nine were killed and a number injured.<sup>66</sup> During the whole of 1945, from January to December, there were 93 fatal battle accidents including 31 who died in air crashes on their way home in July 1945.<sup>67</sup>

#### f) Evacuation of casualties

In a typical division of 15,000 men, there would be approximately 1,000 medical orderlies and stretcher bearers.<sup>68</sup> This number does not include the non-divisional medical and hospital staff. As can be seen from the order of battle at the end of May 1944, the 6<sup>th</sup> SA Armoured Division incorporated two field ambulance units (one attached to each brigade). The 20<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance attached to 12 SA Motorised Brigade was usually situated 15 to 25 kilometres behind the most forward localities. Each field ambulance unit maintained a number of forward and rear dressing stations – 19 Field Ambulance with 11 SA Armoured Brigade, maintained a main dressing station manned by headquarters company, no further back than eight kilometres from the front line. Each unit also had light sections which were about five kilometres from the front line.<sup>69</sup>

Soldiers were most concerned about what would become of them if they were wounded. Evacuation procedures were the subject of lectures and also part of the experience for many. The chain of evacuation as described in official orders, in January 1944 (before the move to Italy) is a minefield of acronyms. Organization could vary according to circumstances:

First aid is rendered in AFVs [armoured fighting vehicles] by members of the crew or by SAMC [South African Medical Corps] attached to unit. Casualties will be brought back (in unit transport or by stretcher-bearers attached to unit to RAP [Regimental Aid Post] at RHQ [Regimental Headquarters] for attention by RMO [Regimental Medical Officer]. Evacuation from RAP to ADS [Advanced Dressing Station] at Bde HQ [Brigade Headquarters] will be by unit vehicles assisted by amb cars [ambulance cars] from Fd Amb [Field ambulance]. Evacuation from ADS to MDS [Main Dressing Station] will be by Fd Amb amb cars, ambulance cars from MDS [Main Dressing Station] to CCS [Casualty Clearing Station] by MAC amb cars.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, Report of Deaths, 25/7/1945; SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, Report of Deaths, 17/7/1945

<sup>65</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 647, RNC, 29/7/1945.

<sup>66</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 257, ATC/pers/13, 6/10/1945; Kalk Bay Historical Association, Bulletin No. 6, March 2002, p. 174.

<sup>67</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 163, Casualties Index 1945.

<sup>68</sup> M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 144.

<sup>69</sup> N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 169.

<sup>70</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 181, Standing Orders, Standing Orders – Medical, 7/1/1944.

The route travelled by wounded men is best explained with reference to the final operations during April 1945. For the attacks on Monte Sole – Caprara – Abelle in April 1945, 20 SA Field Ambulance was in support of 12 SA Motorised Brigade. The casualty clearing posts (CCP) of this field ambulance were sited as close as possible to the regimental aid posts (RAP). Battle Casualties passed back from advanced dressing station (ADS) to forward dressing station (FDS). The casualty clearing station (CCS) was normally 42 to 64 kilometres behind FDS if road communication was good. In this case, it was at Castiglione. Usually, priority casualties were taken back to the CCS then evacuated rearward by ambulance car to the general hospital in Florence (later Bologna). There was a main dressing station (MDS) lying behind brigade headquarters which dealt mainly with the sick, not battle casualties. The MDS is essentially the “B” echelon of the field ambulance which, for the Monte Sole battles, was situated at Vaiano, between Castiglione and 107 SA General Hospital in Florence.

At the Battle of Monte Sole, the sequence was as follows:<sup>71</sup>

Carried by stretcher to the RAP.

Jeep ambulance to CCP.

4 x 4 Humber or AFS ambulance car to the ADS at Ponte Locatello (near Pian di Setta).

All casualties then evacuated back to FDS at Castiglione.

After Monte Sole, once the pursuit started, the MDS moved up to San Giovanni and a CCS was left at La Quercia to stage casualties – as the line of evacuation had lengthened so much. Later, the MDS was at Montagnana and the ADS remained close behind the brigade.<sup>72</sup> The Germans had a similar system of evacuation and certain South Africans who were passed back through German lines after being taken prisoner, were treated with “civility and kindness” which diminished as they got further to the rear.<sup>73</sup>

During the pursuit in the Po valley which was densely populated, sites for aid posts were not difficult to find and local civilians helped identify and clean suitable premises. Places occupied included schools, farmhouses, villas, village halls, store rooms and hospitals, kitchens and living rooms, and even a carpenter’s shop. A new innovation born out of past experience was the addition of a section of 12 Graves Registration Unit (GRU) to the ADS. The war diary of 12GRU tellingly pronounced: “The odd few bodies which often accumulate at an ADS and cause such embarrassment, were taken over by them and dealt with in the most efficient manner”.<sup>74</sup> The quarterly report of 20 Fd Amb for the period ending 30 June 1945 praises the work of all the staff from the clerks, to the ambulance drivers and the medical orderlies who had to pack and unpack – sometimes three times in one day. The spirit of wanting to help pervaded the whole atmosphere, for often, complete strangers would be found in the ADS, trying to do something, even if it were only handing round tea, fetching a drink of water or carrying stretchers.<sup>75</sup>

A report produced by the American Fifth Army in 1945 stated that “only young, well-trained, strong-backed individuals could perform the gruelling task of moving litter [stretcher]

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<sup>71</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 739, 20 SA Fd Amb, 1-30 June 1945; SADDDC, WD, Box 739, 8 SA CCS, 1-31 May 1945.

<sup>72</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 739, 20 SA Fd Amb, 1-30 June 1945; SADDDC, WD, Box 739, 8 SA CCS, 1-31 May 1945.

<sup>73</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, E.S. Rivett-Carnac – Mrs Rivett-Carnac, no date.

<sup>74</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 739, 20 SA Fd Amb, 1-30 June 1945.

<sup>75</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 739, 20 SA Fd Amb, 1-30 June 1945.

casualties over the terrain which characterized fighting in Italy.”<sup>76</sup> It is pertinent therefore, to point out that in the 6 SA Armoured Division, this job was normally done by the Cape Corps who came in for high praise.

The journey further down the line and ultimately home can be understood through the numerous references in Hodgson’s letters which track the progress of his friend George Mennie who had been wounded in the leg by a 20 mm armour piercing round. On 29 June 1944, after waiting for ten days as required, Hodgson informed his parents that Mennie “looked very cheerful before going down the line” and speculated that he would be out of action for approximately three months. Two weeks later, Mennie wrote to his friends in the RNC informing them that he would be going back to the Union for a series of skin grafts and operations. Whereas many of those with serious wounds did return to their units, it soon became clear that Mennie would not be rehabilitated in Italy, as Hodgson explained to his parents: “He will not be seeing us until the end of the war”.<sup>77</sup> After spending time in hospital in Egypt, Mennie arrived in the Union at the beginning of September 1944 to be treated by the renowned cosmetic surgeon, Dr Penn, and he healed in time to transfer to the SAAF before the end of the war.

#### **g) Facilities for the sick and wounded**

The UDF had four field hospitals and one casualty clearing station in Italy. In addition, there were dental units and hygiene units. In a war zone, a hospital consisted of everything except the building and some hospitals made regular moves as demands dictated. For example, the 600 bedded 108<sup>th</sup> South African General Hospital moved from Rome to Florence, but as it became too small in December 1944, it was replaced by the 107<sup>th</sup> South African General Hospital which had 1,200 beds. The 108<sup>th</sup> moved back south. Then as the war progressed in 1945, the 108<sup>th</sup> moved through Bologna and ended up in Milan during the post-war period.<sup>78</sup>

The 700 bedded 102<sup>nd</sup> South African General Hospital was at Bari as from May of 1944. The building was another of the grand projects started by Mussolini but never finished. Apparently it was a “pig-sty” when the Allies took occupation. By the time Lieutenant Reg Wright wrote an article for *Outspan* magazine, he noted that it was a picture of serenity and veritable League of Nations which had treated patients from Britain, Yugoslavia, Cyprus, Greece and Palestine. The doctors who had originally been based in Cairo included Captain P.C. Engle, formerly a District Surgeon from Johannesburg.<sup>79</sup>

One of the main functions of the 102<sup>nd</sup> was the repatriation of boarded and wounded men back to the Union. According to Lieutenant Wright, who was a military observer with the South African public relations unit, the patients were treated like “lords” by the doctors and nurses. One of the nurses to be photographed by the public relations people in Bari, was Olga Norton, the twin of the Southern Rhodesian VC winner Lieutenant Gerard Norton.<sup>80</sup> Olga Norton had been serving with 8 CCS and was now on her way to England for the investiture of her brother with the VC. The unit war diary describes her as “the ideal type of Sister for a CCS – young and cheerful with great stamina which enables her to stand up to any amount of

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<sup>76</sup> *A Military Encyclopaedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, p. 517.

<sup>77</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 18/7/1944.

<sup>78</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 93; SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>79</sup> SADDDC, Photographic Section, CN5-CN10; Militêre Geneeskunde in Suid Afrika, 1913-1983, p. 70.

<sup>80</sup> SADDDC, Photographic Section, CN5-CN10; Militêre Geneeskunde in Suid Afrika, 1913-1983, p. 70.

heavy work”.<sup>81</sup> According to Sampie de Wet, only two nurses from 54 FDS and the eight attached to 8 CCS in Castiglione were allowed to wear the divisional flash.<sup>82</sup>

The 106<sup>th</sup> South African General Hospital was in Rome and included a section of the old mental hospital. It had 600 beds. Some of the heaviest work was clearing out spaces in which to set up a new facility. Although it was previously a modern Italian hospital, the building which housed the 108<sup>th</sup> SA General Hospital in Florence had been damaged in the fighting and in the beginning, it was still not properly equipped and the grounds were strewn with mines.<sup>83</sup>

Although it was not a South African hospital, many South Africans passed through the 92<sup>nd</sup> British General Hospital in the Miano area of Naples. Special cases and long term cases for evacuation to the UK were first flown to Naples. In 1945 there were three flights daily from Florence. The 92<sup>nd</sup> was subject to crowding when there were big pushes up at the front. Casualties came in by plane from forward airstrips, from convoys of ambulances or off the ships in the harbour. During the summer months, the wards were sweltering and full of flies, and in July 1944 the city and harbour was still subjected to the occasional air-raid.<sup>84</sup> For the walking wounded, who were fortunate enough to have proper clothing, there was plenty to do in Naples and for hospital patients, the operas were free.<sup>85</sup>

Another British Hospital through which many South Africans passed, was the 31<sup>st</sup> British General Hospital in Arezzo. Lionel Wulfohn was evacuated to the 31<sup>st</sup>, which specialized in head and spinal injuries. The many nationalities, races and religions represented there included Ghurkhas, Sikhs, South Africans, Poles, Rhodesians and British. There was also a German known to all the English patients as “Ted” – short for Tedesco (the Italian word for German).<sup>86</sup> In the ward with Wulfohn was a man from Kimberley who had an ugly head wound which had affected his ability to speak. Nursing assistants would walk him up and down the corridors teaching him to speak again. Coincidentally, Sampie de Wet of the SAWAS visited Arezzo at this time and was asked to speak in Afrikaans to a boy who had been wounded in the head and had “partially lost the power of speech”. This young boy gave Sampie his address and asked her to write to his mother. This she did with great difficulty as “there was little that I could say that was comforting”.<sup>87</sup>

While the medical treatment of South African soldiers in Italy was given high priority, and the standard of hygiene was as high as humanly possible, the treatment cannot be compared to modern day methods in a first world facility. Medical staff worked to the highest standards possible in a war zone, but deaths occurred which would have been preventable in normal circumstances. Even with the overcrowding, flies and heat, some deaths remain inexplicable. Private Alexander Swanson of the Technical Services Corps got a piece of a hacksaw blade in his eye on 31 October 1944. He was taken to 31 British Hospital at Arezzo where he underwent an operation. He was given penicillin, but his condition deteriorated rapidly and he died ten days later of cardiac failure.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 739, 8 SA CCS, 26-30 August 1945.

<sup>82</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p. 133.

<sup>83</sup> SADDCC, Photographic Section, N251- N253.

<sup>84</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 429.

<sup>85</sup> James Bourhill Collection, L.M. Wulfohn, unpublished memoirs.

<sup>86</sup> James Bourhill Collection, L.M. Wulfohn, unpublished memoirs.

<sup>87</sup> S. De Wet, *Shifty in Italy* p. 65.

<sup>88</sup> SADDCC, Medical records, Pte A. Swanson, 234356V.

There are other examples of relatively minor or treatable injuries which unnecessarily resulted in death. Trooper Royce Fuller (SSB), who died from a perforated bowel, could have been saved, given the correct treatment available at the time. It can be seen from his medical records that Fuller was on penicillin at the 92<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital but the contamination was diagnosed too late. It is clear from his diary entry of 13 July 1944 that Douglas Baker believed that he was only one of three patients at 92<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital in Naples who was prescribed penicillin.<sup>89</sup> Morphine, opium and copious amounts of sweet tea were among the many medications administered to the wounded. Sulphonamide powder was poured into wounds and was apparently very effective at preventing infection.<sup>90</sup>

Despite the bravery of the stretcher bearers and professionalism all the way down the line, facilities were often lacking at the regimental aid post to deal with serious cases and the transporting of the wounded to the rear could take a long time depending on the terrain. For this reason, amputations would often result in death.

Clearly, illness was the main reason for hospitalization further to the rear. During the month of February 1945, 106 SA Combined General Hospital had 322 admissions and 266 discharges (total capacity was 600 beds). Admissions consisted of:

UDF Other Ranks	261
UDF Officers	24
UDF NEAS	18
British Other Ranks	10
South African Military Nursing Service	9

Among the admissions, seventeen were classified as battle casualties, 27 as battle accidents, fifteen as accidental injuries – the rest were illnesses.<sup>91</sup> Closer to the front, during the period July 1944 to April 1945, 8 SA Casualty Clearing Station (8 CCS) admitted 1,451 accidental injuries, 2,009 Battle Casualties, and 670 cases of VD. During the winter months, most serious cases were taken directly to Florence. In the middle of November 1945, 8 CCS moved from Signa outside Florence to Castiglione where they occupied a three storey school building. It was previously used by the Germans as a hospital. During November 1944, the admissions to 8 SA CCS totalled 485.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 427.

<sup>90</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, E.S. Rivett-Carnac – Mrs Rivett-Carnac, date unknown.

<sup>91</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>92</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 739, 8 SA CCS, 1-30 November 1944.



Nationality	Battle Casualty	Battle Accident	Sick
UDF	14	30	241
UK Indian	10	28	118
Indian	9	4	1
USA			1
French			2
Palestinian		2	13
Mauritian		1	
Other (Italian)		3	8
Total	33	68	384
Grand total			485

Two convalescent depots were established to provide rest and convalesce for those who were recovering from wounds and illness but who were not well enough to return to their units. At No. 1 Convalescent Depot in Rome, eleven officers and 45 ORs provided a rest centre for UDF as well as some Canadian and New Zealand troops. According to the CO: “A good spirit prevails among the convalescents... war news having a stimulating effect – and there was a dance twice a month. Discharges appeared keen to get back to the fray.” Petty thieving was prevalent in the unit (No 1 in Rome) and some patients had been appointed to “act as Gestapo”. At No. 2 Convalescent Depot in Macerata (very much out of the way – east of Assisi, close to the Adriatic Sea) trench foot was very prevalent in early 1945. On 15 February 1945, the OC experienced what he described as his “first trouble of colour bar”. A South African patient applied to go to a convalescent depot where there were no non-Europeans. Europeans and non-Europeans had separate sleeping quarters “but” said the OC, “at lectures, parades, meals etc., we leave it to the individual to be next to a NE or not”.<sup>94</sup> Occupational therapy included moulding clay under the instruction of an Italian potter. Embroidery also helped restore flexibility in the fingers.<sup>95</sup>

#### h) Illness and ailments

In general, South Africans had a low rate of sickness (0,6 or 0,7 per thousand per day) as opposed to two per thousand per day for the Guards Brigade. This was during the summer when there was an outbreak of malaria. A medical officer put it down to the stronger constitution of the colonials and better hygiene.<sup>96</sup> The sickness rate while in training in the desert was higher than two per thousand, and for troops in the Union, the rate also hovered around two per thousand.<sup>97</sup> Various foodstuffs such as margarine were “vitaminised” but the low sickness rate was more likely due to high morale.<sup>98</sup>

As winter approached, the rate of sickness increased among the troops and there was an outbreak of typhoid among the civilian populations of northern towns – notably Prato. In winter, personal hygiene lapsed and civilian houses became more “louse infested and

<sup>93</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 739, 8 SA CCS, 1-30 November 1944.

