AFRICAN MILITARY STUDIES • Volume 3

Sights, Sounds, Memories

South African Soldier Experiences
of the Second World War

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Editor

‘Trek Saam!’ A government propaganda poster calling for South Africans to work together.

PICTURES OF SOUTH AFRICA'S WAR EFFORT
PRENTE VAN SUID-AFRIKA SE OORLOGSPOGING

ATTESTING FOR WAR SERVICE

Throughout South Africa, from town and country, women have flocked to the recruiting centres to serve their country in one of the many interesting branches of war work open to women.

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INSWERING VIR OORLOGSDIENS

Dwarsdeur Suid-Afrika uit stad en platteland het vroue na die werwingsentra gekom om hul land te dien in een van die baie interessante vertakings van oorlogswerk wat vir vroue oopstaan.

C. T. LTD.

SERIES OF 50 NOW BEING PACKED WITH THESE CIGARETTES
'N REEKS VAN 50 WORD NOU MET HIERDIE SIGARETTE VERPAK

Cigarette card; women attesting for war service.

'Join the Women's Auxiliary Service Corps'

The Cape Corps manned South Africa's coastal defences after the white gunners had been sent North with the field artillery.

The anti-malaria info sheet kept as a souvenir in the war correspondents' review of the campaign in East Africa.

The desert battlespace was harsh and unforgiving: the German outpost at the top of the Halfaya Pass.

The YMCA mobile canteens, operating under the UDFI, traversed the desert and sold small luxury items – sweets, cigarettes, toiletries – to the men at the front.

'Burning the Hyena': pilots of 2 Squadron SAAF relieve combat stress in the Western Desert.

South African graves at Sidi Rezegh; 'the men fell defending their transport'.

A group of Springboks, who had taken part in the battle at Sidi Rezegh, illustrate a "Toast to Victory" at Christmas in 1941.

Entertainment in the Western Desert. The line-up for the start of the Desert Derby: 'run over two furloughs, entry free, prize 20 Piastres, owners' unknown!

The Royal Natal Carbineers in the Western Desert, with a captured German flag.

The terrain in North Africa was foreign, exciting, and gave opportunity for tourism.

Springbooks on leave in Cairo; information security, some travelling advice, information on the main tourist attractions ('See all you can while you can'), and generally keeping safe (the STD infection rate was still around 30 per thousand troops per year). The war was for most South African troops their first "travel experience".

Top: Soldiers visit the monuments of Ancient Egypt.
Bottom: “Springdoes” – members of the SAWAAS – haggle with a trader: bangles, brooches, and beads were popular souvenirs.

South African troops stationed in Egypt during the second world war travelled when they took even a few days of leave. They visited Luxor, the museums of Cairo, the pyramids of Giza. Some travelled further: to biblical 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 been seen quaffing something cold on the hotel's expansive verandas.

Leisure time in a military hospital; nurses and patients do needlework and make puzzles.

Mrs Smuts and Lady Lampson – wife of the British ambassador to Egypt – chat to South African soldiers at the Springbok Club in Cairo.

Time for some socializing; the SA Irish chat to servicewomen of the WAAF. The typical South African soldier was, according to British counterparts, 'tough, outgoing, friendly' and physically large.

The war brought people together. On Saturday, 24 April 1943, Capt H. Hutchinson married Staff Nurse Miss Jeanne Stark. Both, members of the South African Medical Services, worked at the SA Base Hospital.

"Springdoes" in Egypt. As Agar-Hamilton decried, the PR people fabricated and posed shots, which were largely confined 'to cooks and girls from the UDF Entertainment Units'.

Another PR photograph showing the happy side of the war.

NEAS troops were prolific letter writers.

NMC servicemen in Cairo reading copies of Ndlovu-Tlou, the newspaper printed along with Springbok for the troops in Egypt.

Private Springkaan Masemula receives the Military Medal. He and two other NMC servicemen escaped from Tobruk on 22 July and, following a gruelling trek across the desert, reach Allied lines on 18 August 1942. They had covered 300 miles and could give information on conditions in Tobruk.

The Army Education Scheme information officers became the butt of jokes back in the South African press.

The Italian campaign was fought in close proximity to the Italian people. The battlespace provided remarkable contrasts to the experience of the African campaigns.

A South African Sherman tank rumbles up an Italian street.

Pack mules work with armour: a modern war sometimes depended on the oldest form of transport.

"Prince Charming", "Snow White" and the Seven Dwarfs — a reconnaissance platoon of FC/CTH in Italy. "Sneezy" is called "Sneezy II": "Sneezy I" had struck a mine during a patrol on the advance from Rome to Florence.

A camouflaged Sherman and its NMR crew prepare a brew in Italy in 1944. This was probably taken by Sgt Roger Madden, the photographer attached to Axelson's small Historical Recording Section.

Cape Corps stretcher-bearers evacuate a wounded soldier during the battle for Monte Sole.

The May 1944 issue of The Sable. The war, besides everything else, had brought travel opportunities well beyond the reach of the average South African and what they saw and experienced filled the pages of the divisional and regimental newspapers and magazines, making them wonderful windows into the life of the 6th Armoured Division. They contain travel information, their own brief impressions of the local sights, write-ups on the visiting entertainment units, photographs of WAASies, and, sometimes, men like Guy Butler, the 12th Brigade's Information Officer, published one or two of their wartime poems in them.

Taking in the sights: D Squadron, NMR, pose for a photograph in Italy, June 1944.

“Diary of Death”: a German propaganda leaflet, hitting at diary keeping, aims to undermine the resolve of Allied troops.

'She won't be seeing him again': Ben Fainsinger's diary with the photographs taken from the body of the German soldier he had just shot (see chapter one).

An air letter from Italy, Christmas 1945. The war is over. The writer, who had served with 61 Tunnelling Company, complains of the cold, of the poor rations ('alho the cook makes a good job of the "bully"') and for having to spend yet another Christmas away from Sunny South Africa.

A wartime souvenir – an autographed 50 lire AMC note. T Wilson (WR / DLR), A Thomson (FC / CTH), Cloete (FC / CTH), MG van Schalkwyk (FC / CTH), and others.

The UDFI provided club facilities, warm beds, and hot food during short breaks away from the frontline: here a South African soldier is caught on camera noticing some of the passing talent in Florence. The figure of the woman on the right was cropped off of the photograph when released by the Bureau of Information.

And the men played rugby: Maj Gen Frank Theron meets the UDF rugby team that beat a New Zealand base side 8-3 at Foro d'Italia, in Rome.

The Canadian and US armies issued a wartime log, seemingly to all of their deployed troops. The War Prisoners Aid of the YMCA adapted this and produced a booklet of 112 mostly blank pages. They were issued by the YMCA through the International Red Cross to POWs, who filled these mini-scrapbooks with jottings, photographs taken in camp, and photographs of sweethearts and loved ones. This particular book belonged to Lieut G.A. Gold, RNC, when held at Oflag VA, Weinsberg.