

I had completely underestimated Schalk's desire for family connection, and my husband and I were welcomed in, with trust I felt was undeserved. I was also surprised by the trust that the veterans had in his judgment, that in his allowing me access they followed his lead.

Schalk generously offered up space in his home for my use, and I rolled out the prototype Morse code interview, *Secrets Encoded* (Figure 5), to be examined and touched. I introduced myself, my interest in the notion of coming-of-age rituals, and my personal connection to the SADF. I went on to explain that I had translated my own narrative of pain and vulnerability surrounding the SADF into Morse code and had knitted it into the tapestry which was spread out on the table.

The response was astounding. I watched calloused hands gently move up and down the work, the veterans listening intently, as they asked me to confirm that it was all real, readable text if someone took the time to translate it and heard a consensus that the resulting piece looked like terrain, a landscape of scattered, shrubby bush behind which to take cover. During this interaction, I heard Schalk referred to often as 'The Commander' by the other veterans. This title is not one that was bestowed on him by the SADF, but rather is a recognition by the others of his leadership within their community of veterans.

After about twenty minutes of that first meeting, the veterans, barring the Commander, started to get louder as the stories flowed, each man trying to get my attention and share a story. I was starting to wonder if the flow would ever come to an end, and the experience was so electrifying I hoped it would go on longer, when my great aunt poked her head around the corner with a *potjie* for dinner. With a word, the Commander asserted that it was time adjourn. The other veterans rose and dispersed in a quick and orderly fashion. I realised that even over twenty years after their army service, they still function like a unit and go so far as to have rechristened their band as a unit. I heard, reiterated over and over, that the Commander's experiences were the reason he had the respect of his men.

The men spoke of themselves as a unit and even identified themselves as the *Crocodile Battalion*. The men clearly formed a community of remembrance surrounding their military experience and provided opportunities for sharing stories and experiences that the veterans would not usually speak about. When I asked Schalk who he speaks to about his experiences of the SADF, he responded that the problem with speaking about them is that “people don’t understand”. Schalk also wanted to avoid sharing with people who might “take the thread of what you say and weave their own little story and give you a bad name”. He went on to say that his group were whom he could “discuss anything with ...we can laugh about it”. He mentioned a wider military community, friends he had trained with, with whom he could also discuss anything pertaining to his experience in the SADF.

Through the creation of a community of veterans, there seems to be a communal re(membering), a building of community based on memory and identity deeply entrenched in the experiences of the SADF. There were overlapping ideas that more than one veteran echoed, and one I heard almost consistently was that of rejection. Over the past two and a half decades, the South African military identity has been deemed culturally antique and irrelevant, especially by younger generations:

It's disappearing, the whole military ethos, structure thing. We thought it would be there forever, it's not, the way of thinking, the discipline thing, it's getting diluted, it's getting forgotten... You can say a lot of bad about it, but there's a lot of good about it. It would be a pity for the good to be lost in the whole thing. It's very easy to criticise it all and belittle it when there's peace. But what [...] if the wolf is knocking at the door?

This sense of rejection opened a question regarding the framework of the present through which the veterans remembered their experiences. If the link between masculinity and the military is so strong, and your induction into manhood is through military prowess and protection of a regime that is later condemned, how does that impact the framing of the participants' memories of the SADF and identity pertaining to their military service? Answering that question is beyond the scope of this study, although contemplating it became the departure point for the following works. I asked each participant to speak to me about his experiences of the military with a focus on

vulnerability and hoped that within the stories I would gain some insight into the question of identity and military service.

3.2. The *Encoded* series

At the end of each interview, I asked the veterans if they would allow me to encode a story into a knitted Morse code artwork, using *Encoded Secrets* (Figure 5) as an example of the intended outcome. Those who decided to participate shared a narrative dealing with a painful or vulnerable experience or aspect of their experience of military service. As I have worked and coded the stories the veterans chose to share with me into the soft heaviness of cotton tapestries, I have relistened to and retyped the narratives entrusted to me. The intention originally was to work with recycled cotton yarn, as the military uniforms were made of cotton, and to encode using a colour palette significant to each participant's experience. When I first visited, Fred mentioned a 'minor' uniform switch transitioning from the SADF to the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) that held a lot of significance for the identity of these veterans. Originally, the colour of a belt would signify the division of each soldier. Fred, a pathfinder who was a member of the paratroopers, had a maroon belt. This identified him as someone who had passed the gruelling selection and was a special operative. As a 'recee'¹⁸, Schalk had worn a black and white belt (Figure 7 *Encoded: The Commander*). I felt that it was important for the veterans to have a marker of identity in the coded texts without naming them in the titles. Rather, the titles reference their SADF ranks, except for the title Commander, which is both a name and a rank, though not the participant's SADF rank.

¹⁸Recee is a shortening of Reconnaissance Commandos, the South African Special Forces.



Figure 7: Georgina Glass, *Encoded: The Commander*, 2023.
Knitted Morse code in recycled cotton 183 x 26 cm.
Photograph by Beck Glass.

With the transition to the SANDF, the belt system was changed, and a standard mossy green was issued across the board, regardless of division or rank. I believe the intention was to create unity, but certainly, for Fred who had transitioned into SANDF, it felt like erasure. I originally knit his story in maroon but received feedback halfway through that it made decoding the text almost impossible without physically interacting with the surface created. I decided to work back into the text, revisiting the narrative and picking out the code in green (Figure 8 *Encoded: The Sergeant*).



