

How the story of the South African experience in the Italian campaign was recorded – and distorted

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In war, there is only one incontrovertible “truth”: that of the man in his final death agony. The stories of all other individuals are necessarily fractured.¹

Despite the best efforts of the professional historians attached to the 6th South African Armoured Division (6 SA Armd Div), the story of the South African experience in the Italian campaign of the Second World War has been distorted in many ways. There are the usual taboos about sexuality, alcohol, discipline and racism which are never mentioned in regimental or campaign histories. The public relations unit only emphasised the positive while censorship of the press and of personal letters ensured that the general public was shielded from the harsh facts. The post-war power of the media continued to determine what should be embraced as reality.

In the post-1948 political environment the experience and language of the infantrymen who bore the brunt of the fighting, was overwhelmed by the language of those who were ideologically opposed to the war. It is believed that the existing literature and the modern publishing industry, together with the restricted reporting in the wartime media, and the needs of post-war society, may have cleansed the collective memory and reshaped the sense of self, sense of nation. As modern historiography has shown, memory is a highly subjective construction of experience. Numerous studies have found that the violence and trauma of war was sanitised in the larger national memory just as the theme of sacrifice was emphasised to help build a national identity.²

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1. J. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing* (Granta Books, London, 2000), p 8.
2. W.E. Lee, “Mind and Matter: Cultural Analysis in American Military History, a Look at the State of the Field”, *The Journal of American History*, 93, 2000, p 1136; J.M. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2006),

Popular histories and film are often to blame for the reconstruction of the national memory, however there has been very little of this type of material which relates directly to the South African contribution to the Italian campaign. In 1992, Jack Kros produced *War in Italy: With the South Africans from Taranto to the Alps* which could be called “popular history” and as such, it creates memory as opposed to history. Kros has chapters entitled “The Great Race: A Win for the Boks”, and “Sole: A Spectacular Win for FC/CTH”.³ It is this type of language which is inclined to taint social memory.

The official history of the campaign, *Victory in Italy*, was written by Neil Orpen in 1975 as part of a six-volume history of the South African forces in the Second World War.⁴ He was assisted by a 25-member advisory committee, many of whom were veterans of the campaign – all officers. The original histories of the campaign from the British and American points of view were written by Eric Linklater and Chester Starr respectively.⁵ Both men were attached to the armed forces in Italy and were in charge of recording the history as it was happening. Both men went on to have distinguished academic careers. However, their work was essentially events-led with little insight into social aspects. The Rhodesian histories of the Second World War are more general in that they cover the war as a whole and not just the Italian campaign. Nevertheless, J.F. MacDonald’s *Lion with Tusk Guardant* (1945) and *The War History of Southern Rhodesia* (1950) are important as there were many Rhodesians serving with the 6th South African Armoured Division.⁶

p 6; A. Thompson, “Anzac Memories: Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice in Australia”, in R. Perks and A. Thompson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge, London, 2000), pp 300–301.

3. J. Kros, *War in Italy* (Ashanti Publishers, Rivonia 1992), pp 126, 271.
4. N. Orpen *Victory in Italy* (Purnell, Cape Town, 1975).
5. E. Linklater, *The Campaign in Italy* (Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, London, 1977); C.G. Star, (Ed.), *From Salerno to the Alps: A History of the 5th Army, 1943 - 1945* (Infantry Journal Press, Washington DC, 1948).
6. J.F. MacDonald, *Lion with Tusk Guardant* (The Rhodesian Printing and Publishing Company, Salisbury, 1945) and *The War History of Southern Rhodesia* (Salisbury, Authority of the Republic of Southern Rhodesia, 1950).

By August 1945, some regiments had already started making arrangements for writing the histories of their units. Only one of these planned histories, that of the First City/Cape Town Highlanders, was published by the intended author – Lionel Murray who was a better company commander than he was an historian.⁷ In 1972, Eric Goetzsche brought out a worthy history of the Natal Mounted Rifles with an element of social history relating to the Italian campaign.⁸ One refreshing regimental history which is not top-down, is the history of the Witwatersrand Rifles, *A Bugle Calls* by S. Monick.⁹ Regimental histories are often superficial but the history of the Royal Natal Carbineers, by A. Hattersly, is particularly meagre and uninformative considering the leading role played by this regiment.¹⁰

Serving under command of the 6th South African Armoured Division were a number of non-South African regiments, including the Scots Guards; Grenadier Guards; Coldstream Guards; and 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles, which comprised Indian infantry with British officers. Michael Howard is a veteran of the Italian campaign, having been a captain in the Guards Brigade (attached to the 6th South African Armoured Division) and a recipient of the Military Cross. He has also won the highest accolades in academia and pioneered “total history” during his tenure as Regius Professor of History at Oxford and Professor of History at Yale. Howard’s latest work is *Captain Professor: The Memoirs of Sir Michael Howard*.¹¹ The chapters on the war are based on his letters home and he provides some valuable insights into the attitudes of that era.

7. Department of Defence Archive Repository (hereafter DODAR), War Diaries (hereafter WD), Box 598, Recording Officer, Divisional Recording Section – Lt A.E.G. Trollipe, 2 August 1945; L.G.
8. E. Goetzsche, *Rough but Ready, The Official History of the Natal Mounted Rifles* (Interprint Ltd, Durban, 1972)
9. S. Monick, *A Bugle Calls – The Story of the Witwatersrand Rifles and its Predecessors 1899-1997* (Witwatersrand Regimental Association, Pretoria, 1989).
10. A.F. Hattersly, *Carbineer – A History of the Royal Natal Carbineers* (Gale & Polden, Aldershot, 1950).
11. M. Howard, *Captain Professor: The Memoirs of Sir Michael Howard* (Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2006).

Ex-military officers turned historians are seldom critical of their own kind. The authors have only praise for the officer corps. Memoirs which are published long after the fact are often prone to distortion, but a refreshing and valuable contribution to the subject is Douglas Baker's *War, Wine and Valour* (2005). It is brutally honest about everyday life, battle and morale in the Natal Mounted Rifles. He is less complimentary of the officers and is particularly enlightening about morale, alcohol and sex.¹²

Personal accounts which were written during or immediately after the war (literary sources) include: *With the 6th Div*; and *Shifty in Italy* – both of which appeared in 1945.¹³ The former was written by W.L. Fielding, a staff officer with an eye for detail. The latter was written by Sampie de Wet of the South African Woman's Auxiliary Services (SAWAS). As such, it provides a more perceptive, female perspective.

