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Sights, Sounds, Memories

South African Soldier Experiences
of the Second World War

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Editor

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LITERARY IMAGININGS: PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND THE 'SPRINGBOK TALE'?

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BACKGROUND

If I had been more interested in the style of this book than in its content I would have written it in my own language – Afrikaans. But this is a book which I had on my conscience – on my conscience as a human being and not as a literary craftsman – and which, I felt strongly, should be written in English so that documentary evidence as to exactly what happened in Italy after the 8th September, 1943, should be accessible to the peoples of the two counties at present most concerned with Italy – namely, the British Commonwealth and America.¹

These words are from the Foreword to Uys Krige's personal war narrative. It tells the story of a man, captured at Sidi Rezegh and held captive in Libya and then Italy, of his escape from Campo Prigionieri di Guerra No. 78, and of his 'way out' – 'out' of the camp, from the encircling German troops, out from the infolding mountains, and eventually back to Allied lines.² But for Krige, a well-known poet and writer, this is no ordinary story. Its importance lay in its distinctive content, a story that weighed on his conscience. He warns his reader that this is no imaginary tale, but a true story, one that had to be told, that had to be recorded, 'as documentary evidence as to exactly what happened'. Reading between the lines, it is evident that Krige had no particular faith in the official records or in the press reports of the Bureau of Information. Nobody, other than those who actually shared the experience, could tell it, and it had to be told properly and told in a way that would be accessible to as many readers as possible.

Krige's *Way Out* was one of the first South African personal narratives to come out of the Second World War. But other servicemen, whose accounts followed in growing numbers, shared Krige's view. Alan Flederman, who was captured at Gazala, tells us that he decided to write his own story when he 'read accounts of escapees written by daughters-in-law to ensure that their children would be able to understand what their grandfathers had experienced'.³ Flederman's task, as with other veterans, was to give 'an accurate record', one based on written records generated during the war. Only in this way, he argued, could 'the real and complete account' be written. Those who were not there, who had not experienced the war first-hand, simply could not understand. In this vein, Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, working on the first-person testimony of combatants of the Great War, argue that 'the soldiers set themselves up as historians of their own experience, reacting against and wanting to correct the distortions and misperceptions in the home front's view of them'. In this way the 'veterans, who obviously had the incontestable status of witness to the war experience, also gave themselves the status of historians with the exclusive right to talk about the experience'.⁴

This phenomenon of course crosses all borders and infuses the veterans' tales of all armies. However, when viewed as 'repositories of vital information about the ways in which former servicemen remembered, understood, and mediated their war', personal narratives become richly-veined resources for the social and cultural historian of warfare.⁵ Using these arguments, this chapter seeks to gain a deeper understanding of South Africans' *experience* of the Second World War. The personal narratives (mostly published) of a range of South African service personnel were surveyed, their essential features examined, and conclusions regarding the presence of a 'Springbok Tale' are drawn. In other words, an attempt has been made to identify what it was like for South African service personnel who served in this war and whether there is a distinct South African voice in the 'soldier's tale'.

THE NATURE OF PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND MILITARY MEMOIRS

But first we need to take a step back and define what is meant by a personal narrative. The words of soldiers are preserved in so-called 'ego documents', which range from the diaries, journals and letters kept or written at the time of the events they record, to reminiscences, memoirs and autobiographies constructed by soldiers retrospectively. Perhaps thousands of such accounts, often partial in nature, were left by men of all ranks who served in South Africa's Union Defence Force (UDF). This body of material is important for it provides first-hand information on life in the UDF and offers insights into the very essence of the human perspective on war and, more specifically, of warfighting. However, several problems arise. Not only are these accounts written with very different intentions, but the definitions themselves are problematic. For Harari, military memoirs 'are synthetic narrative texts, ... written retrospectively, ... written to a considerable extent on the basis of personal memory, deal with a considerable time-span, have their authors appear as protagonists, and devote considerable attention to martial affairs in which their authors participated as combatants'.⁶ This definition, like any other, is permeable and some doubts around it remain. Harari notes, for example, that it is 'impossible to determine ... how many times a history should mention its author as a protagonist in order to become a memoir, or when a diary is rewritten by its author after several years qualifies as a memoir'.⁷ This problem, of differentiating between 'history' and 'memoir', will be addressed later in this chapter. For the moment, for our purposes, a personal narrative might be a memoir or an autobiography.

Building on a long tradition in the British world of telling and receiving veterans' stories, South African service personnel produced a range of such personal accounts during and after the Second World War.⁸ A selection of these published accounts is presented in the appendix to this book. Some were written by men who were, or would later become, established professional writers⁹ – men like Guy Butler, Uys

Krige, and Eric Axelson. Far more were one-book men, like Major Lionel Murray, who having qualified before the war as an attorney, and picked up a military cross and bar for bravery, wrote his regiment's history and then started a Cape Town-based high-street law firm.¹⁰ Or Captain WL Fielding, the 6th Division's intelligence officer, who having written *With the 6th Div*, returned to Barberton to resume his career in the cotton and sugar industry in the Eastern Transvaal.¹¹ Fielding's replacement as 'I' Officer was Laurence Gandar, later editor of the *Rand Daily Mail*.¹² But most were not such luminaries. The test, and Hynes unwittingly invokes Krige, should not be how 'literary' a book is (and the term 'literary' is itself problematic), 'but whether the book speaks with a voice that is stubbornly distinct, telling us what it was like, for *this* man, in *his* war'.¹³

Hynes argues that war narratives are a distinct literary type. The warfighting and the nature of the battlefields may change over time. But, he argues, the personal recollections of the soldiers taken as a corpus tell a single, coherent story. The whole of this tale cannot be told, of course. Men die in battle without leaving their record. Others may have survived, but the facts of their lives meant that their wars would remain unrecorded. Then some men told their individual stories, which are useful lenses through which to examine and understand what soldiers say (or don't say) about war, and of how those wars changed them as men and changed their societies.¹⁴ Hynes sees this 'Soldier's Tale' as fundamentally *one* tale, the telling of which traverses several genres: travel writing, autobiography and, of course, history. These facets are addressed in the following three subsections.