<sup>94</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-Div Activities, February and March 1945.

<sup>95</sup> SADDCC, Photographic Section, N440-N442.

<sup>96</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 68.

<sup>97</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 189, File AQ 3/20, Censorship, Press article, health of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division, 27/9/1943.

<sup>98</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, Adms 6 SA Armd Div UDF-CMF, Medical Administrative Instruction, 1/1/1945.

unhygienic”. Military personnel were instructed to clean buildings thoroughly on occupation and to maintain the highest levels of personal hygiene.<sup>99</sup>

The rats, which multiplied particularly in heavily bombed towns, also contaminated the rivers and according to an Allied Armies Italy (AAI) routine order, there had been four fatal cases of Wiels Disease as a result of swimming and bathing in rivers. No camps were to be sited on river banks near towns where infestations were most likely to occur. Engineers were required to wear gumboots when working on bridges over the Arno and anti-rat operations were ordered.<sup>100</sup>

Trench foot was caused by exposure of feet or hands to prolonged periods of wetness and cold. The usual exposure required was three to six days but with colder weather, the exposure was often shorter. The most important contributing factors were those which tended to impair circulation in feet, such as immobility, tight leggings, tight boots, (due to poor fit or wearing too many socks). This was considered to be a preventable disease and measures to combat trench foot included an intensive educational programme in rest centres.<sup>101</sup>

If a man’s feet remained wet and cold for a long period of time, they would first swell, the toes becoming like sausages. They would then turn blue and gangrene was the next step. Walking became so painful as to render the man completely ineffective as a soldier and he would have to be evacuated. Only a small percentage ever returned to the line. Trench foot was treated with gentian violet which was not really effective. The only solution was to keep the feet dry but during their four days spent in the line, boots were not removed – the laces were only loosened. Parcels from home often contained socks. Socks were much in demand because they tended to shrink.<sup>102</sup>

Medical staff maintained that the army socks were the best because the knit on home-made socks was too course. The best way of keeping feet dry was to immerse boots in hot dubbin – but only for short periods. It was recommended that troops be rotated out of the line regularly to dry out clothing. Men had trouble putting on boots in the morning because they had frozen stiff. The solution was to tuck one’s boots into the blankets or to order a bigger size boot.<sup>103</sup> Fur-lined boots of the airman’s style were specially ordered for equipping the forward observation officers but these arrived too late to be of any use.<sup>104</sup>

From the time that the division went back into the line on 2 April 1945, up to the end of the war, the breakdown of casualties admitted by 20 SA Field Ambulance was as follows:<sup>105</sup>

Battle Casualties	575	29.8%
Battle Accidents	244	12.6%
Exhaustion	8	0.4%
Sick	1104	57.2%

<sup>99</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, Engineer HQ, 6 ADE/5/9, 26/10/1944.

<sup>100</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, AAI Routine Order from A (O).

<sup>101</sup> *A Military Encyclopaedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945*, pp. 519-520.

<sup>102</sup> M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 145.

<sup>103</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, Adms 6 SA Armd Div UDF-CMF, Medical Administrative Instruction, 1/1/1945.

<sup>104</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 630, 7/23 Med Rgt, Lessons learned from ops, Report to CRA, 20/8/1944.

<sup>105</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box,739, 20 SA Fd Amb, 1-30 June 1945.

## i) Deaths and burials

Within a close-knit group of soldiers, death was a traumatic event which had repercussions for both primary and secondary support groups. After Frank Ledingham of 7 Platoon, “B” Company, RNC was killed by a sniper’s bullet at Bagnoregio on the night of 12 June 1944, McNicholas wrote home about the emotional consequences:

When you live with a chap in the army for years you feel that you’ve known him all your life. A wonderful bond of friendship is established by campaigning with a chap. You go through the same little hardships, you’re hungry and tired and thirsty together. We used to be together in the same Bren team which made us more close than the other chaps. We used to share a trench and sleep in the same bed, share our water and use the same cover. I feel very lost without him. We are writing to his mother as soon as we can.<sup>106</sup>

It was customary for the commanding officer to write a letter of condolence and usually close friends would also write to the family. Following the death in action of Sergeant O.O.M. (Kippy) Sangster at Chiusi, Lance Corporal E.W. Penny of HQ Coy FC/CTH was one of the many friends who wrote to his widow, Mona Sangster. Twice in one paragraph, he uses the word “brothers”:

We all loved Kippy, not only as a friend, but after being together for four years, we had somehow looked upon each other as brothers especially when in tough spots, and after the battles it would take time to realize just what had happened and what brave fellows had paid the big price. I can assure you that the blow to us who are left is just as though we had lost brothers whom we loved dearly and they were very sad and anxious days.<sup>107</sup>

During the mobile phase, the South African dead were normally buried by their comrades close to where they fell – preferably near a road. The exact map reference would be noted and the formation moved on. The graves concentration units had the responsibility of exhuming and reintering the dead of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division and were among the last to leave Italy. In a letter from the Ministry of Defence (Office of the War Records) the next-of-kin would be informed of the exact location of the temporary grave. Three weeks after the death of her husband, Mona Sangster was sent a letter stating that “A temporary cross, with durable inscription, will be erected by the War Graves Registration Unit as early as possible, and you may rest assured that your husband’s grave attended to and cared for”.<sup>108</sup>

Because the Germans were retreating, they were not always able to bury their dead. The Allies were left with this task and on some occasions, simply covered over the bodies with earth, leaving mounds dotted over the battlefield.<sup>109</sup> Five days after the battle of Monte Stanco, Axelson went over the battlefield. On the summit he found that among the German weapon pits and slit trenches, the dead had been covered with earth, and the area looked particularly forlorn with these rude mounds, shattered rifles, tin hats, pits and trenches and odd bits of equipment and clothing lying around.<sup>110</sup>

Following the Battle of Monte Stanco, the South African dead were buried in temporary graves near the regimental aid post (RAP). A few days later, according to an anecdote related by Monick, the bodies were exhumed to be transported to Castiglione for re-interment. They

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<sup>106</sup> Alison Sulentic Collection, L.G. McNicholas – Mr and Mrs McNicholas, 28/6/1944.

<sup>107</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, E.W. Penny – M. Sangster, 18/8/1944.

<sup>108</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, Office of the War Records – Mrs M. Sangster, 11/8/1944.

<sup>109</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 139.

<sup>110</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 139.

were transported in Jeep trailers as these were the only vehicles which could traverse the muddy mountain tracks. On one particularly muddy hill, it was decided to lift half of the bodies to make the load lighter, leave them at the wayside and return for them with empty trailers. When the Jeeps returned, the bodies were found to be bare-footed, the boots having been removed by civilians.<sup>111</sup>

In all wartime photographs, the crosses on temporary and permanent graves were made of wood. After the war, in the Commonwealth cemeteries, the crosses were replaced with white granite headstones. The granite for the Italian cemeteries came from Carrara where Michelangelo Buonaroti had sourced his material almost five centuries before. In addition to the deceased's number, rank, name, unit and date of death, families were allowed to choose a short inscription of their own wording. The Department of Defence informed the families that the cost of the headstone, erection, inscription and care and upkeep of the grave would be borne by the Imperial Graves Commission – in perpetuity.<sup>112</sup>

All battlefield graves were in time moved to one of the many Commonwealth war cemeteries. Members of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division are buried at more than a dozen different cemeteries, the main ones being Castiglione, Foiano Della Chiana, Bolsena and Cassino. Burials were made directly into hospital graveyards at Florence, Arezzo and Naples. Those who have no known grave are commemorated on the memorial at Cassino war cemetery. The Castiglione cemetery was established by the division for their own exclusive use. The first to be buried there were four Guardsmen who were attached to the Pretoria Regiment. Colonel Arthur Johnstone, the officer commanding the Pretoria Regiment, describes how the great cemetery came to be where it is:

As I was driving back from the fighting area in my Jeep, in failing light, I came across our RSM Max Friedlander and a working party digging graves on a steep hillside next to the road. Much to his annoyance, I stopped the operation and asked them to accompany me to a gently sloping field next to RHQ which had a magnificent panoramic view across the valleys to the mountains beyond.<sup>113</sup>

During the static phase of the campaign, the division was headquartered in the Castiglione area where there was also a casualty clearing station. The dead would be brought in from the surrounding battlefields and buried directly in the cemetery. In the front line, burials were not large affairs, only a few comrades would attend. The grave would be marked by a white cross with name and rank stencilled on it.

Below are four photographs of temporary graves which show individualism in their construction. Friends of the fallen soldiers would sometimes decorate a grave before taking a photograph to send home to the next of kin. Letters of condolence would take pains to point out the picturesque setting of the burial site – usually said to be “high on a hill” somewhere. Seen clockwise, the graves in Figure 30 below are as follows: First City/Cape Town Highlanders killed at Chiusi; Lieutenant Harry Barker (1/6/ Fd Rgt) who was killed by shell fragment at Bagnoregio and was buried in a vineyard in what is a typical (British) battlefield grave; Trooper Gerrit Thomas Ferreira (NMR), a teacher from Graaff-Reiniet, was killed twenty kilometres north of Rome along with other members of the tank crew; finally, (bottom left) is the grave of Lawrence McNicholas (RNC) who was seventeen years old when he was killed by mortar fire near Panzano.

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<sup>111</sup> S. Monick, *A bugle calls*, p. 453.

<sup>112</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, Office of the War Records – Mrs M. Sangster, 11/8/1944.

<sup>113</sup> G.B. Hobbs, *From Sicily to the Alps*, p. 166.



FIGURE 30: Examples of temporary graves.  
FROM: James Bourhill Collection

It has been shown above that casualty rate was not exceptionally low in comparison to other formations, taking into account the relative strength of each formation. An analysis revealed that the distribution of casualties was dependent on the roles played by the different formations at various stages. It was also shown to be a myth that the Guards Brigade bore the brunt of the division's casualties while the contribution of the partisans was underestimated. This chapter on casualties also relates to morale, motivation, myths and memory which will be further explored in the final two chapters.

## CHAPTER 10: MENTALITIES, MORALE AND MOTIVATIONS

The history of mentalities is an important element of total history. It has evolved from its origins in the *Annales* School, and today it encompasses the attitudes of ordinary people to all aspects of life and considers human nature, emotions, beliefs and mental habits. According to Hutton, “mentalities” is a code word for what used to be called culture.<sup>1</sup> In the previous chapter, it was found that culture partly explains the low casualty rate. Attitudes to death have long been a favourite topic for historians investigating mentalities. In the discussion below, the South African attitudes towards battle fatigue, and the ability to deal with mental stress, is shown to have a cultural dimension. The psychological realities of fear, heroism, hate, killing, morale and motivation which are examined in this chapter, are also squarely located in the history of the mind.

### a) **Morale and motivation to fight**

Military theorists for centuries have recognized the importance of the moral factor but in the Second World War, the raising and sustaining of morale developed into one of the unique obsessions of the Allies.<sup>2</sup> As Westbrook put it, “morale is the satisfaction evidenced by the soldier in accomplishing the tasks defined by his job; proficiency is the demonstrated ability to perform those tasks; and discipline is the extent of self control and respect for authority evidenced in that performance.”<sup>3</sup>

If the opinion of their commanding officer can be accepted as fact, the morale of the Pretoria Regiment was surprisingly good following a period of attrition. After only six weeks in action, the Pretoria Regiment had suffered a total of 68 casualties and total replacements to date had amounted to one officer and one OR (other rank). In a report to 11 SA Armd Bde on his regiment’s operations, Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Johnstone wrote: “Notwithstanding the fairly considerable casualties, morale of all ranks is sky-high and the will to kill Germans grows stronger daily”.<sup>4</sup>

Following the June tank battles, the SSB also reported their morale to have reached new heights “as the practical demonstration of the high quality of their training and weapons has given every member a sober confidence in his ability to deal effectively with the enemy.” The “inspired leadership” of the commanding officer (Lieutenant-Colonel C.E.G. Brits) was also mentioned.<sup>5</sup> After a successful operation, morale was understandably high, but using a popular expression of the time, it can be said that among the troops there was generally an undercurrent of “browned-off-ness”.

Although the lower ranks did not know what was happening on a strategic level, they were well aware of the global situation. On 3 October 1944, Axelson noted that morale in the division had gone up since it was published that the Allied forces in Italy were contributing to the war in Europe by holding no fewer than 27 divisions.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, it seems that the

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<sup>1</sup> P.H. Hutton, History and mentalities: The new map of cultural history, *History and Theory*, 20 (3), 1981, p. 237.

<sup>2</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> S.D. Westbrook, Sociopolitical alienation and military efficiency, *The military and society*, by P. Karsten (ed.), pp. 198-204.

<sup>4</sup> SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 243, Tank and personnel casualties, 29/6/1944.

<sup>5</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Regimental history of the SSB, June 1944.

<sup>6</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 126.

deteriorating weather had a negative effect. Towards the end of October, Axelson's assistant, Warrant-Officer (W/O) Roger Madden, spent time in Florence at the W/O's club. Here he heard non commissioned officers (NCOs) talking openly about going AWOL rather than return to the "appalling conditions in the mountains".<sup>7</sup>

The constant speculation about when the war in Italy would be over also had a negative effect on morale. Between September and October 1944, most could not imagine that it would last more than another two to three weeks. In a conversation with at 108 South African General Hospital in Florence on 25 September 1944, Colonel C. Anning told Axelson: "Anybody who openly states that the war will end this year should be court-martialed and cashiered. There have been cases of patrols not reaching their objectives because they had no desire to be killed at this stage of the war."<sup>8</sup> Rumours and speculation were so rife that Bourhill found it necessary to steel himself against the effects: "We get so many disappointments and anti-climaxes that I always find myself painting the worst side of it and when it is OK it is fine and when it's not, it's nothing but what I was prepared for."<sup>9</sup>

Certain incidents of ill discipline in Rome were attributed to low morale caused by the shoddy accommodation provided to both officers and men. Even the Assistant Provost Marshal (APM) did not blame the troops for getting drunk and committing petty crimes. He blamed the UDF administration whose responsibility it was to provide for the welfare of the troops. The administration officers themselves were "beautifully established in lovely offices and messes" but would not allow 6<sup>th</sup> Division officers to enter their messes. According to the APM, the responsibility for the drunkenness, crimes and VD rested to a large extent on the so-called welfare and administration officers.<sup>10</sup> Axelson fumed: "The Springbok Club is not central, it is inadequate, it is a disgrace. All other Allied forces in Italy have first class hotels and clubs available for their troops. The UDF has not. It offends the fellow's pride in his own country."<sup>11</sup>

As was explained in the chapter on recreation and leisure (Chapter 6), Italy could not provide the same standard of leave facilities as was found in Egypt, but leave facilities did improve in the later stages of the campaign. On 22 December 1944, the Springbok Club moved to new premises at 3 Via Romagna and, by all reports, it was a vast improvement. General Theron described it as the "palatial showplace" of the South Africans.<sup>12</sup> Captain Power, who was on the staff of 11 SA Armd Bde, stated in an interview in 1948 that the morale of the brigade was excellent and this was largely due to the first class leave arrangements.<sup>13</sup>

Factors such as thirst, hunger, noise, heat, cold and fear play a large part in the maintenance of morale. Lack of sleep was certainly a major factor among front line troops when in combat, but as was shown in the chapter entitled Sustenance of mind and body (Chapter 4), food had a more general effect on morale. Every effort was made to take hot meals to the troops, especially on the front line, although very often the men took care of their own needs. In his letters, Hodgson clearly shows that being able to supplement one's diet with local

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<sup>7</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 144.