Neil Roos' book, *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Injustice* is a social history which has some relevance to the Italian campaign. Historiographically, Neil Roos locates his work within the broad school of radical social history.¹⁴ In this article, I will take issue with Roos' opinion that it was "the spectre of poverty, poor whiteism and *verkeffering*" which prompted enlistment in a predominantly Afrikaner fighting force. Roos does admit that those who joined later in the war were better educated, but still maintains that there was a general reluctance to serve.

Perhaps the most important social history of the campaign is *A Year in Italy: An Account of a Year as a Military Historian with the South African 6th Armoured Division in Italy, 1944–1945*, by Eric Axelson. It provides valuable insights into day-to-day life as well as the work of the historical recording section. Axelson was awarded his doctorate at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1938 and became head of the

12. D.M. Baker, *War, Wine and Valour* (self published, Essendon, 2005), p 200.

13. W.L. Fielding, *With the 6th Div* (Shuter & Shooter, Pietermaritzburg, 1946); S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy* (Modern Printers, city unknown, 1945).

14. N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Injustice in South Africa, 1939–1961* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005), pp 2–3.

History Department at the University of Cape Town in 1962.¹⁵ His work in Italy and contribution to the historical record is discussed at length below.

To a large extent, the history of this campaign originates from the work of the historical recording section of the 6th South African Armoured Division (6th SA Armd Div).¹⁶ There was a divisional historian attached to the 1st SA Division but instead of war diaries, the units and formations wrote short monthly narratives in an informal style. Following the formation of the 6th SA Armd Div, the keeping of war diaries was regulated by Field Service Regulations. The purpose and function was said to be “for effecting improvements in training, equipment, organisation and administration”. Commanders of all grades were encouraged to include in the war diaries,

*opinions and recommendations based on factual experience in regard to weapons, equipment, tactics, organisation and inter-service cooperation, which may be of benefit for short-term research in the army, as well as material likely to be of value later for the history of the war.*¹⁷

The content of the war diary was to include important orders, reports, messages or dispatches received and issued, and decisions taken. A detailed account of operations, the exact hour of important occurrences, factors affecting operations, weather, topography, daily location, movements, casualties, as well as anything of historical interest, was to be recorded daily. Any such documents, maps, correspondence, newspaper clippings etc., were to be included in the appendices and many items of historical interest were preserved in this way. The narrator was given carte blanche as far as literary style was concerned and some were more conscientious and creative than

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15. E.A. Axelson, *A Year in Italy: An Account of a Year as a Military Historian with the South African 6th Armoured Division in Italy, 1944–1945* (E.H. Walton, Port Elizabeth, 1994). On biographical details, see *The Independent*, Obituary: Professor Eric Axelson, 7 November 1998.
 16. DODAR, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, Duties of Divisional Recording Officer. 5 April 1943
 17. DODAR, Divisional Documents (hereafter Div. Docs), Box 204, 14ADW/18, vol. 1, War Diary Correspondence, 3 January 1943.

others.¹⁸

Generally, relations between the senior divisional staff and the historical recording section were poor. Despite the fact that Axelson oversaw the writing of the war diaries of all units in Italy, including his own unit, and he himself produced a detailed narrative of the campaign, it appears he received no credit from official military sources. The GOC “disliked his narrative intensely” and disapproved of the policy of collecting individual statements for all ranks. Two senior staff officers complained that the narrative was not authoritative enough and demanded that it be rewritten.¹⁹ When the Union War Histories Narrative on the Italian campaign was being compiled in 1948, various senior officers were asked for their comments and it was suggested that the names of commanders and officers should be included as much as possible “to give more colour to the narrative”.²⁰ The narrative is in fact conspicuous by its omission of names.

While writing the British official history of the campaign, Eric Linklater relied mainly on war diaries but found it essential to use interviews as well. He found that too much reliance could not be placed on generals. Axelson felt this was because a “general cannot get out of his head his intentions”.²¹ As Linklater told Axelson, one could not place too much reliance on the private soldier either, as his account would be both “narrow and exaggerated”.²² As far as Linklater was concerned, historical accuracy was not the only objective. He had instructions from the army commander (General H.R. Alexander) to create some good publicity to raise the profile and hence the morale, of the British soldier. He was especially interested in the relationship between the Guards (a British infantry brigade) and the South

18. DODAR, Div. Docs, Box 204, 14ADW/18 vol. 1, War Diary Correspondence, 3 January 1943.

19. DODAR, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, Divisional Recording Officer – E. Axelson, 11 June 1945.

20. DODAR, Union War Histories (hereafter UWH), Box 142, Interview with Maj. I. Moore, Brigade Major, 12 SA Mtd Bde, undated.

21. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 17.

22. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 17.

Africans under whose command they served.²³ Linklater planned to be accurate and truthful but did not intend to blacken characters. He planned to “slur over the bad and play up the good”.²⁴

Axelson noted the difficulty of accurately recording an event even if he had personally witnessed it:

*Madden [a photographer] and I, comparing accounts, often found that we were confused as to the details, sequences and times. We now appreciate the difficulty experienced by members of the division when they make statements to the historical recording section.*²⁵

It is understandable that diarists wrote so favourably about their commanding officers and the army in general, considering that the diaries had to be submitted to the commanding officers for approval.

There is evidence that some in the South African military did not understand the difference between propaganda, publicity and historical recording. Military intelligence was closely involved with the historical recording and it was suspected that mail between Axelson and his superiors in Pretoria was tampered with. It was insinuated that Col E.P. Hartshorne, because of his “questioning attitude” might have been responsible for the tampering. In a letter dated 3 July 1944, Agar-Hamilton wrote to Axelson: “... it might ease Col Hartshorne’s mind if the essential difference between the historian’s job and the propagandist’s were made clear.”²⁶ Propaganda was directed at the enemy in what was called “political warfare” by the British and “psychological warfare” by the Americans. It was a war against the minds of the enemy to break the morale of the enemy and their will to fight.²⁷ At the same time, all forms of media were directed at bolstering morale at home and at the front.

23. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 54.

24. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 121.

25. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 36.

26. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 231.