Figure 8: Georgina Glass, *Encoded: The Sergeant*, 2023.
Knitted Morse code in recycled cotton, 147 x 36 cm.
Photograph by Beck Glass.

The idea of layering over time, obsessively retelling, reworking and rewording is something that has always been present in my work and I was inspired by natural layering and processes of decomposition and re-composition as mosses, fungi and rust set in, building metaphors for layered experience as time and memory shift and come to rest in layers, to reflect the concurrent past and present that exist within a narrative, simultaneously obscuring, eroding and excavating.

The works hang, heavy tapestries, from wooden knitting needles. The needles are positioned at the beginning of the narrative, rather than the end, indicating a continuation, to signify that the direction of the work is into memory and the past, rather than into the future. The works are not biographies to be continued, but rather a snippet of memory enmeshed in the weighty and tactile cotton yarn. To write in Morse code is deliberate and laborious, and usually, Morse messages are refined and limited to the essential language required to transmit meaning, usually keywords. Taking the time to knit each word in these narratives was important to me, as the emotionality of the stories and tone are not lost. It also means that the tapestries are snippets of narrative, rather than an entire recounting of experiences.

Through the process of recording the veterans' stories and transcribing them into tapestries, I was let in to some degree, allowed access to a space reserved, usually for veterans. I was told stories that women in their families had not heard, and I could speculate that perhaps I had the weight of a university study that allowed me access, but it could also be that I had made a bid for bravery and offered vulnerability and pain first. Like many women, my perception of the military growing up and even now is one of wariness, tinged with experiences of violence and the fear of loss and pain. The transferal of stories from these men to me, to a tapestry loses, adds and warps significance, and nuance and tinges them with femininity. These anti-monuments, focussing on individual vulnerability rather than group triumph, blur the gender binary, becoming about human experience rather than strictly masculine. These tapestries also become documents of interaction between masculine and feminine, one generation to another, as each veteran told his narrative with me as his specific audience.

3.3. (Re)membering through the sculptural and emotive

While thinking about and making this project I found a great deal of inspiration in the practice and sculpture of Louise Bourgeois. Not only did Bourgeois engage with spirals, building or releasing tension depending on directionality, but she also engaged with trauma and memory with an exceptional body of emotionally imbued sculpture. Germano Celant identifies Bourgeois' work as "a web rich in memories and stories" (2010:13).

Bourgeois experienced a betrayal of trust as a young girl, when she discovered that her father had hired his mistress, Sadie, to be her governess. The trauma and betrayal permeate powerfully through Bourgeois' creative output, something she circles back to repeatedly. The spiral crops up time and time again as a motif that releases or recoils tension. Bourgeois describes the spiral as "the beginning of movement in space" (Kirili 1989:74), an exploration of surrounding space. She also speaks to the notion that the spiral is about control and giving it up, "of trust, energy, of life itself" (Cheim & Read 2018:7). Among a variety of other media, Bourgeois also, uses and alludes to stitching

in her work, which connects Bourgeois to the maternal, as her mother restored tapestries professionally. Bourgeois also engages with stitching as a restorative and reparative process. Like Bourgeois, my connection to stitching is one that I consider deeply tied to my feminine inheritance, sewing, knitting and other forms of needle work woven through with my memories of my grandmothers, mother and aunts. Stitching became a ritual for connection and the transference of stories and family history. Through stitching, I hoped to disrupt the exclusively masculine space of war stories with the feminine tradition of narrative transference, allowing for nuance and vulnerability.

I first explored the spiral in a work I have titled *Radar* (Figure 9) as it is the beginning of exploring my spatial positioning in my family and history. The work explores my own first thoughts about remembering the Border War. The spiral represented a rippling out, my memories as cultural and familial echoes, exploring misgivings and fears surrounding the project, but also collecting momentum to reach out and contact the veterans I approached for interviews.



Figure 9: Georgina Glass, *Radar*, 2022.
Embroidery on linen, 90 x 74 x 2 cm.
Photograph by Beck Glass.

Radar (Figure 9) was my first exploration into Morse code outside the knitting, as I wanted to maintain the coded narrative while also exploring the spiral shape. French knots and bullion knots have an incredible tactility to them, emerging from the landscape of the cloth as luminous little lumps of tension. The narrative roles out across the seams of stitched-together fabric, cathartically losing the fears and anxiety of starting this project, unsure of what I might find or discover about myself and my family history. As I continued to review my own memories or post-memories surrounding the SADF, the process of stitching became the method for repairing trauma

and reviewing memory. I recorded memories of the stories I had heard about conscription, the overlaps between domestic, feminine associated tasks and the ultra-masculine model of the military. The notion that my uncle only knew how to darn socks and sew buttons (something his mother was rather good at and could have taught him) because he had been made to learn in the military. I considered statements I heard often about the men of my generation, that they should have had the opportunity to go to basic training, that maybe they would have grown up and learned some discipline. Through the process of stitching texts and meditations, while inherently about rites of passage of the men I interviewed and grew up around, I felt the works were infused with femininity, disrupting notions of the gender binary in (re)membering the SADF.