A little like travel writing: 'What a wonderful war it was'

Men enlist and 'go to war' for a variety of reasons.¹⁵ This was no different for the Springboks who volunteered to serve in the Union Defence Force after September 1939. For some, patriotism and the idea of 'South Africanism', with its apparent inclusivity, was important, stressing as it did the country's new independence and English-Afrikaner unity. Mike Sadler, then a young student and something of a pacifist, 'could not help being affected by the strong emotions of patriotism that were sweeping through the country'.¹⁶ For many, the war also brought the promise of fun and enjoyment, and an opportunity to relish comradeship. 'War was in the air' and some university students, no matter how interesting their classes, found 'it very difficult to study'.¹⁷ In groups, men joined the colours, often of local, district-based units and regiments. Later in the war recruits volunteered to serve in specific units, where they may have had friends or relatives. The authorities recognized the value in this 'regimental family' incentive and attempted, where possible, to post volunteers for service with units of their choice.¹⁸ While serving with friends or people from the same region, soldiers might enjoy the strangely wonderful sights of a foreign campaign. This is what Albert Grundlingh referred to as 'the touristic potential of the war'.¹⁹

During the Second World War Springbok volunteers served in campaigns fought somewhere else. This somewhere else was firstly in East Africa and Abyssinia, then in North Africa and Palestine, and finally Italy, before repatriation for some through the United Kingdom, for others through the Middle East, and for a few through Odessa and the Black Sea. Some served on the high seas; others with British forces in the Far East. These places were thought of exotic and unfamiliar, and very different to what an infantryman from the rural Highveld or a gunner from one of the coastal cities knew at home. As Rishika Yadav argues in Chapter 7, this may have been even more so for the members of the Cape Corps and the Native Military Corps.

Many narrators note the strangeness of the countryside and the excitement of the physical environment. Major 'Chooks' Blamey, of the Natal Mounted Rifles, for example, records his approach to Lake Elmenteita through the Great Rift Valley:

I was tingling with excitement with the thrill of having all this wild life around us. We were tensed and keyed up with rifles at the ready, expecting every second to be confronted by some wild animal. The picture of the forest and the glades was magnificent. We stumbled out of the under-growth to find the lake before us and on the water were hundreds of flamingos. This was an amazing sight. ... The sun came up slowly and the flamingos on the water below began to stir, displaying the gorgeous colour of their plumage. This spread a shimmering mass of pink on the water, broken now and then only when a fluttering bird rose above the others. A scene of transcendent beauty I shall probably never have the good fortune to see again.²⁰

This reads like the best of travelogues, expressing delight and enchantment at an experience the narrator presumes might never again return. But there is another side to it. This is the strangeness of the human environment, and especially so of their enemy's world. Keith Ford, a gunner deployed in East Africa, recorded condescendingly of their Italian opponents:

The Italians seem to be a peace-loving people – not very warlike at all. They build fine roads, beautiful houses and lovely towns. However, they do not seem to be very clean nor care much about hygiene and, by and large, the soldiers are a dirty lot. Maybe that is because they have been out here for some time and have picked up indigenous habits and women.²¹

The racial slurs sometimes extend further. Ford again:

The Abbos (our name for the indigenous Africans) were far dirtier and smellier than the Africans in South Africa. An Abyssinian village could be smelt miles away.²²

And at least one guard commander apparently warned his piquet:

Watch out carefully for these buggers – they're as silent as ghosts, will cut your throat without your knowledge, and then chop your prick and balls off for barter.²³

The terms changed when the troops moved further north. Whereas East Africa, green, fertile, and stocked with wildlife, had been a paradise, Egypt was described in opposite terms. Now narrators describe their shock and disbelief. For Sergeant Douglas Scott, of the Transvaal Scottish, 'arrival in Egypt was a shock'. He goes on: 'The filth, flies and heat certainly made us sit up and wonder what had happened'.²⁴ The same story is told by Wolhuter (the flies and dust were the 'two plagues of modern Egypt'²⁵), and Hobbs (the troops were exposed to 'the unpleasant experience of a desert storm; dust and sand entered almost every part of our clothing and kit and, of course, ears, eyes and hair'²⁶), while Sir De Villiers Graaff recounts:

My most vivid memory of this camp [El Amariya] is that of the flies. By the time you had drawn your food from the cookhouse it was covered with flies. You got a suitable morsel on the fork, cleared the flies away and made a dive for your mouth. If you were lucky, you managed to get it into your mouth without taking flies with it.²⁷

Sidi Omar, where a young Paul de Villiers was based, 'was desert. Just sand and more sand and still more sand'.²⁸ Battalions arriving in Egypt went into the desert for training in desert warfare. They moved out for periods of three to five days, navigating by oil compass and the sun, and closing into laagers for each night. Sometimes training manoeuvres, involving attack and consolidation, made a welcome change from the digging of defences.²⁹ But the climate, and the vastness and emptiness of the terrain affected all. Die Middellandse Regiment was stationed at Tel-el-Kebir, which Wolhuter thought looked rather like 'a lonely siding in the Karoo' and that 'even out-of-the-way Draghoender and Putsonderwater in the North Western Cape looked more attractive'.³⁰ But then Tel-el-Kebir did at least have some historical significance; a battle had been fought here in Victorian times, although this made little difference to Van Deventer, Wolhuter's companion, who 'was not interested in the history of the place and was scornful of everything, including the Gyppos, the filth and the general backwardness of the country'.³¹

Karen Horn addresses the medical aspects of the North African campaign in Chapter 3. Many were struck with what became known as 'Gyppo guts',³² 'which was 'agonizing and debilitating' [and] made our lives a misery'.³³ For the most part, the training camps and forward positions were situated in isolated, often barren and inhospitable, parts. Helwan, the South African training base in Egypt, was situated on dry desert sand. When deployed at the front in Egypt, the men were never far from the coast and often swam in the Mediterranean, where some of the Natalians taught 'upcountry boys how to swim'. David Brokensha narrates that 'We were not over-busy; I remember halcyon

days on the beaches, swimming, wrestling, talking, dreaming, playing jukskei.³⁴ All was not bad. Arnold Colenbrander even expresses their pleasure and surprise: 'Everything we saw was new, different and interesting to us. The Nile with the feluccas sailing on it, the delta with its lush green fields in contrast to the arid desert right next to them. The city of Cairo with its pyramids, and the city of Alexandria held our attention'.³⁵

Springboks used their all-too-brief periods of leave for travel. They did tourist things. They saw the sites, took photographs, and enjoyed cold drinks and hot baths. Photographs were of course subject to censorship, but had become increasingly difficult to control. Troops bought relatively inexpensive pocket cameras and, eager to capture their travels and make a pictorial record of their war, took photographs as they went. Photographs had their shortcomings – film was fragile and photos were easily overexposed – but they also had their dangers from a military viewpoint. The case of Corporal NG Nilsen, who was attached to 3 SA Reconnaissance Battalion in 1942, illustrates this point. Nilsen had had his photographs developed in Cairo, but the envelope he used for sending them to his home in South Africa was intercepted by the postal censors. Nilsen had entrusted his films to Cine Photo of Kasr el Nil in Cairo. But H Nassibian, the proprietor of Cine Photo, had been blacklisted since November 1941. The intelligence market was lucrative and some Egyptian businessmen, realising the potential value of the images they were developing, were happy to earn the secondary income they might bring. Steps were taken and all troops were instructed to develop their films only from a list of approved photographers in the Cairo area. As things transpired, Nilsen's photographs proved to be quite harmless.³⁶