27. M. Balfour, *Propaganda in War, 1939-1945* (London, Routledge & Keegan Paul Ltd, London, 1979), p 101.

The Allied military published mild propaganda in the form of *Eighth Army News*, *Union Jack* and *The Sable*, which was the mouthpiece of the 6th South African Armoured Division. In Italy, as in Egypt, these publications projected an image of strength by focusing on events such as the division's birthday parade. John Hodgson, a private in the Royal Natal Carbineers, sent home a copy of *The Sable* which contained pictures of the first birthday celebration of the division in Egypt. Parades were particularly suitable for projecting an image of power. Hodgson wrote that "it was a very posh affair" and speculated that it would soon appear on the African Mirror which was a South African newsreel and a useful propaganda tool.²⁸ The wireless was also used by all for disseminating propaganda, and while the South African government had concerns of its own, the British had more to cope with in the form of air raids and rationing. The SABC was used as a tool in the same way as the BBC was used, to manipulate public opinion while avoiding outright "perversion of the truth".²⁹

It is no secret that news, propaganda and publicity were closely related during the war. The British Ministry of Information had direct control over news and censorship at home and overseas. It saw its function as one of keeping up morale and made use of publications, films and broadcasting. It conducted surveys on home morale and public opinion and ultimately polls on satisfaction with the government and their running of the war.³⁰ One British gunner officer commented in his diary that the newspapers often gave a tremendous boost to morale: "You don't realise how well you're doing until the *Daily Mail* tells you!"³¹

Just as propaganda and publicity were used in all media to influence public opinion, so censorship of personal letters prevented the public from being fully informed. The only authorised channels for communications originating in or destined for the theatre of

28. John Hodgson Collection, Dunkeld, Johannesburg, J.B. Hodgson – his mother, M.V. Hodgson, 1 February 1944.

29. Balfour, *Propaganda in War*, p 87.

30. Balfour, *Propaganda in War*, pp 70–80.

31. J. Swaab, *Field of Fire: Diary of a Gunner Officer* (Sutton Publishing, Stroud, 2005), p 352.

war were those controlled by the military. These included the Army Postal Service (APS), approved telephone, telegraph, cable, or radio systems. It was forbidden to use civilian postal facilities or to give or carry private mail for posting or delivery outside the theatre of war. Any correspondence with Italian civilians was strictly forbidden.³²

Censorship prohibited the disclosure of any information which might be of use or comfort to the enemy or detrimental to the war effort. All but the most banal information was prohibited. Some of the subjects which were prohibited or which could only be discussed after careful consideration, include descriptions of camps; locations of individuals or groups of soldiers; reports of atrocities (unless released by the appropriate authority); unit strength; and arrival or lack of reinforcements.³³

Strict rules were also laid down regarding enclosures and the contents of parcels. The following items were restricted: foreign currency or stamps (except in small quantities); newspaper clippings from local newspapers; military documents (maps, orders, etc.); private diaries; drawings; sketches; music manuscripts; paintings; and studio type portraits (unless the studio trademark and address had been excised). Furthermore, objects could not be wrapped in newspaper. Naturally, photographs and picture postcards could easily violate military censorship regulations. All films, negatives and prints had to be approved by the censor, or they would be disposed of.³⁴

Correspondence with the press was forbidden under censorship rules and it was also forbidden to send home any publications or news bulletins published by serving units or formations smaller than "army", as they had not been press censored.³⁵ Although these

32. DODAR, WD, Box 630, 7/23, Med. Rgt, Routine Order 32/44, 16 July 1944.

33. DODAR, WD, Box 630, 7/23, Med. Rgt, Routine Order 32/44, 16 July 1944.

34. DODAR, WD, Box 630, 7/23, Med. Rgt, Routine Order 32/44, 16 July 1944.

35. DODAR, WD, Box 630, 7/23, Med. Rgt, Routine Order 32/44, 16 July 1944.

rules were often broken, the law did have teeth. Trooper R.H. Bell (Royal Durban Light Infantry) was found guilty of two breaches of censorship and was sentenced to undergo 21 days field punishment.³⁶ Censorship regulations were not applied evenly and some soldiers interpreted them liberally. One British officer in Italy commented in his diary about the tremendous battle between his skill at censorship and the deep cunning of the men in dropping the unnoticeable hint. South African soldiers were equally creative in revealing their present whereabouts.³⁷

If the home front was ignorant of the hardships being endured by the troops, this was partly due to self-censorship by the troops who went to great lengths to convince their loved ones that they were safe and enjoying life. John Hodgson was a corporal in the Royal Natal Carbineers and a prolific letter writer. In October 1944, Hodgson's regiment experienced what is often described as the most traumatic period in its history. The commanding officer of the RNC (Lt-Col Moray Comrie) had to be invalided home as a result. Nevertheless, Hodgson still insisted that the press had exaggerated the danger and discomfort: "As for the newspapers they really annoy me as there is so much exaggeration in them – the utter nonsense in them most of the time gets my goat ..."³⁸

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

36. DODAR, WD, Box 630, 7/23, Med. Rgt, Routine Order 35/44, 4 August 1944.

37. Swaab, *Field of Fire: Diary of a Gunner Officer*, p 148.

38. John Hodgson Collection, Dunkeld, Johannesburg, J. Hodgson – his mother, M.V. Hodgson, 14 November 1944.

of truth, Axelson lamented his own comparative lack of proper equipment, staff and transport.³⁹

In Pretoria, the historical recording section (headed by Capt. J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton) saw the benefit in photography as a visual diary which would summon up events in days to come in a way that no written account could. Even though war might not be photogenic, Agar-Hamilton encouraged Axelson to keep on doing what he was doing.⁴⁰ The dearth of any pictures of a violent nature in the archives confirms that even Axelson avoided photographing the horrors of war. The South African photographer of the historical recording section was specifically instructed to take photographs which illustrate some specific point, not of the type that “wins prizes in amateur competitions”. Posed photographs were to be avoided and when taken, they should be indicated as such. He insisted: “Accuracy in recording is the first consideration and must not be sacrificed to imaginary aesthetic considerations.”⁴¹

It is not surprising that personal photographs, or “snaps”, also failed to portray the horrors of war. Although unofficial photography was allowed, it had to be confined to subjects of a personal nature, such as individuals, groups or views. Particular attention had to be paid to backgrounds to ensure that subjects which could be of interest to the enemy were not included. In any case, cameras, films and exposed prints were not permitted to be carried into a battle zone and no photography was allowed within the area if any division was in the line. Undeveloped film could not be sent out of Italy and prints being sent in the mail were subject to censorship.⁴²

Further images of the war were created by a group of official war artists. From the artworks which have been published, it appears that their favourite subjects included engineering works and bomb

39. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 49.

40. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 234.

41. DODAR, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, Duties of Divisional Recording Officer, 5 April 1943.

42. DODAR, WD, Box 630, 7/23, Med. Rgt, Routine Order 7/45, 17 February 1945.

damage. At divisional headquarters on the outskirts of Florence on 29 July 1944, Axelson was asked why not a single one of the five South African war artists had visited the division since Rome. "How can they, sitting in Rome, or on the shores of Lake Trasimeno, illustrate the progress of the division?"⁴³ In late July 1944, Linklater paid the 6th Division recording section a visit and remarked tongue-in-cheek, that he had heard the most disturbing news – how they were "looking at the war from the wrong end of the telescope; how they wanted to see it with the forward patrols, instead of from a proper [more distant and comfortable] perspective".⁴⁴

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

*... we may be led into the same error of thinking that the Div liberated Italy; in the same way that the South African press led us to believe that the First South African Division had liberated Abyssinia.*⁴⁵

Gaps in the historical record may be partly attributed to lack of capacity. When Axelson paid a visit to Siena in September 1944, he found a huge American contingent of officers and men with vehicles whose mission it was to keep an archive and collect information to be used in writing the history of the campaign. The American 5th Army historian had six officers and sixteen other ranks under him. The staff included professional draughtsmen and artists.⁴⁶ The Union Defence Force (UDF) historical recording section was under-equipped by comparison and Axelson bemoaned his lack of resources. His 15 cwt Fordson truck had "given up the ghost" and he was reduced to driving a temperamental Fiat. Shortly after the battle of Catarelto

43. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 65.

44. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 54.

45. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 65.

46. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 161.

Ridge, he had the opportunity to go over the battlefield with the company commander and get the full story, with photographs – if only he had a jeep. Instead he wrote in his log: “No jeep, no story. No story; no history.”⁴⁷

It was the media, (war reporters, photographers and cartoonists) who were firstly to blame for not revealing the truth. Fussell asks how it is possible that events which were commonplace in the war are known only to those who had direct experience of them. The answer lies partly in human nature which avoids dealing with information that is in conflict with ethical, political or psychological assumptions and that which is likely to cause distress. The most important reason however, is that the media kept quiet about these things on behalf of the war effort.⁴⁸

In 1977, John Steinbeck confessed that journalists aided and abetted the war effort. By not mentioning certain things, a correspondent could give the audience at home the impression that there were no cowards in the service, no thieves and rapists and looters, no cruel or stupid commanders.⁴⁹ Even Ernie Pyle, well known as the infantry’s friend and advocate, as an accredited (civilian) correspondent is said to have revealed only one third of what actually occurred and like the other journalists, fuelled the misconceptions.⁵⁰

Not only were the reporters wearing rose-tinted spectacles, but their editors further sanitised the reports. One war reporter by the name of Harry O’Connor – a short, burly man who worked on the *Rand Daily Mail* and later became editor of the *Eastern Province Herald*⁵¹ described the harsh conditions, casualties and hardships at Monte

47. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 129.

48. P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1989), p 285.

49. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior*, pp 285–286.

50. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior*, p 287.

51. J. Saunders, *South Africa and the International Media, 1972–1979: A Struggle for Representation* (Frank Cass, London, 2000) p 191; B. Poggrund, *War of Words: Memoir of a South African Journalist* (Seven Stories Press, New York, 2000), p 53.

Vigese. He was sent a packet of newspaper clippings from home and noticed that all Union papers, except the *Volksstem*, had cut out anything “suggesting that the Springboks were having a hard time”.⁵²

The Battle of Chiusi was the first major setback for the South Africans. It began on 21 June 1944 and lasted six days. The language used in the telling of the Chiusi episode is a classic example of how a story is distorted and cleansed, and is worth examining in some detail. Reasons given for the disaster include map-reading errors and lack of tank support due to heavy rain. The close-quarter fighting also limited artillery support. The legend begins when the First City/Cape Town Highlanders climbed up the terraced slopes and were besieged in a cinema in the town square.

Throughout the night of the 21/22 June, the Highlanders held out in the *teatro* while enemy tanks rammmed the walls and fired at point-blank range. Thirty-two out of the forty men were killed or wounded; the situation was hopeless and there was no disgrace in surrendering, but on this day, the second anniversary of the mass surrender at Tobruk, the South Africans went to great lengths to justify their actions and there are many conflicting reports of how the battle ended. The version which is narrated in the regimental history appears to be based on the words of Sergeant Harry Campbell which were first quoted in a newspaper report headlined “Cape men’s stand in Chiusi battle – burning theatre rammmed by German tanks”:

*We went out firing our Tommy guns into a haze of smoke and dust, while the Spandaus poured a hail of lead into the building ... When we came into the street, we looked straight down the barrels of innumerable guns not more than ten yards away. There was not much to do but surrender.*⁵³

Nowhere in the newspaper article, was there mention of the carnage or the horror which was alluded to by a German soldier, Walter Stiewig. According to his account, a white flag was waved

52. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 147.

53. Andrew Jones-Phillipson Collection, Cape Town, Press cuttings; L.G. Murray, *First City/Cape Town Highlanders in the Italian Campaign: A Short History, 1943–1945*, p 31.

outside the window of the *teatro* by a German being held prisoner by the South Africans. A German soldier by the name of Herbert Zidek entered alone, and through the dust and the gun-smoke, he saw a scene of human misery that he would never forget.⁵⁴ At least two men had been virtually vaporised by the 88 mm shells from a Tiger tank firing at point-blank range yet the image which is perpetuated is one of Major Bartlett standing a little way up the steps of the *teatro* “emptying his revolver into the enemy”.⁵⁵ Both the company commander, Maj. Bartlett and the second in command, Capt. E.S. Rivett-Carnac, were captured.

