

This paper is a tentative exploration of a number of themes regarding personal and official images which I hope to explore in greater detail in the dissertation itself. It is a preliminary analysis and the conclusions drawn are limited as there remains a great deal more research to be done. It is thus very much a work in progress and any suggestions would be highly appreciated.

The Visual Construction of Gender and Race in the South African Military 1939-1945

by

Suryakanthie Chetty

South Africa entered the war on September 6, 1939, after three days of conflict and debate in Parliament. This conflict between the Hertzog and Smuts' coalitions over entry into the war was significant of the tensions and schisms in South African society highlighted by the Second World War. It showed deep divisions between English and Afrikaans speaking White South Africans only a generation after the South African War. Simultaneously there was a powerful tension among Black South Africans over supporting a government that did not extend to them equal rights.¹ The ability of war to expose fragmentation within South African society, and the social upheavals wrought by mobilisation, also had the potential for creating positive social change in race and gender roles, by giving both Black men and White women the opportunity to engage in roles previously denied to them. To fill the gaps left by the exodus of men to the front lines, women, emulating a similar situation in all the Allied and some of the Axis states as well, took up positions in the Auxiliary Services and industry, allowing them to make a significant contribution to the war effort and creating the possibility for overturning gender stereotypes and bringing about social and economic equality. For Black men the opportunity allowed them to work alongside White men, facing similar danger in terms of coming under enemy fire, being taken prisoner and even death, afforded them the occasion to demonstrate their capability and win the respect of their White counterparts which may have extended beyond the war itself. South Africa therefore stood at a crossroads after 1939 and the experiences of war had the potential to shape the way forward. Images appearing in official magazines

¹ Suryakanthie Chetty. "Gender Under Fire: Interrogating War in South Africa, 1939-1945." (University of Natal Durban: Unpublished MA dissertation, 2001) p75-78.

published by the military, personal photo albums as well as in secondary sources, reflect both official attitudes towards military service as well as the sense individuals involved in the war may have made of their own roles and the way in which they constructed their identity in terms of race, gender, class, nation and empire.

The South African Women's Auxiliary Services were officially inaugurated in November 1939 and became affiliated to the Union Defence Force. They were engaged in a number of activities under the auspices of the war effort, much of which were morale boosting, such as the organisation of entertainment and meals for troops. On the work front a similar pattern emerged to that which had occurred in Britain and the United States – the growing numbers of women working in industry to counter the gap left by men who had enlisted.



(Photos courtesy of Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives)

Images appeared of women in non-traditional roles – as radar operators, fire-fighters, pilots and mechanics. This is particularly apparent in the official magazines published by the Auxiliary Services such as *The Women's Auxiliary* and *WAAFS*. The image on the left is of Women's Auxiliary Air Force mechanics working on an aircraft engine. The women here, in particular the woman in the foreground, is given an almost androgynous look in overalls, wearing a practical watch and her hair – one of the standard indicators of femininity – obscured beneath a cap.

Simultaneously, images depicting women engaging in activities that may have been perceived as a complete contrast to conventional gendered roles, were not as groundbreaking as one may suppose. The image on the right is of a WAAF Meteorological Pilot. Her attire – leather jacket, helmet and goggles – and her position in the cockpit is reminiscent of images of earlier twentieth century female pilots such as Amelia Earhart. It is romanticised and designed to fire the imagination of prospective recruits however it is placed squarely within an existing understanding of unconventional female adventurers and does not create a radical break with the past. In addition her work as a meteorological pilot detracts from the glamour associated with the male fighter pilot.