All troops were briefed before going on leave. They were briefed on information security. They were given some travelling advice, information on the main tourist attractions and the need to make the most of the trip ('See all you can while you can', the pamphlet advised), and on generally keeping safe. Notwithstanding, there are many references to men 'taken in one way or the other [and] a number lost their wristwatches without realising it'.³⁷ The war was for most South African troops their first 'travel experience' and in this sense they were naïve. And 'the fleshpots of Alexandria and Cairo [also] beckoned.' Here were 'hot baths, cold beer, good food and a bed' and it all seemed so far 'away from the guns, the bombing, and the hellish Khamsin and bitter cold!'³⁸ They visited Luxor, the museums of Cairo and the bazaars of the Mousky, the pyramids of Giza, where they haggled with traders, watched snake charmers, and tucked into the local cuisine, which was a welcome change to army fare.³⁹ Alexandria, Fielding tells us, 'was a favourite coastal resort, where the women were beautiful and the bathing refreshing'.⁴⁰

Sergeant Ike Rosmarin tells the same tale. With the supply corps, he and his officer, a Lt Shaprio, would complete their 'purchase in record time and [use] the opportunity to explore [Alexandria] ... with its excellent beach and beautiful girls'.⁴¹ Some travelled

further afield: to ancient sites in Palestine and to Syria. Most, it seems, included in their itinerary a visit to the famous Shepherd's Hotel in Cairo, where they might have been seen quaffing something cold on the hotel's expansive verandas. While some later regretted not having done more 'to explore sites of cultural and historical interest, and to meet local people',⁴² they certainly wrote about what they saw and experienced. The divisional newspapers and magazines – like the *Sable* of the 6th Division – contain many of these impressions, albeit in brief. Some, like Guy Butler, the 12th Brigade's Information Officer, published one or two of their wartime poems in it.⁴³ Others, like the anonymous corporal in the First Division, produced anthologies.⁴⁴ Wollhuter, writing long after the war, reminisced about the few visits he had made to Alexandria and Cairo before his capture at Tobruk. These cities, and the things he saw, 'made [him] realize what a wonderful war it was to give me the opportunity of seeing such strange and fascinating places'.⁴⁵ Axelson, writing when historical recording officer in Italy, sums this up nicely: the men went on sight-seeing visits to Siena for three things: 'It gives them a break, it makes it possible for them to see pretty faces again, and it is for many of them their first contact with medieval fortifications'.⁴⁶

Foreign campaigns, of course, held other attractions for healthy young men removed from female company and the restrictions of home surroundings. The opportunity for pleasure-seeking, casual sex and intemperance was always there, with appetites fuelled by the horror of war and contemplations on the possible brevity of life. This was the concern of more than one mother.⁴⁷ On leave from the front, troops chased one or two 'skirts', a word adopted in the war theatre from American troops or, in Cairo, visited the notorious Sharia el Berker. Taking a 'packet', or catching a dose of VD, was considered to be a serious infringement of military discipline.⁴⁸ There is no mention, in the published narratives, of the consequent visits to the prophylactic stations to which they had to report for venereal treatment when returning from pass. The VD infection rate in Egypt among Allied troops was around 30 per 1 000 troops per year.

Some, however, did note their sexual conquests, before embarkation for "the North", as well as the opportunities embraced in Egypt, Palestine and Italy.⁴⁹ Keith Ford, who is particularly free with his details, records the young Italian assistant of the photographer in Addis, who gave him 'a lesson in Latin love, on the studio couch'.⁵⁰ Then, a year later, the Italian matron in Cairo, whose imbibing had not 'impaired her sexual capacity or detracted from her performance'.⁵¹ And then in 1944 there was Angela in Rome, whose husband had been killed in the Western Desert in 1941. After spending several days together, they had a 'sad, sweet parting' and Ford thought 'of how many other young men had had the same bittersweet experience in that blasted wartime period.' He returned to his billet in Bozzano and, before he could think twice, he was 'back in the shit'.⁵²

Springbok troops, whether visiting the cities and towns or remaining at the battle fronts in Africa and Europe, were assaulted by a battery of sights and sounds and smells.⁵³ They experienced near full immersion in these exotic environments. And they revelled in it.

Largely autobiographical

Secondly, personal narratives are also largely autobiographical. Told by the fighting men themselves, they tend to be direct and undecorated, told in a soldierly, matter-of-fact fashion and, being about one man or a few men, they tend to be tales of particulars. They provide details of one man and his mates, on a frontline in Abyssinia, on a beach in Egypt, in a plane over the North Sea or on a ship in Mediterranean. In this way these largely autobiographical accounts, telling of larger events and describing exotic localities, are at once a little like travel writing and also something like history. And all claim the authority of the ordinary soldier's witness for what is written. After all, war cannot be properly understood second-hand – it is something that *has to be* experienced.⁵⁴

Uys Krige certainly did not stand alone. The drive, perhaps even the duty, to record is evident. Claiming the authority of the ordinary soldier's witness, taking as its premise that war cannot be understood second-hand, soldiers felt the need to document and record. This may have started with ephemera: snapshots and letters home. Several memoirists – including Major 'Chooks' Blamey of the UMR and Gunner Ford – recorded the passage of troops to the studios to have their photographs taken soon after entering Addis Ababa.⁵⁵ Most, possibly even all, troops wrote letters in which some communicated instructions to keep the letters and other artefacts as keepsakes for after the war. Others kept diaries and journals. This 'record making' culminated after the war with the production of an interesting run of personal narratives. As we shall see in the next section, some narrators resorted to jotting down notes, and keeping diaries, and consulting the regimental histories as credible sources to furnish specific details.⁵⁶

Some personal narratives are full autobiographies in the sense that they narrate a continuous life. Guy Butler was the most loquacious; his war narrative forms a substantial part of the second volume of his autobiographical trilogy. David Brokensha, in *Brokie's Way*, which spans a strapping 566 pages, covers the full span of his life from boyhood and his war experiences, through his post-war student life, and onto his career as a social anthropologist on three continents. His wartime experiences form slightly more than 10 percent of the full book. *Coley's Odyssey* takes a similar form. In it Arnold Colenbrander's wartime experiences form an interesting and exciting break in the otherwise rather mundane career of a government official. For Charles Scott Shaw the Second World War, which interrupted his theological studies in Edinburgh, forms an even briefer part of his

memoirs, which focus heavily on his service as a chaplain with the squadron in Korea.⁵⁷ *And the Doctor Recovered* is the witty autobiographical sketch of the life of a medical doctor from young intern to near retirement. Consisting of twenty-four short chapters, Dr Dingle's wartime experiences in three war theatres are recounted very entertainingly in eight of them.⁵⁸ Others include Frank Solomon, whose *And The Years Roll By* details his aviation career and the growth of aviation in South Africa. The Second World War intervenes, almost as a hiatus, towards the end of his book.⁵⁹

For some servicemen the war years were a kind of exile from a real life. Dr Mark Cole-Rous, posted to the 6th Casualty Clearing Station in Mombasa in 1940, was bored and frustrated. He had little to do, apart from leading an enjoyable social life, and felt that his talent as a surgeon was being wasted.⁶⁰ He was certainly not alone in feeling that his life path had been interrupted. Guy Butler, who was about to launch an academic career in 1940, tells us:

... one of the worst aspects of my years in the army was the paucity of contact with other poets and writers. Writing verse was a sort of private vice. The contacts one made with the editorial staff of the Div. magazine the *Sable*, while better than nothing, simply made one realise the lack.⁶¹

The sense of social dislocation, and for Butler the intellectual isolation, could be offset through comradeship. Butler tried to find genial companionship in the company of other information officers. One Saturday night, he records, a function was held to entertain Major Leo Marquard, to say goodbyes to Mike Comay, and to welcome his replacement as the new Divisional Information Officer, Major MacMillan. 'Never in the history of the South Africa army', Butler tells us jokingly, 'had so much brainpower been gathered in one tent, and with no purpose other than to drink beer, and sing, and behave as though there wasn't a war on. It was disgraceful'.⁶² He later linked up with Tony Delius and Uys Krige in Florence, where he records that they:

spent the night ... in a sort of poetical drink-up. It was the first time in years that I had been with men who were just a little mad about writing, and about poetry in particular. I realised how much I was missing this talk of books, writers, artists. My war, which on the face of it should have put me in the way of at least *some* literary souls, had failed me dismally.⁶³

Butler felt let down. The war had introduced a disagreeable caesura into his literary career. Stuck in his tent near the frontline, he was at times envious of Delius and of Krige, who worked with writers, and 'with getting writers into print, or on to the air.' Some servicemen had an unexciting, or perhaps rather an unstimulating, war. For them the war was a rude interruption in an otherwise fulfilling life.

However, the majority of the Springbok personal narratives do not narrate a continuous life. They often start in 1939 or 1940, with the outbreak of war or with the story of their personal enlistment, and end in 1945 with their return to the Union. This is the pattern for Paul de Villiers, Ike Rosmarin, Keith Ford, Glynn Hobbs, Chooks Blamey, Carey Heydenrych, Mike Sadler and others.⁶⁴ They express the mix of excitement – most servicemen were excited about the prospects offered by the war – and then of frustration as they seemingly languished in training camps as they awaited deployment. For this reason perhaps, Wolhuter's narrative starts with his deployment to Egypt and the Western Desert, where there was a small amount of action before capture at Tobruk. But prisoner-of-war narratives are different in many ways. They mostly start with their capture. This is true for Aussie Hammond (Sidi Rezegh), Alan Flederman (Gazala), and Laurie du Preez and Douglas Scott (Tobruk). But in two cases, the POW narratives tell a different story. As their titles indicate, for Uys Krige (*The Way Out*) and Harry Rose-Innes (*The Po Valley Break*), their narratives start with their escape from POW internment. For all of them the end of the war, and personal survival amidst indescribable carnage, is the happy ending.

Uys Krige, and the literary legacy he left of the War, demands separate attention. Published by Unie-Volkspers in 1946, *The Way Out* seems to have enjoyed a longer life than most of its counterparts. It certainly went through several editions and Krige received congratulatory letters for many years. There may be several reasons for this. His was a household name. He was a celebrated author and poet, and his wife, Lydia Lindeque, was a renowned actress. Moreover, as a war correspondent, his voice was known. His 'radiopraatjies' had been a key element in the government information programme, bringing news directly from the battlefield in North Africa to the families huddled around wireless sets in the Union. In most quarters he may have been a trusted, familiar source for this information. His account of *his* escape and evasion through the Italian countryside enjoyed broad appeal. It was an adventure story, and a true one, told by the public-figure-turned-hero. Krige later found that a substantial number of his readers were young boys and for this reason toned down and removed certain passages from the original edition. Moreover, the quality of the writing, and the story's 'incorrigible optimism and [the] staggering kindness' of the Italian people to escapees gripped many.⁶⁵ William Tawse of Aberdeen, Scotland, writing soon after the war (January 1947), felt that *The Way Out* was 'one of the finest books this war has produced.'⁶⁶

Yet *The Way Out* had another particular readership. This was the community of ex-prisoners of war, many of whom had experienced similar ordeals and adventures, and whose families hungered for insight into what their relatives had faced at a time when they all had to deal with such great uncertainty.⁶⁷ Several former POWs wrote to Krige after reading *The Way Out*. Denis Fielder, KE Gisburne, George Read, and Charles Gifford had been part of the escape from Campo 78, but all four had been recaptured:

Fielder the following day, Gisburne two days after, Gifford the day after he and Krige had parted ways, and Read some months later in March 1944.⁶⁸ For these men Krige had had success; he had 'found the way out'. They and other former POWs were therefore excited to read Krige's account. For Fielder it awoke 'such vivid memories and stirred up such a nostalgic wave of "escape-itis"'.⁶⁹ And here the memoir could play other roles. Former servicemen, and perhaps even more so ex-POWs, sought to link up after the war, recount their adventures and share their stories. After all, this was *their history*. However, the geography of post-war demobilisation seemed to thwart this. Fielder lamented: 'If civilisation throws up wars in order for us to meet, it should arrange its peace to enable us to remain within reach'.⁷⁰ *The Way Out* and books like it were such pathways of contact.

Glynn Hobbs, a trooper with the PAG, produced a very different account. Hobbs put pen to paper late in life and 'due largely to the exhortations of [his] wife Anne who, being so interested in family genealogy, suggested that a memoir of [his] war years be written which would be of interest to [their] family in the years to come'.⁷¹ His memoir is a collection of vignettes, scenes of memory, and is limited to his war years. Hobbs had no record, other than memory, from which to work. Moreover, some fifty-two years had lapsed, experiences had faded, and for some months in his account there is almost a blank, although as he notes, 'perhaps nothing of special interest was happening'. This is a collection of his vivid memories, of the striking experiences, of what remains. His memoir, he notes, is therefore not a 'continuous record of events but rather a collection of, hopefully, interesting stories' arranged in roughly chronological sequence.⁷²

Ian Mackenzie, the Honorary Colonel of the 1st Battalion of the Transvaal Scottish, could rightly say of the war: 'To some it was drudgery, boredom, frustration and futility, to others exhilaration, fascination and opportunity'.⁷³ It was their different experiences, along with the life facts of the narrators, that shaped the story each man told.

Also something like history

The idea that there could be a single, coherent soldier's tale is also undermined by several other factors. Rudyard Kipling, in his inspirational history of the Irish Guards in the First World War, reminded us that 'A battalion's field is bounded by its own vision'.⁷⁴ This is obviously even more the case when events are viewed at an individual, personal level. Writing in 1915, Lt Cyril Newton-Thompson noted the extent to which his 'outlook on life [was] apt to be clouded ... by the skyline of [his] hundred yards of trench'.⁷⁵ But not all realised that the man on the frontline was much less able to give an opinion on the general trend of the war than somebody sitting in London and able to process news from various sources. Inevitably the personal narrative is

confined in view, tainted with personal bias, packed with unintended errors, and often affected by raw emotion. It cannot be otherwise.⁷⁶

In several ways, personal narratives take the shape of 'history'. The time is ordered and often linear, moving within a chronology of actual world events, which have their historical contexts and locations. These narratives have causality, indicating how the individual's experiences had their origins in the actual decisions taken by historical leaders. And, importantly, many narrators make reference to research done. Reference to credible resources no doubt increased the perception of validity. Chooks Blamey referred to the regimental histories for credible source material and especially to furnish specific details.⁷⁷ In some cases authors resorted to their own jottings and diaries.