Yet another account by Harry Pearce, a signalman attached to the First City/Cape Town Highlanders, who was captured, goes as follows: “By this time, Major Bartlett was very badly shaken and our situation was hopeless, so in order to save lives, he gave the order to surrender.”⁵⁶ This version is corroborated by Rivett-Carnac, whose letter, written from a prisoner-of-war hospital, was intended for a wide audience and is probably the most detailed and useful account of the battle and ensuing events. At least six close friends had just met a gruesome, violent end in the *teatro* – yet language failed him:

*All our men were still full of fight – and there was a grimness and tenderness impossible to describe. So the morning dragged on. As I said, we were still full of fight, and despite the horror of the situation, were reasonably cheerful – hoping all the time that our tanks might break through and appreciating that if they did, it was essential that we maintained a firm base in the town to which they could come, and from which they could operate.*⁵⁷

In a small way, the discourse relating to the Chiusi episode can be likened to the construction of the legends of the London Blitz and the Dunkirk evacuations. Through a need to reassure the public, these events were transformed from a defeat into a triumph of the

54. W. Stiewing, “Chiusi: 21–23 June 1944”, *Der Deutsche Fallschirmjage*, 2, 1993.

55. W.L. Fielding, *With the 6th Div*, p 120.

56. G.B. Hobbs, *From Sicily to the Alps* (Mallard Publishers, Claremont, 1999), p 116.

57. Andrew Jones-Phillipson collection, Cape Town, E.S. Rivett-Carnac – his wife, M. Rivett-Carnac, July 1944.

indomitability of the human spirit. The wartime media, especially film media, wasted no time in portraying these landmark events in heroic terms.

Perhaps the most contentious example of how cultural attitudes of the time and social relations influenced received history, is the perceived unwillingness of South Africans to serve their country.⁵⁸ While it is true that infantry units were under-strength, certain branches of the military (the air force in particular) were in fact “supernumerary”. However, the question of the shortage of replacements seems to have been exaggerated. There are a number of instances where units had turned away replacements because they did not know what to do with them. The division in general and tank regiments in particular, were extremely fussy about the quality of their officers and men. The infantry accepted rejects from more specialised units. Some officers were prepared to forgo their rank in order to be placed and men stuck in the reserve regiment volunteered for transfer to infantry units.⁵⁹ Field-Marshal J.C. Smuts himself stated in March 1944 that:

*... our European population has responded magnificently to the call to arms. South Africa has only 570 000 European males between the ages of 20 and 60. The fact that so many of them have volunteered for full-time service, is a response which has not been surpassed by any of the Allied nations at war. It means that almost one out of every three males between the ages of 20 and 60 volunteered for full-time service.*⁶⁰

Folklore clouds the question of who did what in the war and what motivated them. Neil Roos may be correct regarding his assessment that when the call to arms came in 1939, mainly poor-white men answered it, and that men who volunteered later tended to be more

58. Received history is the commonly accepted and mainstream account of history.

59. DODAR, Div. Docs, Box 208, Res. Armd Regt, Personnel Unsuitable for Armour, 28 July 1944; DODAR, Div. Docs, Box 208, Res. Armd Regt, Letter Lt-Col A. Johnstone – Commander 11 SA Armd Bde regarding P.E. Taylor, 2 April 1944.

60. Field-Marshal the Rt Hon. J.C. Smuts, “Foreword”, *The Nonqai*, 35, March 1944.

affluent and better educated. It is also accepted that white volunteers' narratives about enlisting were highly individualised.⁶¹ However, the overwhelming weight of evidence is in conflict with Roos' view that volunteering was a political act.⁶²

Grundlingh found that the political convictions of Afrikaners often took second place to material wants, resulting in a form of "economic conscription".⁶³ Enlistment in the predominantly English 6th Division was driven more by cultural and social factors, together with an element of "coercive volunteerism" due to social pressures as well as notions of honour and virtue or a thirst for adventure. Idealism and loyalty to General Jan Smuts may have motivated a few, but patriotism was not a major factor. More than half of those who served in North Africa, were not prepared to take the General Service Oath to serve anywhere in the world. In Hodgson's contemporary opinion, it was mainly those of a certain demographic who were inclined to enlist in the latter stages of the war and it did not take much to deplete this pool:

*This is how I look at it, all the people who intended to join up, who left school before last year, have already done so, all those in between twenty and thirty who ever had intentions of joining up, have already done so, those who have not done so, I am sure, have no intention of ever doing so.*⁶⁴

While much has been written about the social aspects of military service, certain subjects have been omitted from the post-war literature in South Africa. These are the controversial and interrelated topics of morale, fear, discipline, combat fatigue and desertion. The expression of sexuality and use of alcohol are also taboo in the official histories. Most campaign histories steer clear of matters regarding poor morale, and some cases were covered up. The military establishment

61. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks*, p 195.

62. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks*, pp 42–49.

63. A. Grundlingh, "The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force during the Second World War, 1939–45", *The Journal of African History*, 40, 3, pp 360–362.

64. John Hodgson Collection, Dunkeld, Johannesburg, J.B. Hodgson – his father, W.A. Hodgson, 16 June 1944.

is a work system and accordingly it harbours the full range of deviant behaviour and crime which is found in civilian life. In any wartime army there is a sub-culture of aggression but the 6th South African Armoured Division had a relatively low incidence of indiscipline.

Of the 310 cases of indiscipline amongst members of the UDF reported for the month of February 1945, there were 78 who were from the Rome area; 118 from Bari; 51 from Florence; 42 from Prato; and 21 from Jesi. It was noted that the number of cases of drunkenness was increasing and had recently overtaken cases of absence without leave (AWOL) – probably due to the increased number of men on leave. It was noted that 44 out of the total of 64 cases of drunkenness occurred in Bari, where two base camps were situated. In addition, 270 persons were “pulled up” for dress irregularities. Of these, 143 were members of the SAAF.⁶⁵ It can be seen that generally the closer to the front line, the fewer the cases of indiscipline.