3.4. Home: the domestic space as a site for transferral and an icon for protection

Bourgeois' installation work, *Destruction of the Father* (Figure 10), explores family power and dynamics within the setting of the dining room. The cramped and claustrophobic installation is emotionally charged with anger and pain, and the inability to escape is palpable. The work is essentially a dinner table, with the father sitting in his position of power as head of the household. The installation gives form to experiences six decades old, in which Bourgeois imagines the family overthrowing the tyrant father and devouring him (Bernadac 1996:93). The work deals with familial power dynamics, but also becomes a sort of theatre as Bourgeois engages with and remembers traumatic experiences of betrayal from her childhood, confronting and consuming her father in a violent dismemberment of trauma and memory.



Figure 10: Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 1974.
Wood, fabric, plaster and latex.
Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel.
Photograph by Jonas Hänggi.

While Bourgeois' work is incredibly powerful in the emotional engagement of trauma and family dynamics, my own exhibition installation *Coded Binaries* (Figure 11) is intended to explore conversation, rather than confrontation. The space is not claustrophobic, but intimate and is intended to mimic the spaces where I heard stories of conscription told as a small child. The structure of the dining room table is replaced with a lounge, removing the hierarchy imbued in the former setting and so well used by Bourgeois. The lounge becomes a gentler space with more room to breathe.

The space created in *Coded Binaries* (Figure 11) is clearly a domestic one, with trappings of a home that is marked by the Border War. On entering the space, one finds a uniform jacket and beret hung on a cast iron hat stand, and the bookshelf on the opposite wall houses literature, including soldiers' accounts of their experiences surrounding conscription, a redacted portrait of my father-in-law in uniform, and a

teapot. The lounge can be activated by the ritual of tea, something usually facilitated by women, becoming a space for sharing experiences and stories. This is a gentler space than Bourgeois' *Destruction of the Father*, (Figure 10) designed as a space for engagement rather than confrontation and blame.



Figure 11: Georgina Glass, *Coded Binaries* installation shot, 2023.
University of Pretoria Student Gallery.
Photograph by the author.

The domestic space represents the notion of home that many veterans understood themselves to be protecting from the threat of communism. The space also becomes a site for conversation and engagement regarding the transfer of family history, pain and trauma, but there is great difficulty in voicing experiences and narratives openly. The space is intimate, but not claustrophobic, attempting to connect to the energy of the place in which the interviews were conducted. It is a space that deals with my preconceived notions and memories surrounding the Border War and attempts to challenge and revisit those memories. My embroidery tin, inherited from my great-grandmother, is included as I am working from this space, and about this space. My work as a fibre artist is linked to the stitching of generations of women who came before me and is thus deeply imbued with notions of gender and family legacy.

The installation also includes *Television* (Figure 12) an appliance that was manufactured in the Soviet Union during the 1970s with the screen removed and replaced with fabric.

The sculpture engages with the sinister media blackouts and censorship in South Africa during the 1980s. The beaded Morse code, embroidered on wool suiting fabric, swirls inwards, getting tighter and tenser with each spiral.

The soft sculpture, with a protruding, screen-like upholstery, also addresses the comfort of the media produced by the apartheid government, affirming the values and way of life of the white South African community, the comfort of ignorance of the oppression and suffering of the 'non-white' population. The tweed fabric used to upholster the screen also references the uniforms of apartheid politicians, favouring European cut suits and representing government messaging and authority.



Figure 12: Georgina Glass, *Television*, 2023.
Morse code in beads on tweed and found object, 26 x 38,5 x 25 cm.
Photograph by Beck Glass.

3.5. Storytelling as a labyrinth

Storytelling is so much more than the reporting of facts. Remembering and attempting to capture the physical form of a story has been a challenging part of my artmaking process, as the interaction and presentation of the narrative is as pertinent in my memories of stories as the actual content is remembered, reanimated and regurgitated, having been digested, processed and fermented in the lived experience of the teller. Hanging above the *Television* in the *Coded Binary* exhibition is a hoop embroidered with a phrase remembered by Tom (Figure 13). *Sluk nou kou later* (swallow now, chew later) was something he heard at almost every meal, compelling him to eat as quickly as he possibly could. Accept now, process later, is a concept presented in the exhibition space, prompting contemplation of memory. It feels applicable when considering ways of remembering trauma and digesting experiences years later.



Figure 13: Georgina Glass, *Coded Binaries* installation shot, 2023.
University of Pretoria Student Gallery.
Photograph by the author.

Spiral Chair (Figure 14) engages with the sense of betrayal Baines writes about, and which I heard echoed in the narratives of the veterans I interviewed. Their leaders had surrendered from home while they were fighting for the protection of that same home. The spiral that engages with this, attempting to make sense of how these men might feel, begins from the back of the chair, throbbing and rippling out. The front of the chair is almost clear of the green-coded text that might almost be missed without the mirror positioned behind it. Then, the target-like spiral is clearly seen, tense and knotted, working around and around and around again before gaining some freedom and winding almost at random across the cotton canvas.



Figure 14: Georgina Glass, *Spiral Chair*, 2022.
Found chair and Morse code on cotton, 86 x 63,5 x 67 cm.
Photograph by Beck Glass.

3.6. Storytelling as layering

In this body of work, one of the strongest motifs is that of layering, as I have attempted to give form to storytelling as something that incorporates the memory of the past with the framing of the present in one narrative. I have worked to depict family history as a layering of experience, primarily using the rippling and echoing of the spiral form. The exploration of layering is further applied to the literal layering up of stitching on surfaces already embedded with narrative, not just referencing the passage of time and build-up of material, but the idea of digestion, as fungi or moss might grow over and slowly devour and obscure the surface.