The war had given numerous ordinary men and women the opportunity to connect with larger events and possibly even brush shoulders with important people. For these ordinary citizens the war was an adventure, an opportunity to be seized, and one that had to be recorded. The more literate kept journals and some wrote memoirs after their return home. Diaries, letters and other eyewitness accounts, written in the midst of the war or shortly after, and the packets of photographs and film developed while on leave, constitute Jay Winter's vectors of memory.⁷⁸ Sir De Villiers Graaff, who was himself taken at Tobruk, could claim, in his foreword to Schalk Wolhuter's account of their internment at Stalag IVB, that 'his work is accurate because he had the tenacity to keep a diary'.⁷⁹ Wolhuter's mother had kept all the souvenirs he had sent home from Egypt.⁸⁰ Douglas Scott, of the Transvaal Scottish, quoted at some length from the letters he wrote as a POW to his father, in order 'to gain some colour and background' in his short narrative of his years of imprisonment.⁸¹ Even so, writing to his father from Sulmona on 18 December 1943, he felt that his letters, while containing many words, said very little and that, if he wanted to convey what he was thinking, he would have to write a book.⁸²

Yet, in many ways, these narratives seem ahistorical, and perhaps even anti-historical, when read against the big stories that historians tell. There are several contradictions. Some narrators are almost indifferent to the exact location of events in time and space. These details, in terms of the story told, are unimportant to the soldier-narrator, who is not so much concerned with *why*, but rather with *who*. The accounts are invariably on a small scale, of a narrow span, and they contain ephemeral details. For all, their personal survival in the face of so much killing and devastation is what matters most. Moreover, as Hynes notes, the story told by the soldier-narrator, who asserts his authority as the only true witness of his war, is compromised by 'the very nature of memory and language [and] the cloud of witnesses, each telling his own relative truth of events'.⁸³

Brigadier Frederick Cooper's *The Police Brigade* is an example of an account that lies in the grey borderland between personal narrative and history. It is presented as history. It carries the name of Cooper's former command – the 6th Infantry Brigade – as its subtitle. Cooper writes as the former commander, stating so in his Author's Note, and he uses his rank and post-nominal titles on the cover. Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, the wartime Chief of the General Staff, wrote the Foreword. And the book has a number of appendices, including cartoons of many of the officers, the honours and awards earned by members of the brigade, and a list of all of the officers of the units that formed the brigade. Yet, while packed with detail, it is written in an easy style, Cooper is the protagonist and much of the account is written in the first person. Cooper himself notes his two roles – of recording *the* history of the Police Brigade and of telling his *own* personal story. For him the history of the Brigade ends with their capture at Tobruk.⁸⁴ The internment of the men of the brigade, including their subsequent wartime experience as prisoners, is something quite different. In captivity they were individuals.

Majors Sholto Douglas and Lionel Murray, two senior officers of the Cape Town Highlanders (CTH), illustrate a different point. Douglas wrote the first wartime account of this regiment, which was published in Cairo in 1944, covering the period from enlistment in late 1939 to the end of the North African campaign. It is titled concisely *Regimental History* and includes the customary statistics of prisoners taken, casualties sustained, a roll of honour of those killed, and a list of honours and awards received. Douglas candidly explains its origins:

[It started] on mobilisation as an Adjutant's personal diary. With the passage of time material accumulated and eventually the author found himself in possession of a mass of historical records. Realising how soon such material can be scattered and lost and how difficult it would be for historians who follow to correlate the scraps that remain, an authentic history was begun.⁸⁵

He invokes Hynes's notion of authenticity. Yet, sadly, for want of space and time, for the CTH were moving to Italy for the next campaign, Douglas's narrative is brief and devoid 'of the telling of all the little human stories and adventures that make up the lighter side of a soldier's life'.⁸⁶ He calls his narrative a history, and specifically a regimental history. However, he often speaks in the first person. This should be compared to Lionel Murray's history, which takes the story of the CTH from 1943, through the Italian campaign, to the end of the war. Murray wrote his narrative, which he states he has 'audaciously called a "History"', to serve as 'a handbook to refresh the memories of the men who are serving, or who have served in the past, in the Battalion'.⁸⁷ This narrative, written again specifically for the Highlanders, has more of the feel of a 'history'. It is written in the third person. The writing is heavier. And few men are mentioned by name. But, most importantly, the main protagonist

is the regiment. Here one sees the grey borderland between personal narrative and regimental history. Douglas is still the first, while Murray is already the second.⁸⁸

THE FEATURES OF THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE: INTERPOLATED THEMES

Personal narratives, by their nature, might indeed be a little like travel writing, largely autobiographical and something like history, and, as we have seen, they are often all of these things at once. For this reason, personal narratives are also quite unlike regimental history, even when these regimental histories are written by active participants.⁸⁹ We now turn to the many interpolated themes that personal narratives share, features which seem to transcend period, nation and the means of warfighting.

The first of these themes relates to what Hynes has called the *strangeness* of war. As already noted, this strangeness was perhaps first evident in the exotic nature of the locations. However, on closer reading, and particularly for the Italian campaign, where the fighting took place among the populace, it is very evident in terms of the obvious physical destruction of the landscape and the social dislocation of the people. 'After the emptiness of the desert', Axelson notes, 'it was odd to see civilians living only a few yards from the guns'.⁹⁰ The devastation, loss of work and income, the forced change in plans and lifestyles, the misery of the civilians, made Sampie de Wet 'unhappy and homesick'.⁹¹ Several Springbok troops recorded their upset when approached by 'young Italian girls of fourteen or fifteen [who] would offer to spend the night with them for a tin of bully beef'.⁹² De Wet described the Florence she saw in 1944:

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 partly to unwashed humanity and the street latrine, but also to very old houses and their furniture, now pulverised to dust.⁹³

And Livorno:

Leghorn [Livorno] was much more badly smashed than Pisa. We saw only skeletons of buildings, not a single house or shop that was intact. Everywhere were shutters bulging out, and seen from the sides or through their broken slats piles of debris with bits of wood and broken china protruding. I had seen something similar in the demolition area around the Ponte Vecchio when I first arrived in Florence, but here it was universal.⁹⁴