Racial tension is prevalent in all armies and the 6th SA Armoured Division was no different although the only Non-Europeans in the division were the “Coloured” soldiers of the Cape Corps (CC). A disproportionate number of disciplinary cases involved CC members. Apart from being absent without leave, the most common charges were those of “insubordination” or “using insubordinate language to a superior officer” and even “striking a superior officer”. One CC soldier, who accomplished all three in one night, (and was awarded was 28-day detention) was Cpl D. le Roux whose charge sheet read as follows:

At the Cape Corps Club PRATO at 16:10 hrs on 27 November 44, said to No. 51429 Cpl Grant E.N. of 59 “Q” Coy Att UDFI his superior officer, on being lawfully ordered by the latter to replace the articles unlawfully removed by the accused from the said Cape Corps Club “fuck the S/Sergeant, there is too much colour bar in this place”, or words to that effect.⁶⁶

65. DODAR, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-divisional activities, February and March 1945.

66. DODAR, Div. Docs, Box 172, Discipline and crime, Field Crime Sheets, Charge Sheet, Pte D. le Roux.

As at 1 December 1944, there had been only one conviction for rape. The sentence was “death” – later commuted to “life”.⁶⁷ The 6th South African Armoured Division boasted that there were only three deserters as at 5 November 1944, however many absentees had been AWOL for months at a time. A high proportion of absentees were from fighting units and many had disappeared while on leave.⁶⁸ Absence without leave (AWOL) is a situation in which any member of the armed forces is not where he is required to be at the right time. When a soldier misses the movement with which he is required to travel in the course of duty, there is usually a presumption of intent.⁶⁹ However, it appears that the division considered this to be “constructive desertion” rather than full desertion. The reserve group was based firstly in Sant’ Angelo d’Alife and by April 1945, they were in Monte Varchi (between Florence and Arezzo). A string of cases of “constructive desertion” occurred when replacements were being routed to the front.⁷⁰ In a document detailing the lessons learnt from operations, it was recommended that replacements be fetched by truck from the reserve group.⁷¹

The division took a “dim view” of looting and issued an order to that effect on 8 December 1944.⁷² Nevertheless, there were cases of looting especially when it came to food and drink. The red tabs on the shoulders of South African troops made them easily identifiable by the civilian population, who then knew where to go to report a crime. Towards the end of the war and in rear areas, the men were under strict orders not to “acquire by illegal means, any poultry or livestock from Italian civilians”. The sentence for such an offence

67. DODAR, Div. Docs, Box 152, ACV 2 Orders, vol. 1, 6 SA Armd Div Routine Orders (CMF), 11 December 1944.

68. DODAR, Div. Docs, Box 171, Discipline, Return of illegal absentees and missing vehicles as at 20 May 1945; DODAR, Div. Docs, Box 171, Discipline, Return of illegal absentees and missing vehicles as at 31 July 1945.

69. C.D. Bryant, *Khaki-Collar Crime* (The Free Press, London, 1979), p 162.

70. DODAR, WD, Box 598, Recording Officer, 12 SA Mtd Bde, Report on Operations in the Italian Campaign for period August 1944 to May 1945.

71. DODAR, WD, Box 640, PR, 1–30 November 1944.

72. DODAR, WD, Box 628, 4/22, Fd Rgt, 1–31 December 1944.

could be up to eight months field punishment.⁷³

As far as could be ascertained in the English language post-war historiography, there is no mention of South Africans perpetrating large-scale atrocities in post war historiography. It was not uncommon for enemy prisoners to be shot for white-flag outrages and other infractions in the heat of battle but no published record of cold-blooded executions has been found. Even when Eric Axelson published his daily log as *A Year in Italy*, he omitted the following conversation which he had with a South African Press Association (SAPA) photographer, Sgt Cöhn:

Cöhn said he had an argument with Lt-Col Brits just south of Finale. About 12 hours after the battle was decided, there were still groups of enemy holding out, because (they told him later) they would be shot if they surrendered. An SSB sergeant standing close to Cöhn, was shot by a sniper, and Cöhn called out in German, telling them to surrender. The two Germans, thinking he was one of themselves, revealed themselves to him. After Cöhn assured them they would not be shot if they surrendered, they surrendered to him. Both Germans were wounded. They were taken to the RAP [Regimental Aid Post], and there they received medical attention. Lt-Col Brits heard of the death of his sergeant. He asked Cöhn to ask the Germans which one had shot the sergeant. One of the prisoners said that he had. Lt-Col Brits ordered him to be taken outside and shot. Cöhn and the MO [Medical Officer] objected, but the prisoner was taken outside, and shot by a friend of the sergeant's, with a revolver.⁷⁴

Axelson's original log is stored in the military archives and is almost identical to the published version. This story is corroborated by the fact that there was an SSB Sergeant killed on 24 April. He was Sgt R. Moyes, a 37- year-old Rhodesian volunteer.

Regimental and campaign histories steer clear of disciplinary matters, but much can be found in the military archives on the subject of alcohol and the related topics of prostitution and venereal disease

73. DODAR, WD, Box 633, DSR, 1–30 April 1945, Order dated 22 April 1945.

74. DODAR, WD, Box 599, Recording Officer, Daily log, 9 May 1945.

(VD). The general perception is that soldiers are heavy drinkers. According to Bryant, drinking is part of the culture of the military, and the military was tolerant of heavy drinking provided that a man did not incapacitate himself or become unruly. Drinking was a way of life and part of the masculine mystique.⁷⁵ While on leave in Rome in August 1944, Douglas Baker observed:

*At its best alcohol smothers out and makes acceptable the inequalities of rank and authority, the atrociousness of human conduct, the challenges to courage, the grief of bereavement, the imposition of chastity and the tolerance of boredom and exhaustion. At its worst, alcohol aggravates all these with a debasement of personality that constitutes outrage even to the ego.*⁷⁶

Alcohol was always available, either at a cheap price or as part of the ration. In the destroyed villages, troops looked for (and usually found) a quantity of exotic liquors in the cellars of deserted houses. According to Bryant, alcohol served the function of blunting the sex drive, acting as a type of sexual anaesthetic. It also made prostituted sex more acceptable. The Americans were not opposed to prostituted sex and in fact ran military brothels.⁷⁷ The South Africans however, took a dim view of it and made a link between alcohol and venereal disease (VD) in their “Vino – Venus – VD” campaign slogan. Other substances were also enough of a problem to have necessitated the order stating that the possession of hashish, opium, cocaine, or any drug in any form by any member of the UDF was strictly prohibited.⁷⁸

All officers and NCOs received a liquor ration whether they wanted it or not.⁷⁹ Axelson wrote that on 17 July 1944, there was good news. Canteen supplies arrived and there was a half-bottle of whisky and half-bottle of gin for all of the rank of sergeant and above. “The quantity, though small, can for a short time alter one’s outlook on the war. It arrives unexpectedly and for a while inspirits

75. Bryant, *Khaki-Collar Crime*, p 178.

76. Baker, *War, Wine and Valour*, p 439.

77. Bryant, *Khaki-Collar Crime*, pp 174–176.

78. DODAR, Div. Docs, Box 181, UDF Adm HQ MEF, Standing Orders, Camp standing orders, 1944.

79. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior*, pp 103–104.