<sup>8</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 123.

<sup>9</sup> James Bourhill Collection, S.F. Bourhill – E. Bourhill, 27/7/1944.

<sup>10</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p.115.

<sup>12</sup> I.J. van der Waag, *A History of the South African Defence Force Institute (SADFI) 1914-1990*, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> SADDCC,UWH, Box 142, Interview with Capt Power, 18/11/1948.

produce can boost the spirits. In the height of summer, the troops were living off the fat of the land. The fruit was now fully ripe. Pears, apples, peaches, plums and fresh tomatoes were in plentiful supply and being able to get all these things whenever they were wanted, made the meals “one hundred per cent better”, and put everyone in a better mood.<sup>14</sup>

The reasons why men enlisted, was dealt with in Chapter 2 where it was concluded that the question of volunteering is very broad and nebulous and cannot be confined to a discussion of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division alone. Whatever the motivation had been to enlist, the motivation to carry on fighting becomes more universal across all ages, personalities and nationalities. In a survey of 568 American infantrymen who had seen combat in North Africa and Sicily in 1944, men were asked what was the most important factor enabling them to continue fighting. Leadership and discipline, lack of alternatives, vindictiveness, idealism and self preservation were hardly mentioned. Rather, solidarity with the group and thoughts of home were the main incentive.<sup>15</sup>

The main motivation to fight was simply to end the war so as to get back to one’s family and start a normal life again. General Montgomery was aware of this motivating force. Before the Battle of El Alamein in 1942 he did not appeal to any ideological ideals. In his personal message which was read to the troops, he stressed only the motive of getting back home. “The sooner we win this battle, the sooner we shall get back home to our families.”<sup>16</sup> The ideal of getting home to one’s family however, does not explain why some were willing to sacrifice themselves. Loyalty to one’s unit and belief that it was the best unit was a second important motivation to keep fighting. These sentiments were often expressed in the letters of South African soldiers.

The ordinary soldier did not see his situation in terms of grand war aims. Instead he cared more about his own group and his own situation. This can be attributed to the seriousness of his situation and also to the cohesion of small units. Lee found that primary group cohesion sustained combat motivation in many instances but he also found that casualties rapidly splintered such groups. In a statistical study, Stephen Westbrook of the United States Military Academy found that socio-political alienation appears to limit seriously the army’s ability to produce efficient soldiers. A high degree of alienation almost guarantees that the soldier will possess low morale, proficiency and discipline.<sup>17</sup>

Because pride in one’s unit was such an important motivational factor, some American units employed their own public relations (PR) people. Every unit had to have its due, whether it deserved it or not. With sufficient flattery, it would perform its tasks moderately well, but without flattery, the units’ morale would sink, and it would grow “melancholy and depressed, and finally unruly and even mutinous”.<sup>18</sup> A rare example of where regimental insignia has been used as a battle honour is the policy of the ILH/KimR to only allow those who had served in forward areas to wear the regimental shoulder title.

Quoting a number of leading historians such as Niall Ferguson and Joanna Bourke as well as the American philosopher and Second World War veteran, Glenn Gray, Jones supports the

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<sup>14</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 2/8/1944.

<sup>15</sup> J. Bourke, *An intimate history of killing*, p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> S.D. Westbrook, Sociopolitical alienation and military efficiency, *The military and society* (ed. P. Karsten), pp. 198-204.

<sup>18</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 155.



radical position that for many, combat was not a devastating experience but exciting adventurous and fun. Men kept fighting because they wanted to. Not only did they enjoy the delights of comradeship, they also enjoyed the delights of destruction.<sup>19</sup>

There can be no doubt that the opinion and behaviour of the general public back home influences the motivation of the soldier. Dinter explains that he wants everyone to recognize his effort and assist him as much as possible.<sup>20</sup> Fussell goes further by stating: “To motivate those German soldiers you would remind them of their sacred oath to the Führer. To motivate Allied, and especially American soldiers, you would persuade them that their actions would receive ‘credit’ by means of the immense wartime publicity apparatus.”<sup>21</sup>

The matter of recognition, as well as co-operation between the Allies, was addressed by the Minister of Finance, J.H. Hofmeyr, after he returned from visiting the troops in Egypt and Italy during September 1944. After his return to the Union he said in a radio broadcast: “Today, the Sixth Division is an effective fighting force, welded together as a wonderfully co-operative team, including in addition to our own South Africans and Rhodesians, a Guards Brigade and other Empire troops, an Italian unit and other elements, all part of the Fifth Army, all under American command.”<sup>22</sup>

Hofmeyr went on to suggest that the South African public were perhaps well informed of the activities of the Sixth Division, but were unaware how widespread the UDF activities were both in character and geographical extent. He proceeded to mention the work of the non-divisional troops and the South Africans serving in the SAAF and RAF. He also paid tribute to the work being done on the home front with respect to munitions and supplies and expressed the need for appreciation on both sides of their mutual interdependence:

Of late, we have tended to think of our war effort almost exclusively in terms of the Sixth Armoured Division. Undoubtedly, its achievements have warranted our attention and admiration yet I wonder how many South Africans realize that the number of troops up north – even in Italy itself – who do not belong to the Sixth Division is considerably larger than the number of those who do.<sup>23</sup>

The question of recognition was important, not only on a personal or regimental level, it was also necessary to give credit to a division and even the nation as a whole. Messages of congratulations would be widely published on the achievement of every important milestone. Shortly after Florence was captured, the *Rand Daily Mail* published a message of congratulations from Field-Marshal J.C. Smuts to Major-General F. Theron, General Officer, Administration, UDF, Middle East.<sup>24</sup> In a personal letter to Smuts, written on 1 August and published in *The Star* of 11 August 1944, Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese, commander of the Eighth Army, was unstinting in his praise of the South African division which had played a leading role on the left flank since the beginning of the drive north of Rome.

Praise from this quarter would have meant all the more as Leese knew what obstacles had to be overcome, including some very experienced German divisions and the obstructions which their determined rearguards could put up in the way of demolitions and mines. The country

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<sup>19</sup> E. Jones, The psychology of killing: The combat experience of British soldiers during the First World War. *Journal of Contemporary History* (41) 2, 2006, p. 229.

<sup>20</sup> E. Dinter, *Hero or coward*, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 153.

<sup>22</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 30/9/1944, 6<sup>th</sup> Division welded into great fighting force, says Hofmeyr.

<sup>23</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 30/9/1944, 6<sup>th</sup> Division welded into great fighting force, says Hofmeyr.

<sup>24</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 11/8/1944, General Smuts congratulates Sixth Division.

and the roads on that flank were some of the worst encountered in Italy. In the communiqué, the South African troops were described as determined and tenacious with the determination to press on at all costs. As always, the special relationship with the Guards Brigade was highlighted and the hope was expressed that “the achievements of the division will be fully appreciated, both in South Africa, and throughout the Empire”.<sup>25</sup>

The UDF had a PR machine of its own but nothing like that of the American forces which employed professionals from the advertising industry who “attended the troops in combat, not too closely – and provided for hometown consumption the necessary heroic-romantic narrative and imagery”.<sup>26</sup> Some South African unit commanders would bend the rules and bend over backwards to ensure that their regiments received sufficient publicity and recognition. It appears that Colonel Arthur Johnstone, OC of the Pretoria Regiment, in particular cooperated with Axelson and also went to a lot of trouble to organize a visit for Sampie de Wet to travel up to the front in January 1945.<sup>27</sup> It was most unusual for a woman to approach the front line and the special treatment may have been due to the hometown connection or because of the publicity which would reach Pretoria.

Shortly after the arrival of the division in Italy, in the May 1944 edition of *The Sable*, a disgruntled person signing himself as “A. Gunner” penned a complaint to the editor:

In this land of tootin'tanks,  
“What-ho” Britons, “Howdy” Yanks,  
Men or mice their caps reveal  
That they're the knights in shining steel.  
They're the tanks who “do” or “die”,  
Forever in the public eye.

Can it be the black beret!  
Perhaps they're always in the way  
When cameras click. They please the press  
Who love the gunners less and less.

But when they crack the battered Hun  
Remember those behind the gun....

Thus both in the line and behind it, “credit” became a crucial concept. From the most senior officers to the humble private, men never forgot that all important home-town audience and were hungry for favourable publicity. Unfavourable publicity such as General Patton slapping a soldier in hospital suffering from fatigue or the Helwan “mutiny” was to be avoided.<sup>28</sup> Good publicity for a particular unit could create a rush to join that branch.

At the war's end, Colonel E. O'C Maggs conveyed to Axelson that he was anxious about the division receiving adequate recognition in Fifth Army history. At the same time, the Colonel refused to provide an Auster Aircraft and air camera to take low oblique photographs of the ground fought over.<sup>29</sup> Obviously, Maggs was more concerned about “credit” than the keeping of the historical record.

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<sup>25</sup> *The Star*, 11/8/1944, General Leese pays tribute to Springboks.

<sup>26</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 153.

<sup>27</sup> S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, pp. 139-141.

<sup>28</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, pp. 155-158.

<sup>29</sup> E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 225.

In some cases, the historical record has become blurred by every unit wanting to claim the credit for one or other operation. In the final battles, where troop movements were rapid and confusing, it is difficult to determine who was where at what time. For example, various sources make conflicting claims that it was respectively the FC/CTH, the WR/DLR, the SSB and the Americans who took Camposanto Bridge near the end of the war.<sup>30</sup>

As a post script to the question of recognition, some returning soldiers campaigned for a badge to show that they had been on active service with the 6<sup>th</sup> Division. In the absence of wound stripes or chevrons which indicated years of service, some insisted on wearing their divisional flashes. This “vexed question” was raised by the *Sunday Times* who pronounced that “when there are so many civilians in uniform in the modern army, the soldier who serves in the front line is entitled to some badge of distinction.”<sup>31</sup>

*The Star* of 14 July 1944 reported that South Africa had now come into line with Britain and issued gold coloured wound stripes for wounds sustained in the current war and red service chevrons. Veterans wounded in other wars were issued a single red wound stripe. All ranks and all branches of the service could qualify. Inverted red chevrons three quarters of an inch long, worn four inches from the bottom of the right sleeve denoted each completed twelve months of service within or outside the union. It was not essential that service should be continuous but any periods of leave without pay, absence without leave or periods of imprisonment exceeding 28 days, were deducted.<sup>32</sup>

With regard to wound qualifications, strict and clear requirements were laid down. Apart from wounds sustained in action against the enemy, by his weapons, wounds and injuries which qualified for a gold wound stripe included: injuries due to rescue work in bombed buildings or bombed defences; injuries due to collision of a ship with an Allied mine; injuries due to mine or bomb disposal duties and injuries although not due to enemy action, if sustained in forward operational areas, by soldiers while engaged in battlefield conditions against the enemy. Examples of circumstances which would not warrant a wound stripe include: Collisions between ships at sea (unless in battle), car accidents, flying accidents on duty not due to enemy action (but excluding operational sorties), handling of lethal weapons or self inflicted injuries. Ex-servicemen and women entitled to stripes and chevrons could apply direct to A.G. (War Records), Hamilton Street, Pretoria.<sup>33</sup>

Every person who spent time in the Middle East on active service was entitled to the Africa Service Medal. Even though it was worn by divisional and non-divisional troops, it seems to have been coveted by John Hodgson who by the end of 1944 had proved himself in battle many times:

Shortly we will be wearing the ASM (Africa Service Medal). The ribbon you have most probably seen quite a bit of. It is orange with a couple of yellow and green stripes in it. The majority of us are entitled to wear it – yours truly included.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> N. Orpen *Victory in Italy*, p. 291; A.C. Martin, *The Durban Light Infantry*, p. 393; Notes on Military History for Permanent Force Promotion Examinations, pp. 36-37.

<sup>31</sup> *The Springbok*, January 1943.

<sup>32</sup> *The Star*, 14/7/1944, Wound Stripes and Service Chevrons for UDF.

<sup>33</sup> *The Star*, 14/7/1944, Wound Stripes and Service Chevrons for UDF.

<sup>34</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 13/12/1944.

According to Fussell, the American commander, General Mark Clark, was a pre-eminent publicity hound. It has been said that his main war aim was to be photographed entering Rome. He went to great lengths to ensure that his plans were not thwarted and was therefore devastated when the Normandy landings relegated his triumph to the inside pages.<sup>35</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division was just as guilty of publicity seeking and bullying when it came to the liberation of Florence. General Poole saw to it that the ILH/KimR received the credit while other units also sought recognition for their part in the capture of Florence.<sup>36</sup>

#### b) Battle fatigue (psychological casualties)

Coming from a culture that values life and the individual, the realization that they were expendable was difficult for men to accept and this was a major cause of psychological break-downs.<sup>37</sup> From the minimal data available, it is believed that the incidence of battle fatigue was relatively low within the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division – expressed as a percentage of wounded. According to Orpen, the South African statistics for between 1 May and 7 August 1944 (up to the capture of Florence) the divisional medical units had admitted 1,964 battle casualties and 226 men suffering from exhaustion – eleven per cent of the wounded figure.<sup>38</sup> During 44 days of operations in Italy, the 1<sup>st</sup> American Armoured Division suffered 250 wounded and an additional 137 psychiatric casualties (54 per cent of all wounded) in the fight for the “Gothic positions”. At the same time the 91<sup>st</sup> American Division had 2,700 wounded and 919 additional psychiatric casualties (thirty per cent).<sup>39</sup>

In the Great War, “madness” among troops was attributed to the effects of concussion, hence “shell shock”. In the Second World War, it was more realistically attributed to fear. Today, it is known that it is not just the weak or cowardly who will break down, it will inevitably happen to every soldier if in combat long enough. “Long enough” has been defined by physicians and psychiatrists as between 200 and 240 days – depending on the duration and intensity of the experience. No appeal to patriotism, manliness or loyalty to the group would ultimately matter. If a soldier was considered to have “done his bit”, there would be no recriminations as far as his comrades were concerned. After all, tomorrow it might happen to them.<sup>40</sup> Baker mentioned two such cases. Sterzel was one of these. Colin MacArthur was another. They were both friends of Baker’s and had “done their best and shown their worth up to the point where their sovereign consciousness became uncrowned.”<sup>41</sup>

When the South Africans were moved to Siena for a rest in the first week of August 1944, they had been in the line day and night for more than three months. The Carbineers for example, had been in contact with the enemy for forty out of 53 days.<sup>42</sup> The latest thinking held that any man would eventually crack if kept in combat for more than twenty cumulative days. Infantrymen were the most susceptible. Quoting the US Army Surgeon General, Atkinson writes that “practically all men in rifle battalions who were not otherwise disabled,

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<sup>35</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>36</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 142, Notes on interview with Maj Rushmere, 24/11/1948; E. Axelson, *A year in Italy*, p. 159.

<sup>37</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 293.

<sup>38</sup> N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p. 169.

<sup>39</sup> E. Dinter, *Hero or coward*, p. 63.

<sup>40</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 281; M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 125.

<sup>41</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 393.