This scale is hard to imagine. It has to be seen, actually witnessed. And it is shocking. Similar destruction was wrought on social and marital relationships. Active service,

the foreign deployments, the accompanying long separations, placed a great strain on many marriages. Regular mail from home boosted morale: it brought news of the outside world, providing a larger picture as well as connection with family and loved ones.⁹⁵ This was massively important and especially so in the POW camps, where mail was never plentiful and subjected to Abwehr censorship. The 'dumping' or cuckolding of POWs by their girlfriends and wives was particularly hard. In such cases they might receive a 'messpot', a toast to the man and the appropriate destruction of the offending letter.⁹⁶ Many sad tales about broken relationships were shared in army bases and POW camps. In some cases, however, the betrayal had been unwitting. As Carey Heydenrych recounts:

In our camp we had two fellows who were married to the same wife. When the first chap was shot down, he was posted as 'missing believed killed'. She remarried. As Fate would have it, her second husband was also shot down and sent to our camp. They became good friends and only discovered the awful tangle when a letter came for the second husband, enclosing a photo of the wife. These fellows remained friends but they never told us how they intended resolving the matter after the war.⁹⁷

Another theme relates to what Hynes called the *grotesqueness* of war and of war-related death. The war landscape, with its desolation or the very visible presence of war-related death, brought a surreal feeling. Sometimes the narrator felt he or she didn't know the place. A place that had been familiar was now unfamiliar. As Hynes argues, this was perhaps now an *anti*-landscape, where the war's human scenes are as grotesque as its natural ones.

Poet Guy Butler found the landscape in Italy to be surreal and difficult to capture. When with the Rear Brigade HQ in the neighbourhood of Prato, he pitched his tent 'in a stubble field between two olive trees'.⁹⁸ This might have been a surreal abode for a writer, but when he returned to the brigade headquarters after a day out, he struggled to write about what he had seen: 'of mountains; men, mud, death, madness, courage, skill, command, and cold; and a range of earth colours, from golden chestnut through to black soil and back again to brick and blood colour, and the glint of wet metal'.⁹⁹ Capturing the war, the human action, the majestic but despoiled landscape, seemed an insurmountable difficulty. Butler almost envied his compatriots who faced 'more sharply defined tasks', such as the officer in charge of the burial parties after the Battle of Stanco, who had to take a compass-bearing on Mecca before burying the Moslem dead of the French Foreign Legion.¹⁰⁰ Their work was straightforward and no questions were asked.

And then there was the presence of death, and the ways that it presented itself, that was strange. A patrol of the WR/DLR rested in a small glade near Colonia:

One man gratefully sat down on a 'log' of wood, which let out a ghastly groan as his weight sank onto it, and he let out a yell of fear as he leapt up. He had sat down on the body of a German soldier still with greatcoat on and well-preserved by the freezing cold and all the air in the corpse was forced out in a hair-raising groan! At a later date the body was removed and given a proper burial.¹⁰¹

Major FJ Reitz tells us he saw two Messerschmitts downed. He went to examine 'the after-effects' of the second. A gruesome scene presented itself:

A lucky burst from a Bren gun at a low-level Messerschmitt 'straffer' must have registered a shot somewhere, as the plane ploughed into the ground, leaving a gigantic crater, and its debris cartwheeled and disintegrated over some 200 yards. The sickly smell of a pulverised human body still clung to the air, belts of tracer ammunition were scattered along the route but the only visible relic of the pilot was pathetic and incongruous – namely a blonde head of hair, neatly scalped.¹⁰²

Several authors juxtapose this grotesqueness of the war against the beauty and peacefulness of the surroundings. In June 1944 Eric Axelson cadged a lift with some signallers during the Rapido River operations:

Not a sound broke the morning, apart from more vociferous birds. In places the road ran through a plantation, and the air was sweet with the scent of pines. Immediately beyond the trees lay a Sherman tank, with a track and its turret blown off, and from it came the not so pleasant scent of putrefying bodies. Peaceful though the surroundings were the descent was more exciting than any switchback at a fair: there was extra zest and zip – and constant expectation.¹⁰³

The decay of torn human flesh, and the sudden reminder that the occupants of the jeep were in a warzone, was enough for Axelson and his companions to forget the surroundings and make for safer ground.

Yet for some their apparent *enjoyment* of combat is a further feature. Historian Martin van Creveld has explained this as follows:

At all times and places, most men have probably hated war for the discomfort and the hardship it involves, the violence, the havoc, and the bloodshed it causes, and the grief and desolation it leaves in its wake. At all times and places, very often this hatred did not prevent men – even the same men – from enjoying it. They eagerly looked forward to it, revelled in it, and looked back on it with pride and satisfaction when it was over.¹⁰⁴

This is seen in some of the war narratives. Soldiers are recruited and they are prepared and equipped to 'go to war'. Their primary aim, once deployed, is to dominate, quite probably kill, the enemy on the battlefield. In order to achieve this, military organisations condition soldiers to think differently, behave differently and react differently. According to Joanna Bourke, the blunting of the humanity of soldiers,

through the numbing of their human consciousness and their training in the cold application of technology, enabled 'violent acts in modern warfare'.¹⁰⁵ Their civilian lives and attitudes are set aside and an entirely different way of life is embraced. This is certainly the case for enlistees in full-time forces. Volunteers are in a different position. They are civilians taken into the armed forces, for a short period, and with the intention of returning to their peacetime occupations once an emergency has ended. This was the case of the Springbok army during this war.

Every South African serviceman was a volunteer and the overwhelming majority of them probably retained at least something of their civilian orientation. As a 'people's army' the majority were possibly a little short on discipline and regimentation. Their values probably explain their astonishment at the strangeness and the grotesqueness of war, as much as they do the relative absence of any enjoyment in the killing. For most of them war remained an ugly thing. Possibly for this reason most of their personal narratives are devoid of descriptions of actual battle, although there are one or two notable exceptions. Some no doubt enjoyed the opportunity to prove themselves, as men, and as soldiers, and to 'test' themselves in battle. It is possible that some of these scenes, where they existed in draft, were excised from the final, published versions. One must therefore turn to the rough-work journals and diaries to ascertain if some more graphic instances are to be found. While these documents fall outside the ambit of this chapter, the case of Benjamin Fainsinger might be cited by way of example.¹⁰⁶ Fainsinger (1929–1997), a trooper in the Royal Natal Carbineers, longed to find 'action' as quickly as possible. He not only kept a diary in the hope that 'it [would] prove interesting one of these days', but confided in it: 'I just have to shoot a Jerry sometime'.¹⁰⁷ His first opportunity came in 1944, in Italy, when his battalion encountered elements of the Hermann Goering Division. A marksman seemingly of some ability, Fainsinger killed two Germans and he looted at least one of the bodies, taking the man's family photographs. These images he stuck into his own diary as a kind of trophy from the hunt. (The images are in the photograph section of this book.) For Fainsinger, the killing was close and personal and, while he could immediately visualise the killing, there was no remorse. Exposure to the war, to its elements, and to its violence sometimes induces a craving for power. But this condition does not permeate the South African narratives of the war.