Within my retelling of the stories I have heard, I have had reactions of horror, disgust, admiration and empathy. Part of understanding why I felt drawn to this project involved examining my preconceived notions and judgements about the conscription programme and the stories I had already heard before I embarked on this project. One such narrative was told casually at a braai, a supposed to be funny story, focussing on inflicting pain upon a fellow soldier out of boredom. I recalled the details of the story as best I could and recorded it by embroidering it into an armchair cover with protruding and scarring French knots. The story was about being on the border, standing guard duty with two other soldiers, a friend, and a man who was not liked by the narrator or his friend. The narrator and his buddy decided to heat a ten-cent coin in the fire and flick it down the back of the unfortunate victim's heavy coat. The punchline had to do with how difficult the uniform buttons were to undo on the great coats issued by the SADF, and the mad scramble as the man was scalded by the descent of the hot coin. As I worked towards the bulbous Morse code grew larger, more twisted in reds and purples to reflect my outrage at the way this story was framed and the imagined burns that might have marked the skin of the man who had essentially been attacked by his comrades.



Figure 15: Georgina Glass, *Spiral Chair, Pink*, 2022.
Found chair and Morse code on cotton, 87 x 69 x 71 cm.
Photograph by Beck Glass.

Almost a year later, I decided to revisit the work. Physically, it had been one of the most difficult works to make, requiring me to sit in uncomfortable and twisted positions while stitching and spiralling around the armchair. In an exercise attempting to find empathy, I decided to try to digest the experience of hearing the story I had recorded in the armchair. I used a thin unbleached cotton yarn to build a layer of Morse code,

designed to look like maggots, to break down my retelling of the experience of hearing the narrative. The text squirms in between and, all over the larger protrusions of Morse code, obscuring and embellishing the existing narrative with a memory embedded with a year's worth of hindsight.



Figure 16: Georgina Glass, *Spiral Chair, Pink* detail 2022.
Found chair and Morse code on cotton, 87 x 69 x 71 cm.
Photograph by the author.

Each of the three chairs in the exhibition is embroidered with Morse code, engaging with my second-generation memories surrounding conscription and the stories I remember hearing. The works embody the difficulty of speaking clearly and vulnerably about pain and trauma, as we tend to lead each other through labyrinths, near the truth but rarely right to it. True vulnerability is something I strive towards in my work, but I still have not managed to find the courage to openly present my experiences in plain language to the audience, rather relying on coding and obscuring meaning as protection and camouflage, while still achieving some catharsis by giving shape and meaning to my experiences and memories.

3.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the *Encoded Series*, narratives trusted to me by the veterans dealing with vulnerability and pain. By working in the binary codes of Morse code and knitting, each with gendered connotations, I have attempted to disrupt the usually, exclusively masculine space of the sharing of narratives relating to the SADF. I have also grappled with my post memories of the SADF, narratives that deal with pain and trauma and explored the domestic space as a site for the telling of stories and transferral of memory. Through my stitching I have worked to infuse the narratives with the notion of memory as a process of layering, as each time a story is told a layer is added, obscuring, adding or eroding details and meaning. In the next chapter, I intend to explore vulnerability, how the concept of vulnerability is framed by the veterans within the framework of their military masculinity and the pursuit of vulnerability within the exhumation of my post-memories of the SADF.

CHAPTER FOUR: VULNERABILITY

In my practice, I engage with family, sometimes through storytelling, but my work has almost always included the notions of inherited legacy and familial interaction and relationship. My experiences of generational interaction surrounding ideas of trauma and pain have been fascinating and complicated. While there is honesty in spirit, there is also a desire to protect the other person from the pain that you are about to disclose, and I have found myself leading close to the truth but concealing details. While I have stated that all the secrets, I record are interpretable, which is technically true, with time, patience, a key or familiarity with the code, my work is dishonest too. I have layered my Morse code text with further Morse. The layers serve a purpose and work to explore ideas of memory and narrative, family legacy, and history, but they also serve to obscure and shelter naked vulnerability within my narratives and the narratives of the veterans.

4.1. Camouflaging vulnerability

When asked who he might share stories of vulnerability with, Schalk responded that he knew not to throw his ‘pearls before swine’. He said that while he would speak about anything, he was also painfully aware that “people don’t understand. The Staff Sergeant, when we used to go on leave, he said ‘don’t try to talk to people about it. You know, for you it’s a big thing... they’ve got no idea, don’t waste your time and go to people, they’ll think you’re mad’.” While Schalk spoke openly with me about his experiences, he also made it clear that he did not do so lightly. To be allowed access to the narratives of these men speaks of incredible trust in myself and our familial connection.

To translate stories into stitched Morse code does make them very difficult, time-consuming and frustrating to interpret. I created a Morse code key, a series of journal entries, knitting a rectangle each day with an observation, fear or hope I had for the project. Each meditative block of knitting forms the background for a Morse alphabet

square, as I embroidered large Morse letters over the square. Initially, I had started to work with notions of patchwork and the comfort represented by a blanket or quilt. Later, I decided to fracture the work, taking inspiration from the camouflage net I saw around Schalk's property, concealing his home and base from aerial attack.



Figure 17: Georgina Glass, *Spiral Web* installation shot, 2023.
University of Pretoria Student Gallery.
Knitted Morse code in cotton and bamboo.
Photograph by Ricardo Teixeira.