<sup>42</sup> A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer*, p. 133.

ultimately became psychiatric casualties.” Other sources estimate that ten per cent of infantrymen would eventually become combat fatigue casualties.<sup>43</sup>

The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division had a relatively progressive approach to psychiatric and exhaustion cases. Not least, in that it was forbidden to refer to such cases as “shell shock” or any term other than “exhaustion”. All cases of exhaustion or psychiatric disorders, psycho-neurosis or hysteria were to be evacuated. Where indicated, the regimental medical officer (RMO) was to give a sedative such as phenobarbitone which would “produce a condition of ‘doped’ quietness”. The corps psychologist ran a “rest centre” where cases were sorted – some being returned to the lines and serious cases being sent to a psychiatric hospital.<sup>44</sup>

It was considered that “modern” surgical technique and treatment resulted in wounded men being classified as “A” and fit for frontline service before they have had time to recover from their mental trauma. Officers commanding convalescent depots were instructed to ensure that all wounded infantrymen were fully rehabilitated both physically and mentally before being discharged.<sup>45</sup>

In the neuropsychiatric hospitals of the American Fifth Army (which included the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division), an attempt was made to minimise the hospital atmosphere and to foster the notion that it was a modified rest centre. There were no nurses, sheets, mattresses, pillows or pillow cases. Patients slept on regular cots, bathing facilities were provided. The idea of returning to duty was constantly kept before the patient as the objective of his stay. Men would only be sent to the army neuropsychiatric hospital if after two days at the division training and rehabilitation, no visible improvement had occurred. However, as a general rule, men were ready for duty after a two day program of physical conditioning, supervised rest, and tactical training.<sup>46</sup>

War has given many opportunities to the profession of psychology for studying the human mind and “human engineering”. The “fight or flight” instinct was blamed for psychological breakdown in situations of static war where there was no opportunity for either. Other findings were that those with unstable backgrounds were more likely to suffer mental breakdown and that it was possible to suffer what is now known as post traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) without ever having been in contact with the enemy. A 1944 study estimated that in only 35 per cent of cases involving discharge on psychological grounds, “war service” was a cause. Lack of sleep is a major contributor to mental breakdown. Fear of dying rather than the horror of killing is more likely to lead to breakdown. Witnessing atrocities was less likely to affect someone than actually committing atrocities.<sup>47</sup>

Treatment included the use of hypnotic drugs such as sodium amytal or sodium pentothal. Once the patient was tranquilized, strong suggestion was used to make the subject believe in his own recovery. Electroshock therapy was also used. The job of the psychiatrist was to get the soldier back to the front as quickly as possible for the good of the group rather than to ensure the long term mental wellbeing of the patient. Psychiatric cases were given little

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<sup>43</sup>R. Atkinson, *The day of battle*, p. 508; J.C. McManus, *The deadly brotherhood*, p. 162.

<sup>44</sup>SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 181, File 15/0, Div Adm Instrs, 6 SA Armd Div, Medical Adm Ins, 22/5/1944.

<sup>45</sup>SADDDC, Div Docs, Box 180 File AQ 13/10, Allied Force Head Quarters, Office of the Surgeon, Return to units of wounded personnel, 6/3/1945.

<sup>46</sup>*A Military Encyclopaedia Based on Operations in the Italian Campaign, 1943-1945*, pp. 512-513.

<sup>47</sup>J. Bourke, *An intimate history of killing*, pp. 247-253.

sympathy by their comrades or at home. It was considered that diagnoses like shell shock gave fear a respectable name. The inability to act aggressively was itself regarded as a psychiatric disorder.<sup>48</sup>

Battle fatigue may have been stigmatized, but a person with a self-inflicted wound was reviled – it was considered worse than desertion. In his memoirs, Lionel Wulfsohn recounts many amusing and moving stories about those whom he met during his many months in hospital. There was also one case of a self-inflicted wound:

He had put the muzzle of his Tommy gun on his arm and had squeezed the trigger. Unfortunately for him, the gun was on automatic, and he received an ugly burst through his arm. Apart from the pain and suffering he went through, this man was ostracized by the other men who had been honourably wounded in battle. The South African lad led a most lonely existence.<sup>49</sup>

After the war, when Douglas Baker was studying medicine, he met up with Dr Nelson Eddy (formerly the Regimental Medical Officer of the NMR) who had treated cases of battle fatigue in Italy. He confirmed that the neurosis was more widespread than is commonly known. Many of those affected never revealed their condition – others asked to be sent home. These are things which generals did not write about and other men did not talk about.<sup>50</sup> Among themselves, the men used the term “bomb happy”. In his diary, Peter Johnston makes a passing reference to hearing the news that a certain Alec Corrie had gone bomb happy.<sup>51</sup>

In the medical files of South African soldiers in the Second World War, one comes across reports of mental illness by many different names including post traumatic melancholis, essential hypertension, chronic anxiety state or anxiety neurosis associated with a reactive mental state. Cases were investigated by doctors and recommendations were made to the medical board. The terminology may differ but the symptoms are the same: depression, tremors, headaches and nightmares. In the case of a permanent force sergeant, an instructor in the Pretoria Regiment, the examining doctor made the following observations:

Very nervous with well marked tremor of hands. Unwilling to answer any questions or repeat history already given at previous hospital. Wanders around alone and makes no attempt to mix with other patients. Talks unwillingly of the past. Still seems worried as to what will happen when he reaches the Union.<sup>52</sup>

In this case, the doctor was prepared to give the benefit of the doubt with the diagnosis of melancholic neurosis, brought on by concussion after falling into a slit trench at Helwan. Although this case was not directly related to combat, these are the classic symptoms of battle fatigue.

Chronic depression is one of the many ways in which battle fatigue manifests itself. When Major Lionel Gallimore, the CO of “B” Coy, Royal Natal Carbineers, committed suicide at Lucca on 28 February 1944, he had already been resting for ten days and would not have been suffering from physical exhaustion – which caused many soldiers to not care about the

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<sup>48</sup> J. Bourke, *An intimate history of killing*, pp. 257-261.

<sup>49</sup> James Bourhill Collection, L.M. Wulfsohn, unpublished memoirs.

<sup>50</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 392; J.C. McManus, *The deadly brotherhood*, p. 162.

<sup>51</sup> Jane van Velden Collection, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, 19/2/1945.

<sup>52</sup> SADDDC, Medical file of R.R. Lindsay 35433V.

outcome. Gallimore's fellow officers apparently had no idea what his reason was for committing suicide. At dawn that morning, he had woken up the Regimental Medical Officer, Captain Resnek to say that he was going for a walk through the olive trees to watch the sun rise over Lake Massaciuccoli.<sup>53</sup> In this case, it may have been family problems or a sense of having nothing to look forward to. Gallimore had already been wounded once (in the ankle) on 18 October 1944 and only rejoined his regiment on 4 January 1945.<sup>54</sup> It was Major Gallimore who initiated the retreat of the Natal Carbineers from Monte Stanco on 10 October, leaving his Jeep behind.

The notion that a man who loses hope is tempted to commit suicide has been corroborated by Dinter. This was probably one of the most decisive motives for the large number of suicides among soldiers in hopeless situations. If the aggression resulting from hopelessness is not directed against oneself in the form of suicide, it can lead to an increased, even fanatical will to fight.<sup>55</sup> As with every society, the division had its quota of schizophrenics and psychopaths and the medical files are full of these.

There is one theory which holds that "the soft youth of the cities lacked the resolution and toughness" of the "yokel soldier" and were more prone to shell shock. In other words, farm hands were supposedly blessed with a natural courage and could better withstand the strains of combat. This courage was believed to have its roots in a vacant mind, their imagination played no tricks. More than one analyst has surmised that educated and reflective men were more open to the effect of worry, sleeplessness and fatigue. Urban youths, unaccustomed to living off the land and killing animals, were considered intrinsically weak.<sup>56</sup>

### c) Killing and hostility

In her eminent work, *An intimate history of killing*, Joanna Bourke states that the characteristic act of men at war is not dying, it is killing. No aspect of military history or folklore has been as distorted and misrepresented in the remembering of it and the telling of it, as has been the act of killing.<sup>57</sup> This statement made by an SSB Lieutenant the day after the Battle of Celleno provides a rare insight into the pleasure which some people found in killing at close quarters:

I saw a machine-gun post only a few yards away. There were six or seven men in it. I put a 75 mm HE [high explosive] into it. I saw just pieces of meat go flying through the air. I saw seven or eight men on a crest. I turned my co-axial [machine gun] on them. They went down wimp, wimp, wimp. It was great.<sup>58</sup>

This blood-lust is again displayed by the author of the 7/22<sup>nd</sup> Med Rgt war diary who wrote: "There was evidently quite a number of Huns left in the area today and Capt Swan spent a happy morning thinning out their ranks. In addition to killing Germans, he totally destroyed a number of houses suspected of harbouring enemy troops."<sup>59</sup> The same diarist had written after a shoot at the battle of Monte Catealto: "It was assumed that quite a number of

<sup>53</sup> J. Resnek, Video diary, James Bourhill Collection.

<sup>54</sup> SADDDC, Personnel files, Maj L.F. Gallimore 42769V.

<sup>55</sup> E. Dinter, *Hero or coward*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>56</sup> E. Jones, The psychology of killing: The combat experience of British soldiers during the First World War. *Journal of Contemporary History* (41) 2, 2006, pp. 231-232.

<sup>57</sup> J. Bourke, *An intimate history of killing*, p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> SADDDC, UWH, Box 140, Remarks made by personnel of SSB to Div Recording Officer on 11/6/1944.

<sup>59</sup> SADDDC, WD, Box 631, 7/23 Med Rgt, 4/10/1944.

Germans will no longer lift their right hands in the old familiar gesture that we know so well.”<sup>60</sup>

Hate is a key element in killing. Understandably, Adolf Hitler personified the evil system which was the enemy. At one stage Hodgson wrote that “the way things look at the moment – Hitler is all set for a lovely Christmas present, down in hell!”<sup>61</sup> Baker, in particular, had little mercy for German airmen, but in one instance, refrained from opening fire on fifteen year-old Hitler Youths.<sup>62</sup>

Even the mild-mannered Hodgson was capable of killing an unarmed German who flouted the conventions of war. A certain protocol was expected from an enemy when he surrendered and if he did not comply, he could expect retribution. As Hodgson related to his father, it was acceptable to surrender without fighting, but not to fight and then surrender at the last minute:

Yes, Jerry has got the habit of firing on us until we get right on him, then puts up his hands, but don't you believe for one minute that he gets away with it, all he gets is one between the eyes, and very quickly too.<sup>63</sup>

Moorehead explains that at the height of battle, the soldier's feelings were a mixture of desperation, fear, anger and hatred. Some soldiers were driven by revenge and relished killing Germans but the vast majority (more than 90 per cent according to one survey) had no desire to kill a German. The sight of a dead German with personal items and letters scattered around, would invariably invoke pity and sympathy.<sup>64</sup>

Lieutenant Colenbrander of the PAG related one incident where he felt such compassion. After firing on a party of Germans, he realized that one badly wounded man was speaking Dutch. Apparently, he had been taken by the Germans when they overran Holland and had accepted an offer to wear the German uniform but as a non-combatant. He and his companions were on their way to get wine when they ran into the South Africans:

He appeared to be about twenty years old. The poor fellow did not want to die and struggled towards the end. I had given him an injection of morphia, which every officer carried, but to no avail; he died in my arms.<sup>65</sup>

The soldier in the field realized that the average German was a decent human being. A bit pompous perhaps, and wooden, but still just another man. Prisoners were well treated on the whole and it was customary to offer cigarettes. Nevertheless, Hodgson expressed a feeling of satisfaction following the capture of a German:

By the way, what do you think of my stationery? You will never guess where it came from; it came off a Gerry whom we caught a short while ago. He was the real Nazi type, and a big square head at that.<sup>66</sup>

Attitudes towards the enemy are apparent in an undated letter which was written by Capt E.S. Rivett-Carnac to his wife after he was wounded and taken prisoner at Chiusi. Although the

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<sup>60</sup> SADDCC, WD, Box 631, 7/23 Med Rgt, 4/10/1944.

<sup>61</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. & W.A. Hodgson, 18/7/1944.

<sup>62</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 404.

<sup>63</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 14/7/1944.

<sup>64</sup> A. Moorehead, *Eclipse*, p. 68. See also, J.C. McManus, *The deadly brotherhood*, pp. 186-188; M. Parker, *Monte Cassino*, p. 52.

<sup>65</sup> G.B. Hobbs, *From Sicily to the Alps*, p. 137.

<sup>66</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – M.V. Hodgson, 16/9/1944.



captured South Africans had been made to carry wounded German soldiers to the rear through shellfire, the treatment from German and Italian medical staff was found to be kind and considerate. From a POW hospital, Rivett-Carnac wrote that he had been evacuated together with 23 German wounded from Chiusi. They were politeness itself and insisted on offering cigarettes and sharing their food – also all were very keen to discuss how the war was going. Their greatest hope was that it might be settled around a conference table. “There was no arrogance... .”<sup>67</sup> The opposing German troops at Chiusi were from the Herman Göring Division which committed its share of atrocities but were clearly not reviled as was the SS.

While on a visit to Italy in late 1944, the editor of the *Sunday Times*, E.B. Dawson, wrote that while the South Africans respect the fighting quality and courage of the average German soldier, he had nothing but hatred for the SS troops. “They are not only experts in murdering defenceless women and children, but ignore the few rules that are supposed to govern war.”<sup>68</sup> This was a commonly held view of the SS.

It is understandable that German (mainly SS) atrocities heightened the desire to kill and the 6<sup>th</sup> Division saw enough atrocities. Due to the activities of Italian partisans in the San Martino area in the northern Apennines, the 16<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Grenadier Division carried out reprisals against the families of the partisans at the end of September 1944.<sup>69</sup> No doubt, the sight of slaughtered civilians had an impact on the attitudes of the South Africans and on the way in which they conducted the war thereafter. The latest information puts at 770 the total number of killed in the Monte Sole massacre.<sup>70</sup>

#### d) Fear and heroism

There are few South African accounts and no published works which deal with the subject of fear. However, it is enlightening to refer to American studies because as Dinter put it: “fear is the common bond” between all nationalities.<sup>71</sup> Baker breaks a taboo by revealing that South African men cried from fear: “In the line, a few men sobbed . . . sometimes in the corner of the dugout with only reddened eyes to show their shame; it might be with an uttering of the mother’s name if there was real pain, the pain of physical hurts.”<sup>72</sup> In his chapter on morale, titled “Accentuate the positive”, Paul Fussell stated:

One reason soldiers’ and sailors’ letters home are so little to be relied on by the historian of emotion and attitude is that they are composed largely to sustain the morale of the folks at home, to hint as little as possible at the real, worrisome circumstance of the writer. No one wrote “Dear Mother I’m scared to death.”<sup>73</sup>

Fear has an odour, a taste and a feeling. Pieter Joubert of the Pretoria Regiment admitted to a slight feeling of fear while preparing to go into action in the early morning:

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<sup>67</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, E.S. Rivett-Carnac – M. Rivett-Carnac, s.a.

<sup>68</sup> DNMMH, B.412 6<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division file 2, *Sunday Times*, no date, Vivid picture of war in Italy, E.B. Dawson.

<sup>69</sup> SADDCC, UWH, Box 140. Various Narratives by Capt. H.H.H. Biermann, Official military observer, 12 SA Bde, on atrocities in the Apennines. Statement dated 2/2/1945.

<sup>70</sup> N. Abatantuono, M.Cecconi, G. Elmi, M. Fogacci, & M. Monari, *Inverno 1944-45 I Sudafricani a Castiglione*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>71</sup> E. Dinter, *Hero or coward*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>72</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 298.

<sup>73</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 145.