A further constant theme is what Hynes called the *astonishment* at seeing wounds or of being wounded. Arnold Colenbander, of the UMR:

At this time Jardine's tank was hit. It burst into flames and started brewing. Guessing that this would draw the attention of the enemy off of me and on to the crew escaping from the tank, I rose and ran back as fast as my legs and condition would allow towards our tanks in the rear. My recollections now become very hazy. I can remember becoming very weak and taking cover in a shallow ditch near our tanks. I was in great pain and was burned about the face and hands. My

overalls had saved the rest of my body. I seemed to have difficulty in controlling my head which wobbled about in a disconcerting fashion so that I had to steady it with my hands. All tank commanders carried a small tube of morphia in their top left pockets. I broke off the seal and injected the full dose into my arm. I saw nothing of my crew again. I heard later that du Pavillon died in the tank and that Vincent and Dickason died of wounds.¹⁰⁸

The *confusion* of battle is a closely related theme. Reitz was aboard an American LST as he watched a labour battalion of Swazis marshalled into column of route. He tells us:

As they marched past a large dockyard building a gigantic German shell made a direct hit on the building. Bricks and masonry flew. I dodged behind the deckhouse to escape the debris pattering down. A cloud of red dust obscured where the Labour Corps had been. When this lifted, bodies bestrewed the pavement. Naturally I feared the worst. Can you imagine, that as apparent corpse after corpse arose, there were peals of that happy African laughter, which is quite distinctive, as they derided one another for showing fear? Magnificent people!¹⁰⁹

Being taken prisoner had a similar, initially numbing effect. According to Douglas Scott, most of the men captured at Tobruk 'seemed to be in a coma, their attitude being one of resignation and relief'.¹¹⁰ Medical orderly NI Robinson recounts that 'Somewhere in the middle of this confusion I discern myself, in very much the same way as a man sometimes stands outside himself in nightmare, and looks on with helpless horror at what is happening to him'.¹¹¹ Pieter van Niekerk and Gordon Henderson had escaped from the Modena Camp and, having covered 700 kilometres in twenty days, were recaptured near Casino. They had felt 'very exposed, almost naked', and when called on to 'Halt!', sat on a snow-covered stump and waited 'dumbly for the approaching soldier.'

Our minds had gone blank. It had happened too suddenly – too unexpectedly. Our world was a void. With the shock our hopes had been brutally crushed. Our thoughts cried out in deep despair, 'Dear God, what have we done to deserve this?'¹¹²

Van Niekerk and Henderson later recognised their foolishness and carelessness, and, forced back into captivity, a measure of self-contempt followed. Hunted by German troops following his own escape, Uys Krige tells us: 'Although everything that was happening to me was very real and concrete – not only forceful but brutal in its impact – mine, now, was a strangely blurred state of mind and feeling. The outstanding impression I retain of it was of its confusion, its tumult'.¹¹³ In these circumstances, while some men may have been numbed, others were desperate enough to risk all rather than face fresh incarceration.

The *courage* to brave great hardship, harbour great uncertainty, and endure great change is another interpolated feature in these narratives. They tell stories of

hardship and suffering, but also of bravery and endurance that combine in aiding our understanding of the phenomenon of warfighting, of the performance of men in battle, and of the experience of men held in captivity. Many of the accounts, and perhaps the POW accounts more than others, reflect a profound inner change in the narrator. Young boys (some barely ready to shave) go to war, and return as men. There is the forging of the self. The satisfaction of having been part of something of great meaning. This was finely caught in Smuts's exhortation to the departing men of the 1st Brigade in June 1940: 'Go forth as crusaders, as children of the Cross, to fight for freedom itself. You are volunteers of your own choice ... you are going forth to meet danger, hardship and sacrifice'.¹¹⁴ And with this came the satisfaction of eventually succeeding, as South Africans, in a shared endeavour. But it was also about recognising the courage and endurance of others. Towards the end of the war this switched to the German people, and especially the German women, and the abuses they faced following the Soviet invasion. Springboks viewed this with abhorrence and expressed surprise at the cold, matter-of-fact way in which such crimes were accepted by American troops. No doubt, most of these stories remain unwritten and have died with the passing of this generation.

'The circumstance of war', a trooper in the PAG recounted in 1996, placed men in the unexpected position of 'having to endure great mental and physical stress'.¹¹⁵ Many stories of such stress emerge. The surreal imagery of the war, the maiming of friends, and the ever-present possibility of one's own death brought forth many different reactions. In combat units, such as fighter squadrons, the men were often highly-strung. Adrenalin ran high. Sometimes this resulted in dining-room brawls and other forms of indiscipline. For the pilots of 40 Squadron SAAF the ritual of 'Burning the Hyena' became their outlet. Whilst in East Africa, they strung a hyena over a campfire and, buck naked, the pilots would dance around ceremoniously as the carcass sizzled over the flames. These men, Ambrose Brown reminds us, lived 'on the edge of their nerves in the peculiarly dangerous, quick-death circumstances of the air war in a territory that was more forbidding and cruel than the enemy'.¹¹⁶ But in the words of Newman Robinson, 'even great hardships are tolerable if you can see an end to them'.¹¹⁷ The war had undoubtedly created a space for ordinary men to achieve extraordinary things.¹¹⁸

Morale, including attitude to the enemy, is another important feature. As Fankie Monama indicates in Chapter 6, information officers had been placed with the South African forces to play a number of roles. Their reports contain information on the mental and emotional state of Springbok troops. They found in July 1942, for instance, that, while South African soldiers had complete confidence regarding the ultimate victory of the Allies in the war, they had much less confidence in the superiority of the Allied forces and little faith in the high command. This disregard was general and thought not to be focused on any particular general officer. Rommel,

on the other hand, 'was held in awe'. The information officers concluded that this was an outcome of active propaganda, whereas little was done to make Auckinleck and other British generals 'imposing ... familiar or impressive'. Even more peculiar, they thought, was the South African attitude to the enemy. Some South Africans, when questions of the post-war settlement were discussed within the AES context, expressed 'bloodthirsty sentiments about what they want done to the Germans; but there seems to be hardly any personal dislike of the Germans forces to the west of us. They are still known as Jerries rather than Huns: when one of our men is killed, it is an aeroplane or a tank or a shell that killed him, not a German. Modern war of this highly scientific kind is so impersonal that there is little scope for hatred'.¹¹⁹ This is certainly borne out in the majority of personal narratives.