The notion of camouflage is explored in my work *Spiral Web* (Figure 17), which drapes the entry point of the exhibition. The structure is inspired by the camouflage nets strung up around Schalk's home, the setting for the interviews. The home is a sacred space, and for many of the veterans home represented the family and community they were fighting to protect from the threat of communism.



Figure 18: Georgina Glass, *Spiral Web* installation shot, 2023.
Knitted Morse code in cotton and bamboo.
University of Pretoria Student Gallery.
Photograph by Georgina Glass.

The camouflage net does not provide any real protection but does obscure the view of anything or anyone sheltered beneath the flimsy rope and fabric strung together at intervals. Similarly, the narratives are protected by encryption that anyone with enough determination could decode. *Spiral Web* is made up of blocks of knitted Morse code, each block created in a day and recording my experiences, fears and insights surrounding the project on that particular day. Spiralling out from the centre, each block is embroidered with a Morse letter and arranged in alphabetical order, becoming a convoluted key to the exhibition.



Figure 19: Georgina Glass, *Spiral Web* letter H detail, 2023.
Knitted Morse code in cotton and bamboo.
Photograph by Beck Glass.

Each block is knit using yarn with special significance, left over from the creation of garments that I have worn, or garments made for loved ones. This use of textiles is inspired by Bourgeois' stitched works made later in her career. The textiles she used are all remnants from her own life, some she had kept for years, and while the fabric is imbued with importance to the artist, the exact significance of each textile is not made clear to the audience. In a similar way, the texts in *Spiral Web* hold significance as the fibres used to clothe me and my loved ones, but the exact significance is not available to the audience.

4.2. Pursuing vulnerability

For Bourgeois, stitching had a special connection and significance to her mother, a textile restorer, and sewing meant spending time with her mother. Stitching embodies “a form of reparation”, the closing up of a wound or mending of a cut or tear (Celant 2010:19). This idea of mending is explored in *The Little Chair* (Figure 20). Unlike *Spiral Chair* and *Spiral Chair, Pink*, *The Little Chair* employs indents in the encoding of fears and personal vulnerability and trauma relating to this project. The indents mirror the form of the protruding bumps created in *Spiral Chair, Pink*, and the transfer was made from one surface to the other by sitting on the *Spiral Chair, Pink* surface and using my bare skin as a matrix. The work engages with thinking about the transfer of trauma and identity from one generation to another, and the notion of lost details in that transference.



Figure 20: Georgina Glass, *The Little Chair* detail, 2023.
found chair and Morse code on cotton, 61 x 63 x 78 cm.
Photograph by Beck Glass.

This body of work began with the intent to pursue narratives of vulnerability, from both the participants and from myself. I anticipated the veterans' being reticent or even unwilling to make themselves vulnerable in the sharing of their narratives, but I did not fully anticipate how difficult I would find it to be vulnerable when engaging with my own narratives of pain and trauma surrounding this study.

The Little Chair is a bid from bravery, a final attempt at vulnerability, slicing open a calloused cotton surface to expose the sensitive underlayer and the red Morse code, converting dots and dashes into gaping circles and ovals. Unlike the other two chairs, which deal more with reactions to narratives heard and trying to understand memory and betrayal, this sculpture is a final attempt at vulnerability myself. The cream fabric of the chair seat is rent open to expose the smooth and raw underlayer, indented with Morse code detailing trauma. The protective cream layer is pulled over the terribly vulnerable underlayer and then an attempt at repair is made to provide some cover from the horrible nakedness of it all. In the work I have tried to acknowledge that, while I pursue vulnerability and understand it as bravery, I have not managed to be truly vulnerable with the audience. The work is ultimately a vulnerability with myself, as I give form and texture to a narrative that sticks uncomfortably in my throat.

This fear and desire for vulnerability in my work is an overlap I found with the narratives shared with me by the veterans. They too are reticent of being publicly vulnerable by sharing their narratives in plain text, legible and knowable by anyone and with immediacy. They agreed to work with me on this project because of the protection and encryption that the Morse code knitting provides, ensuring that only truly interested or military trained audience members would be able to decode the texts.

4.3. Decoration

Another overlap I found between femininity and the masculine environment of the military is the word ‘decoration’. Embroidery, beadwork and other forms of stitching have been used in domestic spaces and on garments, usually women’s clothing, to decorate and embellish. This sort of work serves to add beauty and exhibit needlework skills, but little else. I found it fascinating that the terminology used for military medals is also ‘decoration’. This overlap began as a starting point to create a series of medals, primarily exploring the idea of achievement. Prior to the interviews, I anticipated that some of the veterans might associate their coming-of-age with a sense of achievement as, within the army, status is based on rank and achievement. This notion was confirmed to some degree when I finally interacted with the veterans and heard their stories.

Tom spoke to the idea of the transformation, from boys to soldiers, with reference to the politics that framed the experience, identifying it as crucial to maintaining the military power that apartheid South Africa needed to support the regime:

In South Africa, wrongly or rightly, it was a real thing. Industry could not function with any confidence without the government turning boys into fighting machines in the defence of what it saw as a global attack on a way of life. That they did extremely well in my opinion. In fact, when we came out of the army, we found girls our age were immature and complacent. Untested.