As the air heated up by the exhausts, “ones breathing slowed down, the back of the neck and the shoulders started tingling and there grew a tightness in the chest, and the atmosphere became hallowed and one was apprehensive and just a little bitty scared.”<sup>74</sup>

Experience is a major factor where fear is concerned. Dinter wrote that in his baptism of fire, a soldier’s levels of anxiety are raised to levels seldom reached again.<sup>75</sup> Everyone had his own coping mechanisms in the event of an enemy bombardment. Some would pray, others would recite nursery school rhymes or times tables. The degree of torment depended on the severity of the shelling and the security of the position. Always the student of human behaviour, Baker observed:

If your mind could still do as it was told, you made yourself smaller, crouching and drawing your knees up to your chest, trying to get your face into your lap. In the end, it didn’t matter too much what you did with your body because it was your mind which was suffering.<sup>76</sup>

At the end of January and beginning of February 1945, the infantry were given the unpleasant task of carrying out fighting patrols to get prisoners. Italian Stretcher bearers who accompanied these patrols were described by Hattersley as being a nuisance and unreliable except when under strict supervision, because of their “incessant excited chattering”. When the firing started, they became “mute and immobile with fear”.<sup>77</sup>

By contrast, the Cape Corps (CC) stretcher bearers of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division distinguished themselves on countless occasions and two were awarded the Military Medal for their actions at Monte Stanco. At a staff conference attended by General Poole when he was in Pretoria on 8 February 1945, he remarked that despite all their other faults and shortcomings, the Cape Corps were the bravest stretcher-bearers he had ever seen.<sup>78</sup> Similar sentiments regarding medical officers, padres and stretcher-bearers were expressed by the editor of the *Sunday Times*, E.B. Dawson, while on a visit to Italy in late 1944: “The Cape boy may give some trouble when the wine flows freely in a town, but he has few superiors at stretcher-bearing.”<sup>79</sup>

While every soldier admits to having fear, cowardice is a different matter which elicited no sympathy as can be inferred from Baker’s comment: “Just as there were desert rats, true and brave, there were also desert mice unworthy of any honour and crafty in hiding their cowardice.”<sup>80</sup> Some say that fear is simply the lack of ability to suspend the imagination.<sup>81</sup> At a time when recruiting drives were at their height, the August 1943 edition of *The Springbok* carried an article entitled “Fear and Courage” and puts it all down to the “marvellous fluid” called adrenalin:

Whether you are a hero or a coward depends on how you use the powers conferred on you by the rush of adrenalin into the bloodstream. If you use them to remove yourself as rapidly as possible to a place of safety, you may be showing reasonable caution or abject cowardice, depending on the circumstances.

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in G.B. Hobbs, *From Sicily to the Alps*, p. 111.

<sup>75</sup> E. Dinter, *Hero or coward*, p. 36.

<sup>76</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 165.

<sup>77</sup> A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer*, p. 148.

<sup>78</sup> H.J. Martin & N. Orpen, *Military and industrial organization 1939- 45*, p. 334.

<sup>79</sup> DNMMH, B412 6<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division file 2, *Sunday Times*, no date, Vivid picture of war in Italy, E.B. Dawson.

<sup>80</sup> D.M. Baker, *War, wine and valour*, p. 392.

<sup>81</sup> C.D. Bryant, *Khaki-collar crime*, p. 45.

The truly brave man will always try to use the stimulus of fear in order to do the best he can for the cause he serves.<sup>82</sup>

Psychologists suggest that there is a positive link between serious mental illness and the enactment of heroic deeds. One explanation is that a soldier who fears that he might crack under the strain, would often act heroically in a fit of “desperate aggression” – or perhaps commit suicide. In her analysis of the anatomy of a hero, Bourke provides evidence that some homosexuals were drawn to the army and could make good soldiers. Homosexuals were inclined to either turn their aggression outwards towards the enemy or show self-sacrificing devotion to their comrades. Psychologists make the distinction between passive inverts and active inverts. The latter are more likely to surrender or self-destruct.<sup>83</sup>

Bravery and masculinity goes to the heart of war and the very existence of armies. Throughout history, noblemen in particular have fought in wars to win honour and glory. It was not enough to be brave; one must be seen as being brave by one’s peers. When S.L.A. Marshall described combat motivation in the Second World War as fuelled by the soldier’s desire to be accepted as “a man among men”, he was identifying something uniquely masculine, a concept which is wrapped up in military behaviour.<sup>84</sup>

Researchers such as S.L.A. Marshall and Samuel Stouffer found that the best combatants were those who before combat expressed the desire to kill as well as those who felt strongly attached to an effective group.<sup>85</sup> Another type of hero described by Joanna Bourke was the psychotic or social misfit. The man who gives the most trouble in peacetime is often the best in battle although in a set-piece battle, it appears that the performance of the group brought about by discipline is more important than individual performance.<sup>86</sup>

Discipline in the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division was instilled through regular parades and strict uniform regulations. Even in the day of mechanized warfare, close-order drill remained a vital component of training. It is a direct physical way of learning that orders must be obeyed and that a soldier is no longer an individual but part of a group.<sup>87</sup>

Attitude and state of mind are key concepts in the history of mentalities while fear and battle fatigue are states of mind. The mentalities aspect ties in with morale as well as the performance of individuals and of the division as a whole. This chapter examined attitudes towards killing and to the enemy in general. It was shown that the maintenance of morale, motivation and mental health were largely dependent on cultural factors and training. In the next and final chapter, the most important findings will be presented and discussed within a theoretical, historiographical framework.

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<sup>82</sup> *The Springbok*, August 1943, Fear and courage.

<sup>83</sup> J. Bourke, *An intimate history of killing*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>84</sup> J.A. Lynn, The embattled future of academic military history, *The Journal of Military History* 61 (4), 1997, pp. 785-786.

<sup>85</sup> J. Bourke, *An intimate history of killing*, p. 112.

<sup>86</sup> M.A. Weitz, Drill, training and the combat performance of the Civil War soldier: Dispelling the myth of poor soldier, great fighter, *Journal of Military History* 62, April 1998, pp. 280-283.

<sup>87</sup> M.A. Weitz, Drill, training and the combat performance of the Civil War soldier: Dispelling the myth of poor soldier, great fighter, *Journal of Military History* 62, April 1998, pp. 286-288.

## CHAPTER 11: FINAL ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

*In war, there is only one incontrovertible ‘truth’: that of the man in his final death agony. The stories of all other individuals are necessarily fractured.*<sup>1</sup>

As stated in the introduction, there is one primary objective to this study, giving rise to three hypotheses. The thesis seeks to understand, first and foremost, what the volunteers of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division experienced in their day to day lives on campaign. This raises questions about who these men were and what motivated them. The demographics of the division were discussed in Chapter 2 while the motivation to fight was the subject matter of the Chapter 10. The latter should not be confused with the motivations to enlist which will be subjected to a final analysis below. Finally, it was hypothesised that the national memory has been cleansed, and using a theoretical, historiographical framework, we examine the ways in which this occurred.

### a) **Experiential aspects**

A history of day-to-day life offers little opportunity for interpretation, but as Danto has said: “To tell what happened... and to explain why... is to do one and the same thing”.<sup>2</sup> The study of day-to-day life is viewed by some as “the only real history”.<sup>3</sup> Previous chapters have told what happened and only a summary is provided here.

Traditionally, South African military historians have steered clear of the more sensitive aspects of day-to-day life in the military. Some of the more controversial topics which have been neglected in the post-war literature in South Africa are the interrelated topics of morale, fear and discipline. The expression of sexuality and use of alcohol were omitted from the official histories as were the subjects of “battle fatigue” and killing. However, recent research by Ian van de Waag and other researchers at the Military Academy at Saldanha has shed light on some of these shadowy areas.<sup>4</sup>

Despite poor living conditions in base camps and in the line, it does seem that within the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division, there were relatively few problems of low morale. The reason for the low incidences of illness and ill-discipline could be attributable to superior training, organized sport and simply being on the winning side. As has been demonstrated, indiscipline was enough of a problem to have kept courts martial in overdrive and detention barracks full. However, the most common crimes were traffic violations, insubordination and dress infringements. Alcohol was associated with venereal disease and the South African troops were responsible for their fair share of both.

In the minds of returned soldiers, it was the periods of rest and recreation which became most firmly imprinted and this experience was freely communicated. During the period of operations, there was little time for getting to know the country and its people. It was mainly on leave and after the war that the men had contact with civilians. It appears that their

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<sup>1</sup> J. Bourke, *An intimate history of killing*, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> A. Danto cited in A. Munslow, *Deconstructing history*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> P. Burke (ed.), *New perspectives on historical writing*, pp. 2-20.

<sup>4</sup> I.J. van der Waag, Furlough, beer and brothel: the politics of STDs in the AIF, 1914-18, South African Historical Society 23<sup>rd</sup> Biennial Conference, 2011; G. Bentz, At the fleshpots of Egypt: The battle for the control of the morality of South African troops in North Africa in the Second World War, South African Historical Society 23<sup>rd</sup> Biennial Conference, 2011.

negative attitude towards the Italian people had a lot to do with their homesickness. The food shortage in the country had a lot to do with the behaviour and morals of the civilians and although there is no evidence that the troops went hungry for long periods, a sparse and foreign diet is sure to have caused grumblings.

Those who suffered from combat fatigue never spoke about it. They would be invalided home and very often withdrew from life and avoided contact with anyone who was part of that terrible past. It is hardly surprising that the instances of mass insubordination have been erased from memory. The Helwan riot which occurred five months after the war ended, was glossed over by official and regimental historians. It is believed that the Helwan incident arose out of the extreme homesickness which has been well documented here. Even in Italy, where the men lived like lords along the Riviera, there was much discontent. It took only a small incident to spark the riot at Helwan, but it is unlikely that there was a political motive or conspiracy.

## **b) Conclusions on casualties**

Despite the perception that the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division incurred particularly low casualties, there are nuances which the analysis revealed. The overwhelming superiority of the Allies in terms of air power and artillery did indeed keep the overall number of killed and wounded to a minimum, but as a percentage of unit strength, the division was on a par with other nations involved in the Italian campaign. It was also shown that the rate of attrition among front line units was in fact particularly high – especially considering that the division was not involved in the fiercest fighting at Salerno and Cassino.

The analysis in Chapter 9 helps one understand the extent of the danger which the various branches of the service faced, and sheds light on various aspects including tactics and training. The distribution of casualties arises from the situation where only two out of ten men in uniform ever saw the front line in the European war. Even in a fighting division such as the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division, there were different grades of participation. Motorised infantry units such as the ILH/KimR lost more than fifty per cent of their strength and accounted for 55 per cent of the division's total casualties. Overall, the number of South African casualties was in line with that of the American Fifth Army as a whole. Importantly, it was shown that it is a myth that the Guards Brigade bore the brunt of the division's casualties.

Compared to the British, American, French, New Zealander and German losses, the casualties suffered by the 6th SA Armoured Division were light. Including all battle casualties, battle accidents and post-war deaths, 1,100 members of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division, including 24 Guards Brigade and the Indian FFR were killed or died on active service in Italy (see Appendix E). It must be pointed out that the figure of 711 South African fatalities mentioned by General Poole at the victory parade at Monza, did not include those who later died of wounds or those who had been originally listed as missing and only later confirmed dead. In total, there are around 1,800 South Africans buried in the war cemeteries in Italy. The higher figure includes non-divisional troops, escaped POW's and members of the SAAF.

The extent to which accidents were responsible for death and injury is indicative of the prevalence of heavy equipment in an industrialized military machine. Accidental shootings and road accidents remained the primary cause while falling out of windows was by no

means uncommon. Death in combat can be seen as the single most momentous act which a soldier might experience and desperately tries to avoid. The extent to which death in action (or the probability thereof) is part of the soldier's experience was clearly revealed in analysis of casualty figures.

### c) Conclusions on motivations

Who were the men who called themselves the “Red Tabs” and why were they willing to join the infantry regiments which bore the brunt of the casualties? The answer may be that enlistment in the predominantly English 6<sup>th</sup> Division was driven by cultural and social factors together with an element of “coercive volunteerism” due to social pressures as well as notions of honour and virtue or a thirst for adventure. Many of the volunteers are themselves not clear about their own motivations but there is general agreement that patriotism was not a major factor. For young men in their twenties, it is unlikely that volunteering was a political act, but a sense of duty still prevailed.

Albert Grundlingh found that political convictions of Afrikaners often took second place to material wants, resulting in a form of “economic conscription”.<sup>5</sup> Idealism and loyalty to Smuts may have motivated a few, but patriotism was not a major factor. As was shown in Chapter 2, more than half of those who served in North Africa, were not prepared to take the General Service Oath to serve anywhere in the world. In Hodgson's contemporary opinion, it was mainly those of a certain demographic who were inclined to enlist in the latter stages and it did not take much to deplete this pool:

... all the people who intended to join up, who left school before last year, have already done so, all those in between twenty and thirty who ever had intentions of joining up, have already done so, those who have not done so, I am sure, have no intentions of ever doing so.<sup>6</sup>

It is true that the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division had a white demographic profile but “whiteness” did not feature greatly in the narratives of the volunteers. Neither did young school-leavers give much consideration to material gain. Although in every society, returned soldiers have a certain sense of entitlement, few “Red Tabs” would have thought of their military service in terms of a social contract with the state to entrench their privilege. As the research suggests, these relatively well educated young men were likely to be at a slight disadvantage economically (compared to those who stayed home).

Part of the excitement of military service related to the youth of the combatants. At the age of eighteen, soldiers living away from home for the first time, experimenting with alcohol, and perhaps exploring their sexuality. “In the way that students looked back on their university years as a period of self-discovery, so veterans went through an intense period of change”.<sup>7</sup>

Nagel supports the concept of “the masculine allure of adventure”. Men's accountings of their enlistment in wars often describe their anticipation and excitement, their sense of embarking on a great adventure, their desire not to be “left behind” or “left out” of the grand quest that war represents. In her theorizing on masculinity, Nagel covers almost every aspect

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<sup>5</sup>A. Grundlingh, The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force during the Second World War, 1939-45, *The Journal of African History* 40 (3), 1999, pp. 360-362.

<sup>6</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – W.A. Hodgson, 16/6/1944.

<sup>7</sup> E. Jones, The psychology of killing: The combat experience of British soldiers during the First World War, *Journal of Contemporary History* (41) 2, 2006, p. 243.

which makes enlistment irresistible. Although there are wars that men resist, once a war is widely defined as a matter of duty, honour and patriotism, a defence of freedom, then resistance for many men becomes a matter of cowardice and dishonour. For men confronted with this unpalatable threat of public humiliation, there are the pull factors such as the allure of adventure, the promise of masculine camaraderie, the opportunity to test and prove oneself, the chance to participate in a historic larger-than-life, generation defining event.<sup>8</sup>

Questions about why soldiers are willing to fight and risk death are as old as warfare itself. In modern times, many have turned to psychology and anthropology for answers. Exploring the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, Robert B. Edgerton asserted that the Zulus charged to their deaths against British rifles – not for revenge, religion, freedom, booty or even self-defence, but for a complex set of motives. Most important was the fact that these men sought to prove their courage not only to women but also to other men. Zulus fought primarily to impress other Zulus.<sup>9</sup>

According to Lambert, it was not exactly whiteness which defined white soldiers, it was South Africanness, based on the “acceptance by all white South Africans of a common sense of white ethnicity overriding the differences between English-speakers and Afrikaners in the Union and of a loyalty to South Africa within a wider loyalty to the Crown and commitment to the Commonwealth”. British traditions and ideals were an integral part of this South Africanist sentiment, but as Guy Butler, a veteran of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division, said “...we rejected jingoism...we had our own dreams for our country”.<sup>10</sup>

The question of the shortage of replacements also seems to have been distorted. Field-Marshal J.C. Smuts himself stated in March 1944 that almost one out of every three males between the ages of 20 and 60 volunteered for full-time service.<sup>11</sup> While it is true that infantry units were under-strength, certain branches of the military (the air force in particular) were in fact over-subscribed. There are a number of instances where units turned away replacements because they did not know what to do with them. The division in general, and tank regiments in particular, were extremely fussy about the quality of their officers and men. The infantry did accept rejects from more specialised units. Some officers were prepared to forgo their rank in order to be placed and some of those stuck in the reserve regiment volunteered for transfer to infantry units.

#### **d) Memory as a category of analysis**

History is a society’s memory of its past, and the functioning of this memory depends on the situation in which society finds itself. The way in which the war is written about and portrayed, varies according to culture. In answering the questions about experience and enlistment, it is hypothesized that the story has been reconstructed in the national memory. This is partly due to wartime censorship and popular histories published in the post-war period.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, South Africa’s Second World War historiography has been shaped

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<sup>8</sup> J. Nagel, Masculinity and nationalism: gender and sexuality in the making of nations, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (21 (2), 1998, pp. 252-259.

<sup>9</sup> J.W. Chambers, The New Military History: Myth and Reality, *The Journal of Military History* (55) 3, 1991, p. 402.