the camp.”⁸⁰ Even the low alcohol beer ration (in sufficient quantity) had the necessary effects:

*Just finished my third bottle of beer... very nice taste – but no effect on the mind at all. It's the first we've had for some time, three bottles per man! It may not have any effects on the mind but it's got plenty on the bladder ... I love everybody – even the cunning Hun isn't so bad tonight!*⁸¹

Exposure to the elements as well as the violence could induce a powerful craving. On 17 October 1944, from his cold wet, *casa* in Poggio above Grizzana, after a night under shelling, Capt. H.H.H. Biermann wrote to a friend behind the lines: “If there is anything in the line of booze on issue or to buy, please ask the Fwd press officer/s to keep some for me. I really feel like a drink, in fact like several.”⁸² The diary of Gunner P.M. Johnston (7/23rd Medium Regiment) relates that he traded cigarettes for cognac and then had a “heavy session” after which he slept in a truck.⁸³ On Christmas Eve, he was having a party in Montepiano to the rear of Castiglione, with “much booze”.⁸⁴ Hodgson and his circle were more abstemious:

*As you can imagine there is plenty of cheap wine here, and when the opportunity arises the chaps give it a bit of a flap. Occasionally I have a glass of wine but I prefer my beer much more and will always stick to it. George is the same. In fact in our whole platoon there are very few chaps who drink and those who do, do it properly so we do not experience any drunkenness as one so often finds in the army.*⁸⁵

80. Axelson, *A Year in Italy*, p 50.

81. James Bourhill Collection (in possession of the first author), S.F. Bourhill – his mother, E. Bourhill, 16 November 1944.

82. DODAR, UWH, Box 140, Capt. H.H.H. Biermann, military observer attached to 12 SA Bde – war correspondent Harry O'Connor, 17 October 1944.

83. Jane van Velden Collection, Rustenburg, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, entry for 16 October 1944.

84. Jane van Velden Collection, Rustenburg, P.M. Johnston, personal diary, entry for 19 December 1944.

85. John Hodgson collection, Dunkeld Johannesburg, J.B. Hodgson – his mother, M.V. Hodgson, 17 May 1944.

Although carefully avoided in South African military history, the subject of rampant libidos in a wartime situation is well documented in the international literature.⁸⁶ Prostitution was more prevalent in the Italian campaign than in any other campaign in the Second World War. Apart from the professional prostitutes in Naples, so many women had lost their menfolk that the only way to survive was by selling their bodies.

Some of the girls were professional prostitutes, others were part-time amateurs. Mothers sometimes encouraged their daughters to pay for food in kind. A female member of the UDF, Sampie de Wet, was convinced that

Some of our boys got very upset because when they were looking after trucks or cars [outside the Minerva Hotel], young Italian girls of fourteen or fifteen would offer to spend the night with them for a tin of bully beef.⁸⁷

After a girl of about thirteen offered herself to him for a tin of bully beef, a British officer wrote: “It was a revelation what hungry people will do”.⁸⁸ Not all men were prepared to take advantage of the situation, but Douglas Baker (Natal Mounted Rifles) was more pragmatic:

Occasionally a woman would come back to the billets with a soldier and spend the afternoon alone with him. The event might only last half an hour ... men being men, and soldiers being what they are, his friends would be invited to keep the kettle boiling and she would be willing to continue because more food and luxury items would be forthcoming and so on.⁸⁹

The shameful result of such activity was the high incidence of venereal disease (VD) which was of great concern in early 1945. During February there were 59 admissions for VD compared to 266 medical and 238 surgical reasons. This is despite intensive education, rounding up of prostitutes and placing certain localities out of bounds. According to the monthly report of the provost for the month of

86. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior*, pp 110–114.

87. S. de Wet, *Shifty in Italy*, p 34.

88. Swaab, *Field of Fire: Diary of a Gunner Officer*, p 129.

89. Baker, *War, Wine and Valour*, p 402.

January 1945, the campaign against VD was being prosecuted with “unrelenting zeal”.⁹⁰ A medical administrative instruction to the division quotes an experienced commanding officer as having written

*... it is my firm opinion that in a good unit there is practically no VD ... each CO must occupy his men when they are not actively working, since boredom is the chief reason for drunkenness and wantonness....they must educate their soldiers medically.*⁹¹

In fact, the incidence of VD was higher in top infantry regiments than in most other units.

Homosexuality was especially taboo and is virtually absent from the literature. Some homosexuals went to extreme lengths to hide their sexuality, nevertheless there are examples where homosexuality was acknowledged and tolerated by career officers to whom nothing was surprising in the army.⁹² One notable example is Regent Professor Michael Howard, who during the war was a captain in the Coldstream Guards (attached to the 6th SA Armd Div) and won the Military Cross. He was homosexual and according to a colleague, Professor B.H. Reid, he never tried to conceal it, but because of this “operated on the fringes”.⁹³

The extent to which death or injury was part of the soldier’s experience can be better understood by analysing the casualty statistics. Casualties suffered by the 6th South African Armoured Division were surprisingly low. During the twelve-month period of operations in Italy, there were only 711 South Africans killed, many of them accidentally. During the period 8 May 1944 to 27 January 1945, the total number of wounded was 2 269. Of these, 580 or 25 percent

90. DODAR, UWH, Box 140, Monthly summary of non-divisional activities, February and March 1945.

91. DODAR, Div. Docs, Box 171, File 6ADE/5/9, Medical, Medical Administrative Instruction, 16 May 1945, ADMS 6 SA Armd Div, CMF.