I find it interesting that rather than saying outright that he felt mature and tested, the focus in Tom’s answer was on his ‘immature’ and ‘untested’ female peers, a foil for his own identity and experience. I also understand why he answers this way. His experiences of conscription and training were incredibly intense as the process was meant to convert teenagers into the property of the state:

The state owned you completely. They told your parents so. They couldn’t even cut your hair. That is a frightening position to be in... You were expected to function around death and trauma for the sake of the team around you... To do heroic things to save others and to be selfless. This [process] makes me acutely aware how ‘comfortable’ we all are in this era. Wars always happened somewhere else.

For me, this last idea speaks to a loss of innocence as the reality of war, suffering and vulnerability is made very real in the experience of a young man. I certainly could not pretend I had any real idea of what these young men experienced. For me, just like for Tom's female peers, war happened somewhere else. While Tom speaks to the terror and vulnerability of this time, there is also a sense of triumph, a sense of pride in his resilience and ability to endure and adapt to the training:

It was a life changer. Boys became young men in a short time. I became physically robust and mentally strong. I was young so I could deal with it better than I thought. I never knew I had it in me.

Again, the idea of achievement emerges, even though he did not specifically use that term. There is a sense of accomplishment in finding out what you are made of, that you have what it takes.

Medals felt like interesting and powerful objects to explore, a literal badge of honour that marks action and achievement, simultaneously bearing the name 'decoration' and carrying an interesting association with femininity in the name, while also acting as proof of military prowess, markers of respect earned, and masculine identity proved. The text embroidered on each medal comes from Fred, "*gaan jy aan*" referencing the idea of endurance, and the marker of military masculinity identified by all the participants.



Figure 21: Georgina Glass, *Decoration Series: A*, 2023.
Morse code knitting and embroidery in cotton on linen, 15 x 20 cm.
Photograph by Beck Glass.

Medals are awarded for a variety of reasons: selfless acts, injury, bravery and valour. Universally, medals awarded for bravery have orange ribbons, and that is the colour I decided to knit with. Reflecting on what bravery means to me, I decided to knit Morse code text into the ribbons referencing what it means to live in a country with so much gender-based violence. Each set of medals carries encoded texts relating to bravery. While in a military context the masculine notion of ‘action’ is required for bravery, I posit that bravery can also encompass continued living despite fear. I also intended to honour the bravery of each veteran to engage with this project. The work recognises their vulnerability in speaking to me and trusting me with their stories.

When asked what he understands the relationship between vulnerability and bravery to be, Schalk responded that the latter does not exist without the former:

The more vulnerable you are, the braver you are. If you are vulnerable, you know that you’re dependent on other people to help you succeed...The

biggest force in the universe is love. The more love you have the stronger you are. The more love you have for your family and your fellow people, the more you'll want to do for them, the more you'll want to protect them, the better soldier you are, and the more you think you can do everything alone the weaker soldier you are. You won't make it in those times because you've been self-reliant. You [must] put your life in your fellow soldier and creator's hands. That's vulnerable. And the [greatest] soldiers that I've got the [most] respect for... when there's dire need and fear and pressure, they pray. They ask assistance. They are vulnerable, they are weak, and they admit it. And that's where they get their strength.

While I resonated with the idea that bravery requires vulnerability, I had also anticipated encountering a rejection of vulnerability as a weakness. Fred took a different approach to the question and confirmed that “you cannot be brave if you do not realise that you are vulnerable... we are all vulnerable. If you... know, as a soldier, that you are vulnerable then you are [...] not a dead soldier”. Accepting vulnerability as a reality of life and a major consideration for survival was of vast import to Fred, rather than a full rejection of weakness. Tom remembers that the two ideas of bravery and vulnerability were considered and certainly presented to him as binary opposites:

In alpha male driven South Africa, vulnerability was a weakness and bravery was admired. I understand it of course. Nothing wrong if you are surviving, you must grow a thick skin to get through life. Vulnerability was seen as allowing ‘questions’ of oneself... Suffice to say vulnerability should be a strength if you are a confident person and bravery is accepting that.

For both Tom and Schalk, vulnerability was clearly and intrinsically linked to bravery, but these ideas are also presented by men who have confidence in their masculinity, and who have survived and excelled during their military service. It is interesting that the most decorated of the veterans, Schalk, was the most vocal about the importance of acknowledging vulnerability, as he is the clear leader of the group and had the respect and admiration of the other veterans, which one could argue gave him the confidence and bravery to speak so openly about his vulnerability as a human being as well as a soldier.

4.4. To guess but never know

I first explored the idea of decoration through the embellishment of an SADF step-out jacket. This blazer-like garment was worn for formal occasions and ceremonies. *To Guess but Never Know* (Figure 22) engages with military legacy and inherited notions of masculinity in my generation. The embellishments over the back of the jacket are a beaded Morse code conversion with my husband. He understands himself to be the first in his line to not complete some military service but had intended to from a young age. The coded conversation is picked out in the diluted colour of the unit he had hoped to join, maroon for paratroopers. Like *The Little Chair* (Figure 20) *To Guess but Never Know* deals with intimate post-memory surrounding the SADF and works with taking an impression of an impression, losing detail and colour as elements are lost in the transferal. When linking this jacket to the soldiers I interviewed, the spatter of beadwork is reminiscent of blood, stains from the physical war and residue in the minds of the soldiers. For my husband, the opportunity to test and prove himself within a military format was something linked to his familial legacy of masculinity. The conversation in the work *To Guess but Never Know* meanders slowly down the back, exploring his memories of his inherited military legacy. *To Guess but Never Know* also refers to the experiences of the participants, I can interview them and hear their stories, but I will never fully understand their experiences. I can meander close, but never fully arrive without shared experience.