<sup>10</sup> J. Lambert, Their finest hour: English-speaking South Africans in World War II, *South African Historical Journal*, (60) 1, 2008, pp. 75-76.

<sup>11</sup> *The Nonqai*, Foreword by Field-Marshal the Rt. Hon. J.C. Smuts, 35, March 1944.

<sup>12</sup> S. Monick, *A bugle calls*, p. 324.

largely by political considerations in order to achieve certain political objectives which made it virtually impossible to produce an unbiased history.<sup>13</sup>

In his discussion of the “aftermyth” of the Anglo-Boer War, Boje writes that “national defeat, ignominy and trauma encourage the construction of a dominant societal perspective that assuages individual discomfiture”.<sup>14</sup> Boje suggests that the national resistance in France and Italy was a myth – which is at odds with the fact that the partisans liberated virtually all of the large Italian cities and their activities prevented many Allied casualties. When the borders between the front line and the home front became blurred, as in the Second World War, it affected the way in which the conflict was seen in retrospect.<sup>15</sup>

Myths and folklore can arise out of the need to obscure reality. It has been shown that where collaboration raised uncomfortable questions, as in the case of the Italians, the war simply vanished as a subject of public discourse. To a lesser extent, the same situation has occurred in South Africa, possibly because a section of the South African population were Nazi sympathisers and collaborators. The National Party emphasised Afrikaner heroism and suffering in the Great Trek and the Anglo-Boer War. This helps to explain why the story of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division was quietly forgotten.

According to Katz, Agar-Hamilton suffered under a Nationalist government and must have treaded very carefully when examining such issues as the surrender of Tobruk in light of the prominent position given to Klopper by the government in 1952. The efforts of Agar-Hamilton were extinguished by H.F. Vervoerd in 1962 when all pretences of government interest in producing an official history of the war ended in premature closure of the UWHS.<sup>16</sup> Katz adds that Orpen’s government-sponsored work was sanitised by removing all references to excesses committed by South African forces and conflicts between English and Afrikaans soldiers.<sup>17</sup> “Successive apartheid regimes ensured interest would soon fade. Publications gradually made less mention of what was seen as a British Imperial matter.”<sup>18</sup>

The way in which the war is remembered has long been an area of academic research (internationally), and as modern historiography has shown, memory is a highly subjective construction of experience.<sup>11</sup> This is partly as a result of what G.L. Mosse refers to as “the myth of the war experience” which comprises a whole series of attitudes which helped men confront and accept the unprecedented experience, and informed many of the literary, artistic and political perceptions after the First World War.<sup>12</sup> This was the way in which people tried to come to terms with the horror of the war. It disguised, but could not eliminate, accurate memories of the past. Veterans tried to forget the tragic years of the war as quickly as possible but remembered the companionship, purposefulness and the security of the war. Many veterans considered the war years in retrospect as the happiest years of their lives.

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<sup>13</sup> D. Katz, A Case of Arrested Development: The historiography relating to South Africa’s participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, p. 285.

<sup>14</sup> J. Boje, Winburg’s War, pp. 447-448.

<sup>15</sup> G.L. Mosse, Two world wars and the myth of the war experience, *Journal of Contemporary History*, (21) 4, 1986, pp. 492-493.

<sup>16</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa’s participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, p. 294.

<sup>17</sup> D. Katz, A case of arrested development: The historiography relating to South Africa’s participation in the Second World War, *Scientia Militaria*,(40) 3, 2012, p. 295.

<sup>18</sup> A. Stewart, The Klopper affair: Anglo South African relations and the surrender of the Tobruk garrison, *Twentieth Century British History* (17) 4, 2006, p. 540.



Although postmodernism holds that there is no difference between history and social memory, Tosh explains that social memory is derived from tradition and nostalgia and provides a feeling of security or “an escape into a more congenial past”.<sup>19</sup> A leading oral historian, Alistair Thomson, conducted extensive interviews while researching Australian memories of the First World War, the popular legend of ‘Anzac’ (Australia and New Zealand Corps) and the relationship between individual memories and national legend. Thomson’s research shows how some memories are highlighted while others are repressed and silenced.<sup>20</sup> Thomson found that what we remember fits in with our present identity and helps us feel more in harmony with our lives.<sup>21</sup> “The aftermyth of war” is created through a deliberate selection of remembered events within an ideological context.<sup>22</sup>

To show things as they really were, it is necessary to “go beyond the published word”.<sup>23</sup> Much use has been made of primary sources, but letters from the front cannot always be taken at face value. Where Hodgson and others protested too much that everything was just wonderful, it is necessary to try and understand the specific historical conditions. One veteran wrote that in letters, diaries and even published works, every effort was made to disguise disgust at men and systems that were insults to intelligence and to tone down descriptions of scenes inconceivably ghastly. On the other hand, every possible instance of bravery and cheerfulness was recorded. Little attempt was made to reproduce the emotions that filled the heart and mind of the private soldier.<sup>24</sup>

In the post 1948 political environment, the experience and language of the infantrymen who bore the brunt of the fighting, was overwhelmed by the language of those who were ideologically opposed to the war. It is believed that the existing literature and the modern publishing industry, together with the restricted reporting in the wartime media, and the needs of the post-war society may have cleansed the collective memory and reshaped sense of self, sense of nation. As modern historiography has shown, memory is a highly subjective construction of experience. Numerous studies have found that the violence and trauma of war was cleaned up in the larger national memory as the theme of sacrifice was emphasized to help build a national identity.<sup>25</sup>

The post-war power of “the media” to determine what shall be embraced as reality is in large part due to the success of the morale culture in wartime. It may even represent its continuation.<sup>26</sup> Due to wartime censorship and the culture of emphasizing the positive, the general public had no concept of what the fighting men had experienced and how changed

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<sup>19</sup> J. Tosh, *The pursuit of history*, pp. 20-23.

<sup>20</sup> A. Thomson, Memory as a battlefield: Personal and political investments in the national military past, *Oral History Review* (22) 2, 1995, pp. 55-73.

<sup>21</sup> A. Thomson, Anzac memories: Putting popular memory theory into practice in Australia, in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The oral history reader*, pp. 300-301.

<sup>22</sup> J. Boje, Winburg’s war, p. 447.

<sup>23</sup> J. Tosh, *The pursuit of history*, pp. 20-23.

<sup>24</sup> E. Jones, The psychology of killing: The combat experience of British soldiers during the First World War. *Journal of Contemporary History* (41) 2, 2006, p. 234.

<sup>25</sup> W.E. Lee, Mind and matter – Cultural analysis in American military history, A look at the state of the field, *The Journal of American History* 93, 2000, p. 1136; J.M. Winter, *Remembering war: The great war between memory and history in the twentieth century*, p. 6; A. Thomson, Anzac memories: Putting popular memory theory into practice in Australia, in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The oral history reader*, pp. 300-301.

<sup>26</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 164; W.E. Lee, Mind and matter – Cultural analysis in American military history: A look at the state of the field, *The Journal of American History* 93, 2007, p. 1137.

they were. It can be said that their experience and language was overwhelmed by those who were on active service in Italy but who never went into the forward areas. These rear echelon troops outnumbered the frontline troops almost three to one.<sup>27</sup>

It was not only civilians who were ignorant about real life in the front line, most soldiers were almost as ignorant since only a small proportion did any fighting. Only a third of South African volunteers left the Union. William Manchester affirms that: “All who wore uniforms are called veterans, but more than 90 per cent of them are as uninformed about the killing zones as those on the home front.” By the end of the war, there were 11,000,000 men in the American army of whom 2,000,000 were in the 90 combat divisions and fewer than 700,000 were in the infantry.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, it can be argued, that society’s perceptions of the war are largely derived from film and folklore. With the appearance of television documentaries, films and books about the war, many of which were created for popular consumption, it can be said that there is a memory boom underway. This boom is seen by Winter as an attempt to keep alive the “names and images of the millions whose lives have been truncated or disfigured by war”.<sup>29</sup> Unlike the Great War, there was a lag of approximately thirty years after the Second World War before the boom occurred. Many will argue that the volumes of popular history which have appeared in recent years are part of the memory boom but not part of history.

Commercial cinema and television have often been accused of confusing fact with fiction. There is no doubt that film contributes to our sense of the past. However, film simplifies, generalizes and stereotypes. Perhaps film should be seen in the same way as oral tradition (ceremony and story-telling) where the telling of the exact truth is not the main objective. Neither did documentary films and newsreels tell the whole story. Through the shooting and editing process, only a small slice of history is revealed.<sup>30</sup>

The raw material of actuality film is the unedited original, normally shot without sound. As a historical source it is generally reliable, although some incidents have been restaged by cameramen shortly after the real events. Newsreels however were a different story. Individual sequences were selected and edited for newsreel use. The overall tone of British newsreel commentaries gradually became more aggressive than any other form of propaganda. Documentaries made for the Ministry of Information were often intended to boost morale or project the views of the British situation abroad. Like feature films, they may be studied by the historian provided the historian is aware of the subjective prejudices of the film-makers.<sup>31</sup> The important role which film played in shaping opinion during the war years is dealt with in Chapter 5.

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<sup>27</sup> S. Monick, *A bugle calls*, p. 324.

<sup>28</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, p. 283.

<sup>29</sup> Winter, J.M., *Remembering war: The great war between memory and history in the twentieth century*, pp. 6-12.

<sup>30</sup> P. Sorlin, How to look at an “historical film” in M. Landy (ed), *The historical film: History and memory in the media*, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> C. Coultass, British feature films and the Second World War. *Journal of Contemporary History* (19) 1, 1984, pp. 7-8.

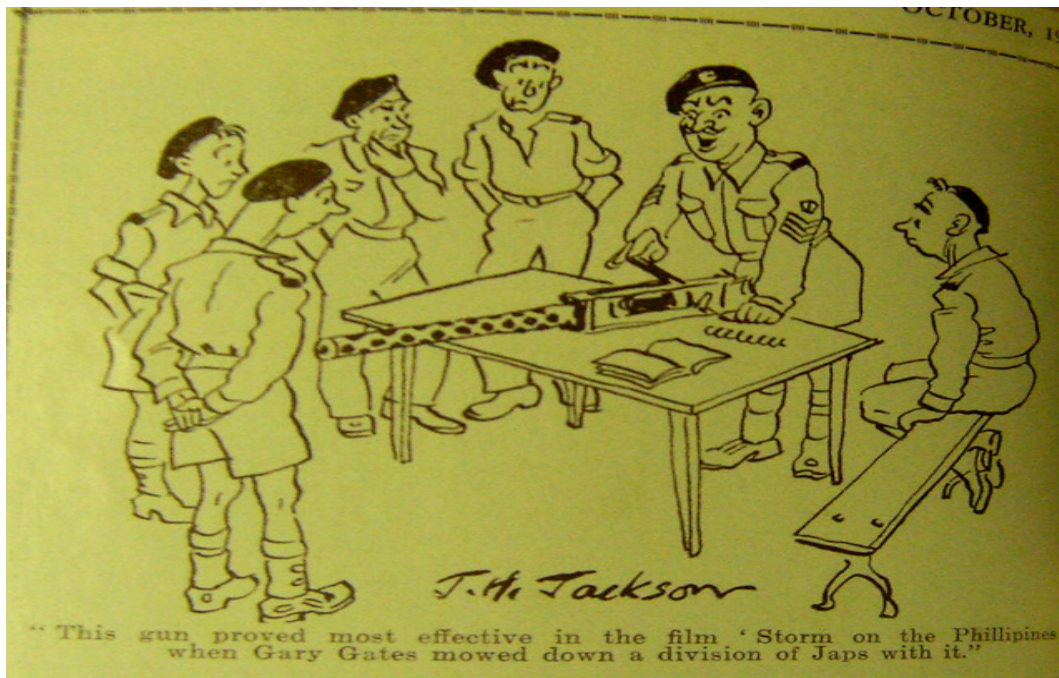


FIGURE 31: J.H. Jackson cartoon illustrating the cynicism with which South African soldiers received the offerings from Hollywood  
FROM: *The Nonquai* 35, October 1944

For fighting men, it was anathema to talk about their combat experience or write home about it. Self-censorship is as much to blame for the misconceptions held by the home front as any other forms of propaganda designed to keep spirits up. Hodgson's letters mainly consist of chipper messages and stock phrases which serve to illustrate that while the pain of separation was readily communicated, the physical discomforts, the danger and the horror was left unspoken. Certainly, there are varying degrees of horror, and the Italian theatre cannot be compared to the war against the Japanese. It is not surprising that South Africans frequently wrote about their fear of being sent to Burma when the war in Europe was over.

In the most traumatic of times for Hodgson personally, he wrote about film and music, he asked about his favourite haunts and gave brotherly advice to his younger sister. Not a word was said about himself or his own trying circumstances.<sup>32</sup> By setting aside the immediate or "surface" meaning in favour of the less obvious – it is possible to get closer to his true state of mind. The power of the text lies in the unintended layers of meaning it conveys.<sup>33</sup> Winter considers that letters are a snapshot of the mind of the soldier. "The prose comes to stand for the man himself, his nobility, his beliefs, his aspirations."<sup>34</sup>

Just as recipients of letters from the front would have looked for small nuances in the language to understand the soldier's state of mind, so should the historian be cognisant of the intended readership, prevailing circumstances and personality of the soldier. Just as newspapers did not properly inform the public at the time, they can also mislead the present-day student of history. Readers would have become very familiar with the geography of Italy as the typical newspaper article spoke of advances and gains through cities and territories

<sup>32</sup> John Hodgson Collection, J.B. Hodgson – D.M. Hodgson, 23/10/1944.

<sup>33</sup> J. Tosh, *The pursuit of history*, pp. 194-195.

<sup>34</sup> J.M. Winter, *Remembering war: The great war between memory and history in the twentieth century*, p. 109.

(accompanied by maps with sweeping arrows) but did nothing to portray the true experience, casualties were seldom mentioned and set-backs were given a positive spin.

The Battle of Chiusi provides a classic example of how a story is distorted and cleansed and is worth examining in some detail. Chiusi will always be associated particularly with the ILH/KimR and the FC/CTH and was the first major set-back for the South Africans.

The Battle of Chiusi began on 21 June 1944 and lasted six days. First, it was erroneously believed that the ILH/KimR had already passed through the town because of a map-reading error. The Chiusi station is situated a kilometre or two away from the hilltop town, in the valley below in what was a separate (industrial) centre called “Stazione di Chiusi”. Other reasons given for the fiasco were that the close quarter fighting limited the use of artillery, rain bogged down tanks on their way to the rescue and faulty intelligence regarding the enemy strength.

After climbing up the terraced slopes, the FC/CTH entered the ancient quarter near the Cathedral, ‘A’ Coy took up positions in a wine shop and in a cinema in the town square where they became besieged. Throughout the night of the 21/22 June, the Highlanders held out in the *teatro* while enemy tanks rammed the walls and fired at point-blank range. Thirty two out of the forty men were killed or wounded, the situation was hopeless and there was no disgrace in surrendering, but on this the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the mass surrender at Tobruk, the South Africans went to great lengths to justify their actions and there are many conflicting reports of how the battle ended. The version which is narrated in the regimental history appears to be based on the words of Sergeant Harry Campbell which were first quoted in a newspaper report headlined “Cape Men’s stand in Chiusi battle – burning theatre rammed by German tanks”:

We went out firing our Tommy guns into a haze of smoke and dust, while the Spandaus poured a hail of lead into the building...When we came into the street, we looked straight down the barrels of innumerable guns not more than ten yards away. There was not much to do but surrender.<sup>35</sup>

Nowhere in the article was there any mention of the carnage or the horror which was alluded to by a German soldier, Walter Stiewig. According to this account, a white flag was waved outside the window of the *teatro* by a German being held prisoner by the South Africans. A German soldier by the name of Herbert Zidek entered alone and through the dust and the gunsmoke, he saw a scene of human misery that he would never forget.<sup>36</sup> At least two men had been virtually vaporised by the 88 mm shells from a Tiger tank firing at point blank range yet the perpetuated image is one of Major Bartlett standing a little way up the steps of the *teatro* “emptying his revolver into the enemy”.<sup>37</sup> Both the company commander, Major Bartlett and 2 i/c, Captain Rivett-Carnac, were captured.