A final theme to note here is one of human change, the way in which the war changed the *attitudes and outlooks* of the men and women plunged for, perhaps, five years into service abroad in multi-national and multi-racial armies, fighting world fascism and authoritarianism. Some may have had several years of reflection in a POW cage. In other words, did these men and women return changed people? For some the change was palpable. For the Brokenshas, a middle-class, English-speaking family from Natal, their three sons made new friends in the armed forces, several of whom were Afrikaners. For many, this may have been the first attempt to reach across the language divide in 'white society'. David Brokensha later wrote: 'I cringe now when I think how superior, with no justification, we English-speaking Natalians felt, regarding Afrikaners'.¹²⁰ And as Major JF Reitz recounts, far from being a divisive factor, Afrikaans came to play an interesting role during the war, as a kind of cement for all South Africans serving with various formations overseas: 'it proved in all cases to be the "Open Sesame" when fellow South Africans encountered one another,' even when they possessed only rudimentary knowledge of the language.¹²¹

But, of course, for South Africans there was the submersion in a far larger sea of human otherness.¹²² A kind of submersion that was not possible in the South Africa of the day. This related to the ways in which South Africans viewed each other, but also how South Africans viewed others. Higher authorities instructed Allied troops based in Egypt and elsewhere to respect local customs and to desist from provoking the local population. Wolhuter recounts how, after the cinema shows in Cairo, troops would rise with the singing of the Egyptian national anthem and thereafter, believing Farouk to be anti-British and pro-German, mockingly chant: 'King Farouk, King Farouk / We'll hang your bollocks on a hook!'¹²³ Decades later he could 'appreciate what resentment our over-bearing attitude must have caused, but at the time we looked upon Egypt as a British possession and thought we had every right to be there and behave as we did'.¹²⁴ The first detectible change is evinced in Italy, where Allied troops, generally, praised the Italian people for the unselfish support given to escaped POWs, in particular, and often at great personal risk. And many may have

agreed that the poverty they found in 'the hovels of the Abruzzi [was] an indictment of the present World Social System'.¹²⁵ Writing in September 1944, Alf Burns, who had been with Krige in PG 78, expressed the general sense of hopelessness and helplessness, and the fear that the post-war world would still be divided and unequal. How many, like Burns and Butler, felt that *their* war had failed them?

Many veterans returned to North Africa and Europe, to visit the places where they had fought, where they had lost friends and compatriots, or had been imprisoned. Major BG Simpkins, of the Rand Light Infantry, returned to Egypt and Libya in September 1958. The world had, of course, changed again. But Simpkins did so for two particular reasons. He was compiling a history of his regiment and he wished to re-visit the battlefields and take photographs. His book was published in 1965.¹²⁶ But there was a second, deeper reason. Not only had Simpkins left friends behind in the desert, but he had come to realise that a part of him had been left there too. His visit was almost a pilgrimage, a journey of remembrance and, through his book, a memorialisation of what he and his mates had gone through. On returning home in 1958 he felt that, after breathing the Western Desert air anew, he had left behind an even greater part of himself than before.¹²⁷

CONCLUSION

Soldiers narrate their stories for a variety of reasons. Many narrate as a way of expressing their 'emotions and feelings in words', while for others the sharing of stories can be an effective form of coming to terms with a violent, perhaps traumatic past.¹²⁸ Narration, with a strong emphasis on the sharing of common stories, enables veterans to form literary communities bonded by nostalgia and wistfulness, a kind of homesickness for an unrecoverable past. Some, like Simpkins of the RLI, juxtaposed their younger selves as wartime volunteers with their present selves as veterans and historians. For such men, their writings often took the form of a life story, one tracing their personal development as narrator and sometimes as regimental historian. The war experience shaped their views and their approaches to their writings on the war, while the war itself, and their writing about it, came to fashion their identities as individuals, as veterans, and as soldier-historians. For them, theirs was the only authentic voice.

The South African personal narratives of the Second World War, like those from any other country, are a mixed bag. Much depends on the narrator, his or her willingness and ability to tell the 'true' story, and their ability to place the narration within the context of wider events. Some perhaps inevitably wrote narrowly focused accounts. Others like Hobbs produced vignettes, the residue of memory. Yet others produced accounts that remain fine literary works. The praise bestowed

by Aubrey Burns on Uys Krige's *The Way Out* touches on the elements that make the best of these narratives:

I found this book excellent beyond my expectation ... *The Way Out* has all the earmarks of an honest story – neither dramatically sensationalized nor protectively reticent. It is not merely an absorbing adventure story; nor is it merely a remarkably balanced blend of the objective and subjective elements of a personal experience, translated into effective narrative. Even more than a story about war, or a story about the author, it is a story about the Italian people, about humanity and human neighbourliness at the basic practical level – a story of group heroism not in organized mass action or purpose, but in independent individual unanimity.¹²⁹

Endnotes

- 1 Uys Krige, *The Way Out; Italian Intermezzo* (Cape Town and Port Elizabeth: Unie-Volkspers, 1946), Foreword.
- 2 Uys Krige, 'Difficulties the 8th Army have to face', radio broadcast c1944, 225.RW.10, Uys Krige Collection, JS Gerike Library, Stellenbosch University (SU). The notion of finding 'the way out' or of 'seeing no way out' is found in the narratives of others. See, for example, Alan Flederman, *And Direction was Given* (Cape Town: Pretext, 2000), p 1.
- 3 Flederman, *And Direction was Given*, p xiii.
- 4 Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *1914-1918: Understanding the Great War* (London: Profile Books, 2000), p 38.
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- 8 Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, pp 1-26. See also Harari, 'Military Memoirs', pp 289-309.
- 9 Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale; Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p xiv.
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- 12 Guy Butler, *Bursting World; An Autobiography 1936-45* (Cape Town & Johannesburg: David Philip, 1983), p 250.
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- 14 Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, pp xii-xiii.
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- 17 Paul de Villiers, *Memoirs: The Second World; Just a Small Part* (n.p.: private, 2006), p 6.
- 18 CGS to AG, 31 Aug 1942, CGS War, box 86, file 24/2 Manpower Wastage in the UDE, Department of Defence Archives (DODA).
- 19 Albert 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', *Journal of African History*, vol. 40, no. 3 (1999), p 362.
- 20 Major AE Blamey, *A Company Commander Remembers; From El Yibo to El Alamein* (Pietermaritzburg: The Natal Witness, 1963), pp 8-9.
- 21 Keith Ford, *From Addis to the Aosta Valley; A South African in the North African and Italian Campaigns, 1940-1945* (Solihull: Helion, 2012), p 52.
- 22 Ford, *From Addis to the Aosta Valley*, p 60.
- 23 Ford, *From Addis to the Aosta Valley*, p 60.

- 24 Douglas Scott, *My Luck Still Held* (Cape Town: Unie-Volkspers, 1946), p 2.
- 25 SG Wolhuter, *The Melancholy State; The Story of a South African Prisoner-of-War* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1984), p 3.
- 26 Glynn B Hobbs, *Recollections of Italy; The memoir of a trooper in Prince Alfred's Guard* (n.p.: private, 1996), p 11. See also De Villiers, *Memoirs*, p 36.
- 27 Sir De Villiers Graaff, *Div Looks Back; The memoirs of Sir De Villiers Graaff* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: Human & Rousseau, 1994), pp 70–71.
- 28 De Villiers, *Memoirs*, p 35.
- 29 Major WS Douglas, *Regimental History: A Short History of the Cape Town Highlanders, Sept 1939 – Feb 1943* (Cairo: E.R. Schindler, 1944), pp 11–12.
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