Figure 22: Georgina Glass, *To Guess but Never Know*, 2022.
morse code in beads on a found SADF uniform jacket, variable dimensions
Photograph by Beck Glass.

4.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the relationship between ideas of bravery and notions of vulnerability as framed by the SADF veterans. While Tom remembers that vulnerability was presented to him as the opposite of bravery during his military service, Schalk and Fred are very clear in their identifying that vulnerability is a very real part of human experience, and even more so during war time. They assert that an overly confident soldier who cannot rely on support or backup for fear of exhibiting weakness is a dead soldier. They also assert that without vulnerability, bravery cannot exist. I have also attempted to grapple with vulnerability in my work and acknowledge the bravery of the veterans sharing their vulnerability with me.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The opportunity to speak frankly with SADF veterans and be let into their private sphere is one I am very conscious of as a privilege. In explaining my study to peers and specifically the children of SADF veterans, I have been made aware repeatedly that most veterans retain their silence and will not engage in a real telling or discussion of their experiences. For some, there is fear of judgement or a lingering sense that no one, except for other veterans, would understand their experiences. To have been allowed access and to be trusted by the participating veterans with their stories and memories is not something I take lightly.

5.1. Summary of findings

The objectives of the study were two-fold. First, I sought to understand the ideological constructions of masculinity employed by the SADF and to explore the impact these had in shaping and reinforcing gender identity in a generation of white South African men. Without exception, each of the participating veterans identified their conscription and military service as a rite of passage into manhood, even though their framings of this experience and the significance of that experience varied. A uniting concept was that conscription provided an opportunity to find out what they were made of, giving them confidence in their physical and mental strength. There was also a consensus that military service had played an important role in defining their masculine identities. Each veteran spoke about a sense of achievement and testing that happened during training that had given them a sense of confidence to carry into their lives. This knowledge came from having been to their very lowest point and knowing that they had pushed on and could push on. While there were no united and definitive criteria from the participants as to what it means to be a man and how exactly the SADF had inducted them into manhood, this idea of endurance emerged as the clearest answer I managed to find. I did find it interesting that each of the participants presented different facets of masculine identity when asked about the attributes that define masculinity. There was an emphasis placed on the shifting nature of masculinity, and I also found that the veterans, in

explaining masculine identity to me, often referred to feminine identity to create a foil, an inverse, presenting a gender binary, that masculinity was based on what femininity was not, but within the given understandings of femininity was overlap into masculinity, complicating and contradicting the notion of binary presented.

Christian ideology immersed in my review of literature surrounding the SADF as a fundamental part of white South African identity. This element is important to consider as African liberation groups within South Africa and in the greater areas of Southern Africa that the SADF engaged in had Soviet or Cuban support, and so their communist backing was framed by the apartheid government as in opposition to Christian values and thus a white South African way of life. Not all the participants identified as Christian, but for those who did, faith was a very important part of their experiences. The notion of obedience was important and played into the idea of the hierarchy that was important in retaining the structure of the SADF. Obedience to God and commanding officers was important in surviving day to day, and the belief that a higher power cares about you, has the moral high ground and knows best what course of action should be taken applies both to the faith in army leadership and the faith in God exhibited by the veterans. Surprisingly, I also encountered the use of Buddhist philosophy, combined with Christian faith, to create a nuanced understanding based on experiences of war and soldiering in Schalk.

Each veteran also expressed a sense of feeling misunderstood and self-censoring outside of their military community. They all felt, for better or for worse, that culturally current ideas of masculinity were moving away from their identities forged in the SADF. Not all, but half went so far as to say they felt forgotten by my generation. While the pool of participants in this study is far too small to draw data that could be applied generally to all SADF conscripts, I still believe that the narratives and interviews collected are valuable to collective remembering. The experiences and answers archive a community that believes they will be forgotten within the next generation and present personal experiences and narratives as important and worthy of recording.

The second objective of this study was to explore my post memories surrounding the Border War while engaging with narratives and memories from veterans. Remembering

the Border War and exhuming my memories surrounding the conflict has been a process of hunting ghosts, impressions of someone else's trauma and pain that have taken root in their framework within my own experience. This has been a project in which I have tried to understand and present the fallibility and strangeness of memory, a thing that happens now, but about then. Through the repetition of engaging with spiralling, coded and layered narrative, I have set down my post-memory surrounding the Border War, second-hand trauma, and pain through a lens of femininity. I engage with domestic spaces as sites for the transferral of family legacy and memory surrounding the war, and the ways in which narratives of pain and vulnerability are communicated. Through the meditative process of stitching, I have attempted to unpack my preconceived notions of the SADF, and trauma inherited from the Border War

The laborious process of stitching narrative into my work in Morse code has meant that my engagement with the stories and with my memories has been laboured and considered, as each word is slowly layered and embedded into the surface of my work. In that process, the meaning and choice of each word is considered: the words chosen by the veterans in their storytelling, as well as my choice of words and tones as I have encoded my memories. This body of work considers the nature of memory, both cultural and personal, as something rooted in experiences of the past but interpreted through the lens of the present. The work embodies this consideration through motifs of layering up and spiralling out.