Another account by Harry Pearce, a signalman attached to the FC/CTH who was captured, goes as follows: “By this time, Major Bartlett was very badly shaken and our situation was hopeless, so in order to save lives, he gave the order to surrender.”<sup>38</sup> This version is corroborated by Captain E.S. Rivett-Carnac who, in correspondence, provided what is

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<sup>35</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, scrap book; L. G. Murray, *First City/Cape Town Highlanders in the Italian Campaign: A short history, 1943-1945*, p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> W. Stiewig, Chiusi: 21-23 June, 1944, *Der Deutsche Fallschirmjäger*.

<sup>37</sup> W.L. Fielding, *With the 6<sup>th</sup> Div*, p. 120.

<sup>38</sup> G.B. Hobbs, *From Sicily to the Alps*, p. 116.

probably the most detailed and useful account of the battle and ensuing events. At least six close friends had just been slaughtered in the *teatro* – yet language failed him:

All our men were still full of fight – and there was a grimness and tenderness impossible to describe. So the morning dragged on...despite the horror of the situation, [we] were reasonably cheerful – hoping all the time that our tanks might break through and appreciating that if they did, it was essential that we maintained a firm base in the town to which they could come, and from which they could operate.<sup>39</sup>

One of the many reports about the battle was that in the *Rand Daily Mail* article of 27 June 1944 which carried the headline: “Springboks get first taste of street fighting – At grips in Chiusi with a Hermann Goering Battalion”. The account which was cabled by a bureau of information observer was quite accurate in describing how three companies of “a Cape regiment” went in after a company of “a Rand battalion” had to withdraw after being “shot off the terraced slopes”. The positive aspects which were emphasized in the article included the accurate shooting of the artillery at an observation tower and also, because of the hold-up at Chiusi, the traffic jams on the roads were relieved for a few days.<sup>40</sup>

In a small way, the discourse relating to the Chiusi episode can be likened to the construction of the legends of the London Blitz and the Dunkirk evacuations. Through a need to reassure the public, these events were transformed from a defeat into a triumph of the indomitability of the human spirit. The wartime media, especially film media, wasted no time in portraying these landmark events in heroic terms: Major stars played heroic figures in these films which served as a form of collective morality as well as a source of morale.<sup>41</sup> While most of the romantic dramas which entertained the public during the war years were eminently forgettable, the constant stream of wartime films fulfilled the objective of boosting morale – while adding to received history.

In the letters and diaries which form the basis of these accounts, there is an indication that these writings were intended for a wider audience – as was found by Jones:

An infantryman fighting for his life did not have the time or inclination to record his thoughts and feelings. As a result, diaries and letters were written between battles during quiet periods of front-line service. They formed part of the soldier’s attempt to make sense of what he had gone through. For some, there may have been a rationalization of what they had done or thought they had done. Given the high attrition rates among the infantry, diaries were a way in which a soldier could leave an enduring record for close friends and family.<sup>42</sup>

There are numerous examples where veterans recount as their own personal experience, incidents and attitudes which are clearly part of the folklore. Received history has also been subject to distortion as memories fade over time. In recent years, the social record has continued to grow with the appearance of short memoirs which were written in later years, long after the fact.<sup>43</sup> Misconstruction occurs unintentionally, memory has become tainted and in many cases, veterans have completely forgotten events which took place nearly seventy years ago.

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, E.S. Rivett-Carnac – M. Rivett-Carnac, s.a.

<sup>40</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 27/6/1944, Springboks get first taste of street fighting.

<sup>41</sup> M. Landy (ed), *The historical film: History and memory in the media*, p. 8.

<sup>42</sup> E. Jones, The psychology of killing: The combat experience of British soldiers during the First World War. *Journal of Contemporary History* (41) 2, 2006, p. 233.

<sup>43</sup> C. Anderson, My army days, unpublished memoir, Natal Carbineers Museum.

Memory is inculcated by the act of remembrance which encompasses the proliferation of war memorials, memorial services, pilgrimages, teaching and writing history.<sup>44</sup> Winter explains that after the First World War, the cult of memory became a cult of mourning, exemplified by the proliferation of war memorials in every town. War memorials did not however proliferate after the Second World War. The names of those who died in the Second World War were simply added to those of the Great War. Winter sees this as a reflection of failure in that the warnings of “never again” were not heeded.<sup>45</sup>

More than 300,000 members of the British Diaspora (South Africans, Australians, New Zealanders, Indians and Canadians) died on active service in the two world wars. Winter sees this contribution as having created “another, still living, history of the Empire”. The names of the dead “disclose a moment when family history collided with world history, leaving traces, indelible traces, which we can see to this day”.<sup>46</sup>

In an article on new cultural history written in 1992, Winter wrote: “The Great War remains the essential point of departure for anyone concerned to understand the cultural history of this turbulent century.”<sup>47</sup> In what was his greatest work, *The Great War and modern memory*, Paul Fussell explains how the Great War changed the language, culture and history of Britain forever. Coming from an age of innocence, there had not yet been a need for a language in which to express such violence, pain and grief. The Edwardians loved literature. They were more than just literate, they were vigorously literary. When confronted with the indescribable horrors of the trenches, they experienced a desire to rivet their impressions through writing. However, writers lacked the ability to craft the true horror into words, resulting in a shift in language and literary technique. Subsequent to 1918, there was a proliferation of memoirs, many of them fictionalised. After the Second World War, the population tended to silence and even literature “conscientiously objected”.<sup>48</sup>

It has been shown that to get closer to the past, it is necessary to go beyond the official histories. For that matter, it is also necessary to go beyond propaganda, oral evidence and film. Even primary sources have their limitations. Fussell quotes a war-time diarist who later said of his own writings: “There is nothing to get hold of if you are trying to write a proper historical account of it all. No wonder the stuff slips away mercury-wise from proper historians. No wonder they have to erect artificial structures of one sort or another in its place. No wonder it is those artists who re-create life rather than try to re-capture it who, in one way prove the good historians in the end”.<sup>49</sup>

One well-regarded historian assures us that memory is a process distinct from history but not isolated from it – history and memory overlap. History “is not simply memory with footnotes; and memory is not simply history without footnotes”. Memory (or historical remembrance) is a process which occurs in time and space.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> J.M. Winter, *Remembering war: The great war between memory and history in the twentieth century*, p. 144.

<sup>45</sup> J.M. Winter, *Remembering war: The great war between memory and history in the twentieth century*, pp. 26 & 151.

<sup>46</sup> J.M. Winter, *Remembering war: The great war between memory and history in the twentieth century*, pp. 168-180.

<sup>47</sup> J.M. Winter, Catastrophe and culture: Recent trends in the historiography of the First World War, *The Journal of Modern History* (64) 3, 1992, p. 532.

<sup>48</sup> P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War*, pp. 132-134.

<sup>49</sup> P. Fussell, *The Great War and modern memory*, p. 311.

<sup>50</sup> J.M. Winter, *Remembering war: The great war between memory and history in the twentieth century*, p. 6.

If Von Ranke was correct, all the theoretical arguments and analytical methods cannot equal the importance of the original documents. The archival material is there for everyone to explore but Hodgson's letters are in a private collection and may never again be made available to the researcher. For posterity therefore, it is important to include as much of this material as possible.

Hodgson's letters from the front offer a valuable insight into his everyday life but even they did not record the things which the passing time has made important. Keeping in mind that even the war diaries were subject to distortion, much of the minutiae required for a social history can be obtained from all the paperwork which was churned out by pedantic HQ staff and countless company clerks. Thanks to Agar-Hamilton, Axelson and the historical recording section which salvaged truckloads of documents and shipped them home to the Union, there is more than adequate archival material to enable historians to better understand what the South African soldiers experienced in the Italian campaign.

## APPENDIX A

### SIXTH SOUTH AFRICAN ARMOURED DIVISION ORDER OF BATTLE AT 15 APRIL 1945<sup>1</sup>

#### HEADQUARTERS

Headquarters 6 South African Armoured Division  
Headquarters 11 South African Armoured Brigade  
Headquarters 12 South African Motorised Brigade  
Headquarters 13 South African Motorised Brigade

#### ARMOURED UNITS

1<sup>st</sup> Pretoria Regiment (Princess Alice's Own) PR (PAO)  
Prince Alfred's Guard (PAG)  
Special Service Battalion (SSB)

#### ARTILLERY

1/6 Field Regiment, CFA, SAA  
4/22 Field Regiment, SAA  
15 Field Regiment  
1/11 Anti-Tank Regiment, SAA  
1/12 Light Anti-Aircraft, Regiment, SAA  
7/23 Medium Regiment, SAA  
Survey Troop SAA  
42 Air Observation Post Flight SAAF  
535 Searchlight Battery (one Troop)

#### MOTORISED INFANTRY

Royal Natal Carbineers (RNC)  
Natal Mounted Rifles/SA Airforce Regiment (NMR/SAAF)  
Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment (ILH/KimR)  
Royal Durban Light Infantry (RDLI)  
First City/Cape Town Highlanders (FC/CTH)  
Witwatersrand Rifles/Regiment De la Rey Regiment (WR/DLR)  
4/13 Frontier Force Rifles  
1 Battalion of 135 U.S. Regimental Combat Team  
Regiment Botha/Regiment President Steyn

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<sup>1</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 192, Orders of Battle and Location Statements, U.D.F. Formations and Units, Order of Battle for 6 SA Armoured Division at commencement of last phase of operations in Italy, 15/4/1945.



## ENGINEERS

5 Field Squadron SAEC  
8 Field Squadron, SAEC  
12 Field Squadron, SAEC  
17 Field Park Squadron, SAEC

## SIGNALS

Headquarters Squadron 6 Armoured Division Signals, SACS  
6 SA Armoured Division Signals Squadron, SACS  
6 SA Armoured Division Artillery Signal Squadron, SACS  
17 Armoured Brigade Signal Squadron, SACS  
14 Motorised Brigade Signal Squadron, SACS  
18 Motorised Brigade Signal Squadron, SACS

## INTELLIGENCE

66 Field Security Section

## QUARTERMASTER SERVICES

6 Armoured Div Forward Tank Delivery Squadron  
55 Quartermaster Company, QSC  
56 Quartermaster Company, QSC  
57 Quartermaster Company, QSC  
58 Quartermaster Company, QSC  
59 Quartermaster Company, QSC  
73 Bulk Breaking Platoon, QSC  
74 Bulk Breaking Platoon, QSC  
75 Bulk Breaking Platoon, QSC  
76 Bulk Breaking Platoon, QSC  
49 Field Bakery RASC  
3 Italian Pack Transport Company  
14 Italian Pack Transport Company  
250 Italian Pack Transport Company

## TECHNICAL SERVICES

27 Armoured Transport Workshops, TSC  
28 Armoured Div Workshops, TSC  
29 Armoured Div Workshops, TSC  
30 Armoured Div Heavy Recovery Section, TSC  
31 Armoured Div Light Recovery Section, TSC  
15 Armoured Div 2<sup>nd</sup> Line Transport Workshops, TSC  
6 Armoured Div Technical Stores Field Park, TSC

## MEDICAL

19 Field Ambulance, SAMC  
20 Field Ambulance, SAMC  
6 Armoured Division Dental Unit, SAMC  
174 Mobile Dental Unit  
6 Field Hygiene Unit, SAMC  
1 Field Surgical Unit, SAMC  
2 Field Surgical Unit, SAMC  
8 Field Surgical Unit, SAMC  
23 Field Transfusion Unit  
54 Field Dressing Station  
Mobile Ophthalmic Unit  
A Section 146 Company (Motor-Ambulance Convoy) RASC

## MILITARY POLICE

6 Armoured Division Provost Company, SACMP

## POSTAL

6 Armoured Division Postal Unit

## PIONEER AND LABOUR

99 Italian Pioneer and Labour Company  
121 Italian Pioneer and Labour Company  
219 Italian Pioneer and Labour Company  
221 Italian Pioneer and Labour Company

## MISCELLANEOUS

6 Armoured Division Pay Section  
38 US Infantry Dog Scout Platoon (American)  
1 Mobile Bath Unit, QSC  
57 Mobile Laundry and Bath Unit  
12 Graves Registration Unit

## RESERVE GROUP

Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles/Transvaal Scottish/Rand Light Infantry (DSR)  
Regiment Botha/Regiment President Steyn (BPS)  
Reserve Armoured Regiment  
Reserve Motorised Battalion  
Reserve Artillery Group, SAA  
Reserve Field Squadron, SAEC  
Reserve Signal Squadron, SACS  
Reserve Quartermaster Company, QSC  
Reserve Field Ambulance, SAMC  
Reserve Provost Section, SAMP  
Reserve Field Security Section  
Reserve Infantry School  
Reserve Group Reception and Transit Unit

COMPOSITION OF 24 GUARDS BRIGADE WHO WERE PART OF THE DIVISION UP  
UNTIL FEBRUARY 1945

### **24 Guards Infantry Brigade**

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, The Scots Guards  
3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, The Coldstream Guards  
5<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Grenadier Guards  
23<sup>rd</sup> (Army) Field Regiment, RA  
42<sup>nd</sup> Field Company, RE  
201<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade Workshop, REME  
24<sup>th</sup> Independent Brigade Group (Guards)  
Workshop, REME  
550<sup>th</sup> Company, RASC  
137<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, RAMC  
226<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, RAMC

## APPENDIX B

 CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE INDICATING HARBOUR AREAS AND MILAGES DURING OPERATIONS BY 12 MOTORIZED BRIGADE GROUP ITALIAN SUMMER CAMPAIGN 1944<sup>2</sup>

DATE	PLACE	MILAGE	UNIT IN CONTACT WITH ENEMY OR NOT
PHASE 1			
5 May – 23 May	M. Cifalco		Contact
	St Elia		
PHASE 2			
25 May	Limatola	Nil	Concentration area
28 May	Cervato	50	Harbour
30 May	Pontecorvo	15	Harbour
1 June	Ceccano	18	Harbour
2 June	West of Frosinone	7	No Contact
3 June	Anagni Area	13	Contact
4 June	South of Paliano	5	Town captured
5 June	Colonna	23	No contact
6 June	Via Rome to south of Castelnuovo	28	Contact
9 June	Civita Castellana	15	Concentration area (24 Gds Bde having passed through)
10 June	North of Viterbo	30	Concentration area
11 June	North of Viterbo	4	No contact
12 June	South of Bagnoregio	6	Contact
14 June	West of Orvieto	15	Contact
16 June	Via Allerona to	19	Contact
18 June	Salci	2	Contact
20 June	Le Piazze	8	Contact
22 June	East of Cetona	5	Contact
28 June	North to south of Chiusi	3	Contact
30 June	Area Savina[o]	7	11 SA Armd Bde in the lead WR/DLR under comd – contact

<sup>2</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 165, File E.4 Ops.