92. J. Costello, *Love, Sex and War: Changing Values* (Collins, London, 1985), pp 160–163.

93. B.H. Reid, “Michael Howard and the Evolution of Modern War Studies”, *The Journal of Military History*, 73, 3, 2009, p 874.

were classified as battle accidents.⁹⁴ Even in a fighting division such as the 6th South African Armoured Division, there were different grades of participation. Motorised infantry units such as the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment lost more than 50 percent of their strength and accounted for 55 percent of the division's total casualties. Although the overall number of South African casualties was relatively low, it was in line with that of the American Fifth Army as a whole. Furthermore, it has been shown to be a myth that the Guards Brigade bore the brunt of the division's casualties.⁹⁵

From the data available, it is believed that the incidence of battle fatigue, when expressed as a percentage of wounded, was relatively low within the 6th South African Armoured Division. According to Orpen, the South African statistics for the period from 1 May to 7 August 1944 (up to the capture of Florence), the divisional medical units had admitted 1 964 battle casualties and 226 men suffering from exhaustion – eleven percent of the wounded figure.⁹⁶ During 44 days of operations in Italy, the 1st American Armoured Division suffered 250 wounded and an additional 137 psychiatric casualties (54 percent) in the fight for the “Gothic positions”. At the same time the 91st American Division had 2 700 wounded and 919 additional psychiatric casualties (30 percent).⁹⁷

After the war when Douglas Baker was studying medicine, he met up with Dr Nelson Eddy (formerly the Regimental Medical Officer of the Natal Mounted Rifles) who had treated cases of battle fatigue in Italy. He confirmed that the neurosis was more widespread than is commonly known. Many of those affected were quietly sent home. These were things which generals didn't write about and other men didn't talk about.⁹⁸ As with every society, the division had its quota of schizophrenics and psychopaths and the medical files are full of

94. DODAR, Div. Docs, Box 163, Casualty returns, Battle Casualties and Battle Accidents for the period 4 May 1944 to 27 January 1945.

95. DODAR, Div. Docs, Box 163, Casualty returns, Battle Casualties and Battle Accidents for the period 4 May 1944 to 27 January 1945.

96. Orpen *Victory in Italy*, p 169.

97. E. Dinter, *Hero or Coward?* (Frank Cass, London, 1985), p 63.

98. Baker, *War, Wine and Valour*, p 392.

these.

If the general trend for the Allied armies in World War Two applies, then no more than 20 percent of South African enlisted men – or 50 000, saw the front line. In other words, of the 70 000 Red Tabs who were on active service during the entire war, 20 000 were combatants.⁹⁹ The remainder would have been non-combat engineers, headquarters staff, military police, medical, quartermaster and other service personnel. The experience and language of the infantrymen who bore the brunt of the fighting was overwhelmed by the language of those on the home-front. The amusing anecdotes told by returned soldiers, the majority of whom had not see the front line, added to the misconceptions which censorship and propaganda had already inculcated in the national consciousness.

The result is that in South African folklore, the Italian campaign is perceived as a long camping trip and a great adventure. Received history continues to be distorted as memories fade over time. In recent years, the social record has continued to grow with the appearance of short memoirs which were written in later years, long after the fact. Misconstruction occurs unintentionally, memory has not only become tainted; in many cases, veterans have simply forgotten.

Although postmodernism holds that there is no difference between history and social memory, Tosh explains that social memory is derived from tradition and nostalgia and provides a feeling of security or “an escape into a more congenial past”. To show things as they really were, it is necessary to “go beyond the published word”.¹⁰⁰ For that matter, it is also necessary to go beyond those contemporary accounts which were aimed at maintaining morale. Keeping in mind that even the war diaries were subject to distortion, the most valuable record sources come from all the paperwork which was churned out by pedantic HQ staff and countless company clerks. Thanks to Eric Axelson and the historical recording section which salvaged truckloads of documents and shipped them home to the Union,

99. Monick, *A Bugle Calls*, p 324.

100. J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (Pearson Education, Harlow, 2006), pp 20–93.

there is enough archival material to enable historians to go beyond the written word and to better understand what the South African soldiers experienced in the Italian campaign.

Abstract

Despite the best efforts of professional historians attached to the 6th South African Armoured Division, the demands of morale building overwhelmed those of historical accuracy and the true story of the ordinary South African soldier has been left untold. Unsurprisingly, after 67 years individual memories have become distorted, but the cleansing of the national memory began as events were happening. This article explains how the story of the war in Italy was conveyed to the South African public and how propaganda and censorship contributed to the misconceptions which became inculcated in the national consciousness.

Contemporary accounts were subjected to censorship and accentuated the positive and post-war literature does little to change these perceptions. Conflicting accounts of the Battle of Chiusi illustrate how language transformed events from a defeat into a triumph of the indomitability of the human spirit. Taboo topics of sexuality, alcohol use, atrocities and battle fatigue are mostly absent from the literature. Conventional wisdom regarding enlistment and the unwillingness to serve is challenged by arguing that almost all formations within the 6th South African Armoured Division, apart from rifle companies, were over-subscribed. An analysis of casualty statistics revealed that the life of an infantryman was indeed precarious, whereas for the ordinary member of the division, death or injury was typically caused by accident.

Keywords: 6th South African Armoured Division; Italy; Second World War; propaganda; censorship; social memory.

Opsomming

Nieteenstaande die beste pogings van professionele historici wat aan die 6de Suid-Afrikaanse Pantserdivisie verbonde was, het die eise van moreelbou die eise van historiese akkuraatheid oorskadu. Die ware verhaal van die gewone Suid-Afrikaanse soldaat het dus onvertel gebly. Dit is nie verbasend nie dat individuele herinneringe oor 'n tydperk van 67 jaar verdraai is, maar die "reiniging" van die nasionale geheue het reeds tydens die gebeure self begin. Hierdie artikel verduidelik hoe die verhaal van die oorlog in Italië aan die Suid-Afrikaanse publiek voorgestel is en hoe propaganda en sensuur tot die wanopvattinge bygedra het wat in die nasionale bewussyn ingeprent is.

Tydgenootlike verslae is aan sensuur onderwerp en het die positiewe beklemtoon, terwyl na-oorlogse literatuur weinig gedoen het om opvattinge te verander. Taboe onderwerpe oor seksualiteit, alkoholmisbruik, wreedhede en gevegsvermoeidheid is meestal afwesig in die literatuur. Konvensionele wysheid rakende indiensneming en die onwilligheid om te dien is nie op die 6de Suid-Afrikaanse Pantserdivisie van toepassing nie. Ongevalle statistieke word ondersoek wat bewys dat sterftes en beserings hoofsaaklik voorgekom het in infanterie-eenhede, hoewel ongelukke vir 25 persent van beserings verantwoordelik was. Weersprekende weergawes van die Slag van Chiusi illustreer hoe taal gebeure kon omvorm van 'n nederlaag tot 'n oorwinning van die ontembaarheid van die menslike gees.

Sleutelwoorde: 6de Suid-Afrikaanse Pantserdivisie; Italië; Tweede Wêreldoorlog; propaganda; sensuur; sosiale geheue.