5.2. Limitations and opportunities for further research

This master's study is limited; however, the pool of participants draws some conclusions about the SADF veterans as a group and focuses on the stories of individual experiences. Further research could expand the group, and, in time, perhaps more veterans would be interested in sharing narratives relating to their experiences of the SADF and engaging with questions regarding masculinity. Further exploration of post-memory and the creation of masculinity through the SADF could include interviews and participation from a second generation and include narratives and memories from the

children of the veterans and engage with their memories and second-hand narratives of the SADF.

In the veterans, I found that they had different experiences of the SADF and remembered it differently. They also have differing ideas that contribute to the way they identify masculinity. However, I still found overlapping sentiments and experiences, indicating that while their experiences were not identical, there was enough overlap that all the participants remembered their military service as induction into manhood. There was also a particular performance of masculinity that was connected to this military rite of passage and was identified by the participants as the ability to endure. They each spoke about their military service as a test, to know what you're made of, which created confidence in their ability to survive. One of the participants, Tom, presented a variation of experience from the other veterans, as he has left South Africa and no longer identifies as South African. There was a certain disconnect from the experience of conscription for Tom that I did not find in the other participants. Either the other participants connect their military identity very closely with their identity as South Africans, or their (re)membered community of veterans helps to maintain a sense of communal identity that retains the masculine ideals of the SADF. This is likely a combination and a potential area for further research, either engaging with expatriated South Africans who were conscripted into the SADF, or a further exploration of the re(membered) communities of SADF veterans in South Africa.

The practice of knitting narratives of the SADF in Morse code could also expand to engage more directly with the sense of stitching as repair, and perhaps a larger study could involve veterans recording narratives themselves, by engaging with the feminine practice of knitting. This would be an ambitious but very interesting exploration, but a project of this nature would need to be very carefully considered in terms of labour and creative ownership and is beyond the scope of this study.

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Faculty of Humanities
Department of Visual Arts

Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent

A feministic and artistic encoding of narratives of a (re)membered Unit of the SADF (1979-1989) of memories of masculinity and vulnerability

You are invited to participate in a Fine Art research study, titled *A feministic and artistic encoding of narratives of a (re)membered Unit of the SADF (1979-1989) of memories of masculinity and vulnerability* conducted by Georgina Glass from the Department of Visual Arts, School of the Arts at the University of Pretoria. The research is for a master's degree.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the effects of National Service on creating a particular masculinity among white South African men.

If you decide to participate:

- You will be interviewed by Georgina Glass at a time and place of your convenience.
 - The interview will consist of semi-structured questions.
 - The interview will be informal and conversational.
- The interview will take (approximately) 2 hours to complete, and this will be a one-on-one meeting.
 - The interview will be digitally recorded so that there is no misrepresentation.
- Your thoughts, experiences, and opinions on the SADF will be used in the written thesis as well as in the construction of artworks.
- You will be given the option to withdraw participation request that the record of interview be destroyed

No compensation will be offered for participating in this study and I cannot guarantee that you personally will receive any benefits from this research, but the hope is that your participation in the study will contribute to archiving stories of vulnerability and masculinity within memories of the SADF. The information you share will also help me to improve my understanding of experiences of military training and gain insight into the ethos and techniques employed by the SADF.

In view of you discussing your experiences in the SADF, you may be personally affected emotionally so risk to you is noted. You may skip any question you feel unwilling to answer and you may withdraw from the interview at any time without a reason. Free

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Departement Visuele Kunste
Lefapha la Bomotheo
Kgoro ya Bokgabo bja Pono

LifeLine Counselling is available for trauma intervention and you may contact them on 012 8043619 (Pretoria) or 0861322322 (National)

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Any questions you have about this study can be directed to Georgina Glass at 061 214 8109 or email address, or the supervisor of my mini-dissertation, Avi Sooful at Avi.Sooful@up.ac.za. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Pretoria's Research Ethics office at 012 354 1330 or fhsethics@up.ac.za.

Subject statement of voluntary consent:

When signing this form, I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use and understand. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this Letter of Informed Consent has been given to me.

Participant

Signature:

.....

Print name:

.....

Date:

.....

By signing below, I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

Researcher's name:

.....

Faculty of Humanities
Department of Visual Arts
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Departement Visuele Kunste
Lefapha la Bomotheo
Kgoro ya Bokgabo bja Pono

Print name:

.....

Date:

.....

Faculty of Humanities
Department of Visual Arts
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Departement Visuele Kunste
Lefapha la Bomo
Kgoro ya Bokgabo bja Pono

List of Questions

Personal background

During the 1980's the South African government bolstered their military forces through an enforced national service. I believe that you served during this time, what year were you called up?

For the record could you tell me your name and rank that you held in the army?

How old were you when you entered military training?

Could you explain to me your daily routine during military training?

Cultural influences and ideology

Was religion an important part of the training? Why do you think that?

Were you allowed to receive gifts from family members?

What sort of gifts did you receive?

Constructing masculinity

What training did your group/battalion perform and how often did you do this?

What was the reason for this?

How did this affect you mentally and physically?

Was target practice part of your training?

What sort of drills did you do?

How long were you in training before you were deployed into the field as a soldier?

Impact on conscripts

How long did you serve in the SADF?

When did you leave the SADF and why?

Has your military service played an important part in how you live your life today?

Do you think that your military service played a role in turning you into a real man?

How would you describe a real man?

What are your best memories of the military service?

What are your worst memories?

Which memories of the military service do you speak about openly to family?

What memories or experiences do you not speak about to your family?

Do you ever speak about pain or being vulnerable to your friends or family?