1 July	North of Acquaviva	4	11 SA Armd Bde in the lead WR/DLR under comd – contact
3 July	South of Lucignano	14	Contact
4 July	South of Palazzuolo	7	Contact
5 July	SE of Castelnuovo	9	Contact
16 July	San Giovanni	9	Contact
17 July	Ama	6	Contact
20 July	North of Radda	6	Contact
22 July	South of Panzano	4	Contact
25 July	South of Greve	5	Contact
29 July	North of Greve	6	Contact
30 July	NW of Greve	10	Contact
2 August	South of Mercatale	3	Contact
3 August	SW of Imprunetta	4	Contact
4 August	South of Firenze	3	12 Mtd Bde in Div Res. 11 SA Amd Bde with WR/DLD under comd reached south bank of River Arno

## APPENDIX C

 CHRONLOGY OF OPERATIONS IN THE GOTHIC LINE AND WINTER LINE UP UNTIL THE REST PERIOD AT LUCCA<sup>3</sup>

Date	Command	Unit	Remarks	Place
22/8/44	5 Army	6 SAAD	Ex 8 army Reserve	Siena Area
24/8/44	5 Army	6 SAAD	Begins relief 85 US Div	On Arno River
26/8/44	IV Corps	6 SAAD	Completes relief	On Arno River
1/9/44	IV Corps	6 SAAD	Crosses	Arno River
3/9/44	12 Bde	FC/CTH	Occupies crest	M. Albano
5/9/44	24 Bde	NMR/SAAF	Occupies	Monsummano
9/9/44	24 Bde	3 Coldm	Occupies	Montecatini
13/9/44	11 Bde	FF Rif	Occupies	M. Acuto
16/9/44	11 Bde	FF Rif	Attacks and secures	M. Alto
18/9/44	11 Bde	ILH/KimR	Attacks and secures	M. Pozzo del Bagno
22/9/44	24 Bde	3 Coldm	Raid	Serra
30/9/44	24 Bde	1 SG	Begins attack on	Monte Catarelto (Pt 707)
2/10/44	24 Bde	5 Gren	Attacks	Pt 707
3/10/44	24 Bde	5 Gren	Occupies	Pt 707
3/10/44	11 Bde	ILH/Kim/R	Seizes	Torlai
6/10/44	11 Bde	RNC	Occupies	M. Vigese
7/10/44	11 Bde	FF Rif	Attacks and occupies	M. Stanco
8/10/44	11 Bde	FF Rif	Driven off	M. Stanco
10/10/44	11 Bde	RNC	Attacks, driven off	M. Stanco
13/10/44	12 Bde	WR/DLR & FC/CTH	Attack and secure	M. Stanco
17/10/44	12 Bde	RNC & FC/CTH	Attack and secure	M. Pezza
19/10/44	12 Bde	WR/DLR	Attack and secure	Pt 806
22/10/44	24 Bde	1 SG	Occupy	M. Alcino
23/10/44	12 Bde	ILH/KimR	Attack and secure	M. Salvaro (Pt 826)
24/10/44	24	1 SG	Occupies	M. Termine
29/10/44	CCB	11 US Armd Inf Bn	Attack and secure	Palazzo

<sup>3</sup> SADDCC, Box 598, WD, Recording Officer, 22/8/1944 – 22/2/1945; Table adapted from “Operations of the 6 SA Armoured Division in Italy” compiled by the recording section, 6 SA Armd Div, March 1945.

## APPENDIX D

 ORDER OF BATTLE AND FIGHTING STRENGTH AT THE END OF MAY 1944<sup>4</sup>

		Ofrs	ORs	CCs
1	Div HQ	54	203	89
2	NMR/SAAF	47	676	39
3	11 Bde HQ	19	131	30
4	PAG	40	565	40
5	PR(PAO)	36	557	40
6	SSB	43	565	40
7	ILH/KimR	44	727	58
8	12 Bde HQ	17	69	31
9	RNC	45	752	108
10	FC/CTH	47	743	106
11	WR/DLR	47	746	108
12	RDLI	31	412	47
<b>Artillery</b>				
13	HQ	8	27	11
14	1/6/Fd Rgt	43	627	65
15	4/22 Fd Rgt	52	786	91
16	7/23 Med Rgt	33	589	54
17	1/11 A/T Rgt	26	626	56
18	1/12/Lt AA	41	673	56
<b>Engineers</b>				
19	8 Fd Sqn	10	222	24
20	12 Fd Sqn	9	223	23
21	17 Fd Pk Sqn	7	125	16
<b>Signals</b>				
22	HQ 6 SA Armd Div Sigs	19	307	34
23	6 Div Artillery Sigs Sqn	3	50	5
24	17 Armd Bde Sign Sqn	6	122	13
25	14 Motorised Bde Sigs Sqn	6	121	13

<sup>4</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 192, File AQ 21/4 Vol 2, Units under command Nov 1943 – 15 Oct 1945.

### Quartermaster services

26	“Q” Services HQ	10	32	48
27	136 [tank?] Quartermaster Coy	13	177	45
28	55 “Q” Coy	8	173	28
29	56 “Q” Coy	9	155	44
30	57 “Q” Coy	9	139	51
31	58 “Q” Coy	10	222	50
32	59 “Q” Coy	11	220	52
33	73 Bulk Breaking Platoon	1	16	18
34	74 Bulk Breaking Platoon	1	16	18
35	75 Bulk Breaking Platoon	1	16	18

### Technical services

36	28 Armd Div Workshops	7	224	5
37	29 Armd Div Workshops	8	234	10
38	30 Heavy Recovery Sect	2	93	2
39	31 Light Recovery Sect	2	50	2
40	14 2 <sup>nd</sup> Line Transport W/S	4	183	8
41	“T” Stores Fd Pk	4	56	11

### Medical

42	19 Field Ambulance	19	137	49
43	20 Field Ambulance	16	160	45
44	6 Div Dental Unit	3	8	3
45	6 Hygiene Section	2	9	7

### Miscellaneous

46	6 Div Provost Coy	5	146	25
47	66 Field Security Sect	1	16	1
48	6 Div Postal Unit	1	22	1

<b>Total for 6 SA Armd Div</b>	<b>880</b>	<b>13148</b>	<b>1678</b>
24 Guards Brigade Group	208	4459	-----
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1088</b>	<b>17607</b>	<b>1678</b>



## APPENDIX E

Breakdown of all 6 SA Armd Div battle casualties and battle accidents. <sup>5</sup>										
Unit or Formation	CMF May 44 to May 45			CMF May 45 to Aug 45		Air crashes July 45	TOTALS			
	X	Y	Z	X	Y		X	Y	Z	Total
Div HQ	3	14		1		2	6	14		20
11 Armd Bde HQ	1	11		1			2	11		13
PAG	23	137	6	2	9	1	26	146		178
PR (PAO)	44	154					44	154		198
SSB	39	186	6			2	41	186		233
ILH/KimR	112	408	31	1			113	408		552
FTDS	2	10			1		2	11		13
12 SA Mtd Bde HQ	3	3					3	3		6
RDLI	21	178		2	3		23	181		204
FC/CTH	93	345	58				93	345		496
WR/DLR	132	637	20	1	7	3	136	644		800
13 Mtd Bde HQ		1						1		1
RNC	109	369	10	2	2		115	371		496
NMR/SAAF	49	171	8	3	4	4	53	175		236
SAA HQ	1	5		1	1	1	2	6		8
1/6 Fd Rgt	17	107	1	1	2		18	109		128
15 Fd Rgt		3			3			6		6
4/22 Fd Rgt	7	117		2	10	1	10	127		137
7/23 Med Rgt	7	30		2	1		9	31		40
1/11 A/Tk	7	92	1		0		7	92		100
1/12 LAA	4	34			6	2	6	40		46
SAEC	32	137		1	1	1	34	138		172
Sigs (Excl det)	8	59		3			11	59		70
QSC	13	95		3	14	6	22	109		131
TSC	2	33		2	1	3	7	34		41
Med	2	28			3	1	3	31		34
Div Prov Coy	4	23					4	23		27
DSR						4	4			4
TOTALS	735	3387	141	28	68	31	794	3455	141	4390
24 Guards Brigade (attached)							229	1117	60	1406
4/13 FF Rif (attached)							87	281	45	413
Total for the division including attached formations							1110	4853	246	6209

X = Killed; Y = Wounded/injured (excl remained on duty); Z = POW & missing.

<sup>5</sup> SADDCC, Div Docs, Box 163, Casualty returns, Battle casualties and Battle 6 SA Armd Div.

## APPENDIX F

## ABBREVIATIONS OF NAMES OF REGIMENTS AND FORMATIONS

Designations and abbreviations were determined by the military staff at the time and re-designations took place from time to time.

6 SA Armd Div	6th South African Armoured Division
<b>Arty</b>	<b>Artillery</b>
1/6 Fd Rgt	1/6 th Field Regiment, CFA, SAA
4/22 Fd Rgt	4/22nd Field Regiment, SAA
7/23 Med Rgt	7/23rd Medium Regiment, SAA
1/12 Lt AA Rgt	1/12th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, SAAF
1/11 A/T Rgt	1/11th Anti-Tank Regiment, SAA
<b>Armoured Reconnaissance</b>	
NMR/SAAF	Natal Mounted Rifles/South African Air Force Regiment
<b>Support Group</b>	
RDLI	Royal Durban Light Infantry
<b>11 SA Amd Bde</b>	<b>11 South African Armoured Brigade</b>
PR(PAO)	Pretoria Regiment (Princess Alice's Own)
PAG	Prince Alfred's Guard
SSB	Special Service Battalion
ILH/KimR	Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment
FFR or FF Rif	4/13th Frontier Force Rifles
<b>12 SA Mtd Bde</b>	<b>12 South African Motorised Brigade</b>
FC/CTH	First City/Cape Town Highlanders
RNC	Royal Natal Carbineers
WR/DLR	Witwatersrand Rifles/Regiment De la Rey
<b>13 SA Mtd Bde</b>	<b>13 South African Motorised Brigade (Formed in February 1945)</b>
ILH/KimR	Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment
NMR/SAAF	Natal Mounted Rifles/South African Air Force Regiment
RDLI	Royal Durban Light Infantry
15 Fd Rgt	15th Field Regiment, SAA
BPS	Regiment Botha/Regiment President Steyn
<b>Reserves</b>	
DSR	Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles – Transvaal Scottish – Rand Light Infantry

APPENDIX G: OTHER ABBREVIATIONS<sup>6</sup>

AAI	Allied Armies Italy
A Tk or AT	Anti Tank
A Tps	Army Troops
AA	Anti Aircraft
ACF	Active Citizen Force
Adm	Administrating or Administrative
ADMS	Assistant Director Medical Services
ADQT	Assistant Director Quartermaster Technical
ADS	Advanced Dressing Station
Adv	Advance or Advanced
AES	Army Education Service
AFHQ	Allied Force Headquarters
AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicle
Amb	Ambulance
AMG	Allied Military Government
AP	Armour Piercing or Anti-Personnel
APM	Assistant Provost Marshall
APO	Army Post Office
Armd or Amd	Armoured
Arty	Artillery
Att	Attached
AWL or AWOL	Absent Without Leave
Bde	Brigade
Bdr	Bombardier
Bn	Battalion
Brig	Brigadier
Brig Gen	Brigadier General
Bty	Battery
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
Ca	Casa (Italian for house)
CB	Counter Battery
CCP	Casualty Clearing Post
CCS.	Casualty Clearing Station
CIC	Counter Intelligence Corps (American)
CMF	Central Mediterranean Forces
CO	Commanding Officer
Col	Colonel
Colm	Column
Comd	Command, Commander or Commanding
Comd HQ	Command Headquarters
Conv Depot	Convalescent Depot
Coy	Company
Cpl	Corporal
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery (Divisional artillery commander)

<sup>6</sup> Compiled with the kind assistance of Colonel William Marshall, SANDF.

CSM	Company Sergeant Major
CWGC	Commonwealth War Graves Commission
Det	Detachment
DI	Dangerously Ill
Div	Divisional or Division
Div (Bde) Wkshop	Divisional (Brigade) Workshop
Div Docs	Divisional Documents
SADDDC	Department of Defence Archives Repository
DR or DonR	Dispatch Rider
ENSA	Entertainments National Services Association
Eyetic, Itie, Iti	Slang for Italian person
Fd Amb	Field Ambulance, S.A.M.C.
Fd Pk Coy	Field Park Company, S.A.E.C.
Fd Sqn (Tp)	Field Squadron (Troop), S.A.E.C.
Fd	Field
FDL	Foremost Defended Localities/Location/Lines
FDS	Field Dressing station
FFI	Free From Infection
FGCM	Field General Court Martial
FOO	Forward Observation Officer
FSS	Field Security Section
FUP	Forming Up Position/Place
Fwd	Forward
GCM	General Court Martial
Gen	General
Gen Hosp	General Hospital
GHQ	General Headquarters
Gnr	Gunner
GOC	General Officer Commanding
Gp	Group
GRO	General Routine Order
GRU	Graves Registration Unit
GS	General Service or General Staff
GSO	General Staff Officer or General Service Oath
GSW	Gun Shot Wound
HE	High Explosive
Hosp	Hospital
HQ	Headquarters
Hr	Hour
Hy	Heavy
i/c	In Charge Of
Inf	Infantry
Inf Bde (Bn)	Infantry Brigade (Battalion)
IO	Intelligence Officer
K/D	Khaki Dress
L/Bdr	Lance-Bombardier
L/Cpl	Lance Corporal
LAD	Light Aid Detachment

Lieut	Lieutenant
LMG	Light Machine Gun
LO	Liaison Officer
LRDG	Long Range Desert Group
LOB	Left Out of Battle
Lt	Light
Lt Col	Lieutenant Colonel
Lt Gen	Lieutenant General
MAC	Motor Ambulance Convoy
MDC	Military Disciplinary Code
MDS	Main Dressing Station
Mech	Mechanised
Med	Medium
MG	Machine Gun
MT	Mechanical Transport or Motor Transport
Mtd or Motd	Motorised
NAAFI	Navy Army and Air Force Institutes
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NEAS	Non-European Army Services
NMC	Native Military Corps
O i/c	Officer in charge
OC	Officer Commanding
Offr	Officer
OP	Observation Post
OPA	Observation Post Assistant
OR	Other Ranks
PIAT	Projectile Infantry Anti Tank
Pk	Park
Pl	Platoon
Pnr	Pioneer
PO	Post Office
Posn	Position
Pr or pdr	Pounder (as in 25-pdr)
Pro or Provo	Provost
Pt	Point
Pte	Private
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
PW or POW	Prisoner of War
QM	Quartermaster
RAP	Regimental Aid Post
Rd	Road
Rec	Recovery
Rec Sec	Recovery Section
Recce	Reconnaissance or Reconnoitre
Ref	Reference
Regt or Rgt	Regiment
Res	Reserve
Rfn	Rifleman

RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major
SAA	South African Artillery
SAAC	South African Armoured Corps
SACS	South African Corps of Signals
SAEC	South African Engineer Corps
SAMC	South African Medical Corps
SAMNS	South African Military Nursing Service
SAPA	South African Press Association
SATC	South African Tank Corps
Sec	Section
Sergt or Sgt	Sergeant
SHELREPS	Shelling Reports
SI	Seriously Ill
Sig	Signal
Sigmn	Signalman
Sigs	Signals
SP or SPG	Self Propelled Gun
Tac R	Tactical Reconnaissance
Tks	Tanks
Tpr	Trooper
Tpt	Transport
Tpt	Troop
TSMG	Thompson Sub Machine Gun
UDF	Union Defence Force
UDFI	Union Defence Force Institutes
WAAS	Women's Auxiliary Army Service
WD	War Department
WET	War Establishment Tables
YTB	Youth Training Brigade

## SOURCES

### ARCHIVAL RESOURCES

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#### MISCELLANEOUS

##### Cinematography

RESNEK, J., Video diary of the Royal Natal Carbineers, James Bourhill Collection.

##### Conference papers

VAN DER WAAG, I.J., Furlough, beer and brothel: the politics of STDs in the AIF, 1914-18, South African Historical Society 23<sup>rd</sup> Biennial Conference, 2011.

BENTZ, G., At the fleshpots of Egypt: The battle for the control of the morality of South African troops in North Africa in the Second World War, South African Historical Society 23<sup>rd</sup> Biennial Conference, 2011.

Headstone inscriptions at Castiglione Commonwealth War Cemetery.

Brain, Sgt, T. P., SAA, 30/10/1944, age 29, Durban, Natal.

Buckley, Sgt, C. C., MM and Bar, RDLI, 25/4/1945, age 23, Pietermaritzburg, Natal.

Thorpe, Cpl, J. D., RNC, 10/10/1944, age 27, Mooi River, Natal.

Watt, Pte, J. C., RNC, 24/10/1944, age 17, Brakpan, Transvaal.