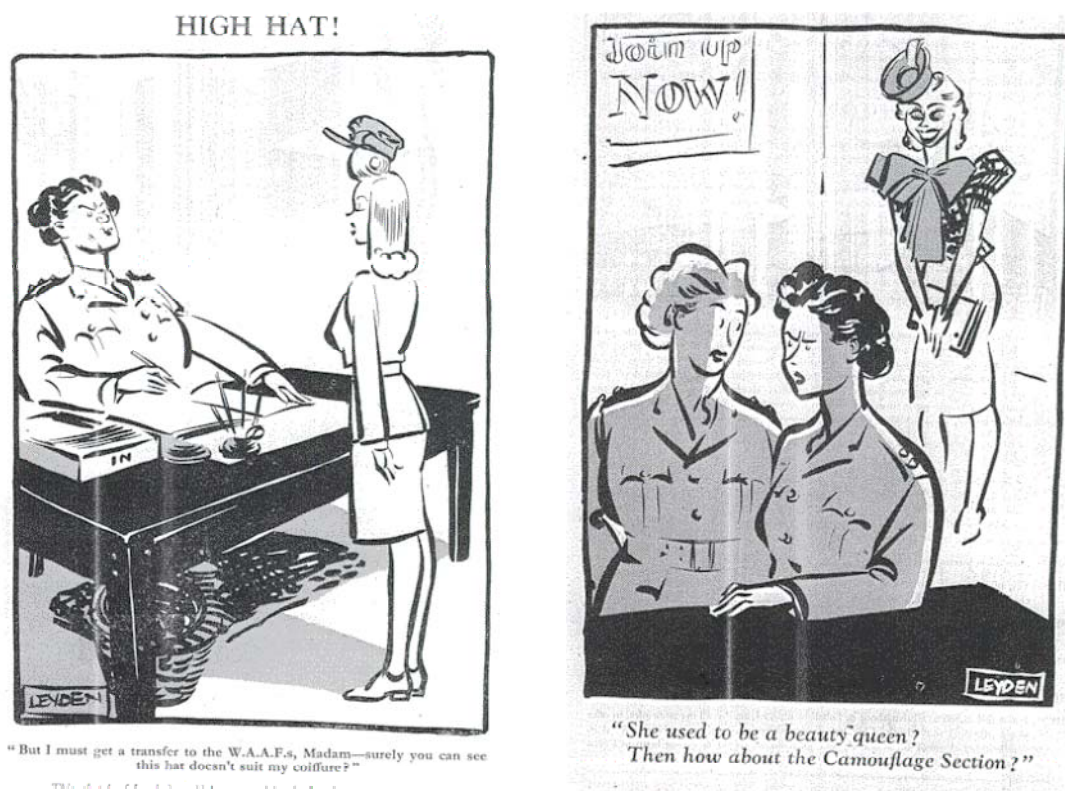


(Photo courtesy of Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives)

The domestically themed picture provides a sense of continuity with pre-war notions of femininity, containing the disruption on the home front brought about by the war. It is of Auxiliary women in aprons and uniforms behind a table, preparing a meal, a pose, which is usually found lacking in the formality of military photographs. The apparent contentment of women engaging in domestic chores lessens the disruption to gender roles created by the war and indicates that the nature of women's war work was temporary and that the true work of women lay on the domestic front.

The cartoon character of "Winnie the WAAF" appearing regularly in the official magazine of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force *WAAFS* is further significant of the limitations placed upon the role of women in military service. In a cartoon in March 1943, "Winnie" appeared before her commanding officer requesting a transfer, as her "coiffure" did not suit her hat. "Winnie" was presented as a wholly feminine, slim,

well-endowed figure which was contrasted with that of her female commander who was far more androgynous with almost masculine features, broad shoulders and stern expression – the only feature identifying her as female was her hair, styled in acceptable auxiliary manner.² A month later another cartoon appeared showing “Winnie” in the recruiting office wearing clothing at the height of fashion for civilian life and the height of impracticality for the Auxiliary Services due to its fitting nature, high-heeled shoes and large bow. At the same time “Winnie” had on a great deal of make-up. The caption deals with a conversation of two similar looking androgynous female officers who suggested that her past experience as a beauty queen would best suit her for the camouflage section.³ In addition to “Winnie” the portrayal of the commanding officers is an amusing send-up of the idea that women in the military had to sacrifice prescribed aspects of their femininity – hair, make-up, clothing – in order to be considered acceptable in a previously male sphere.



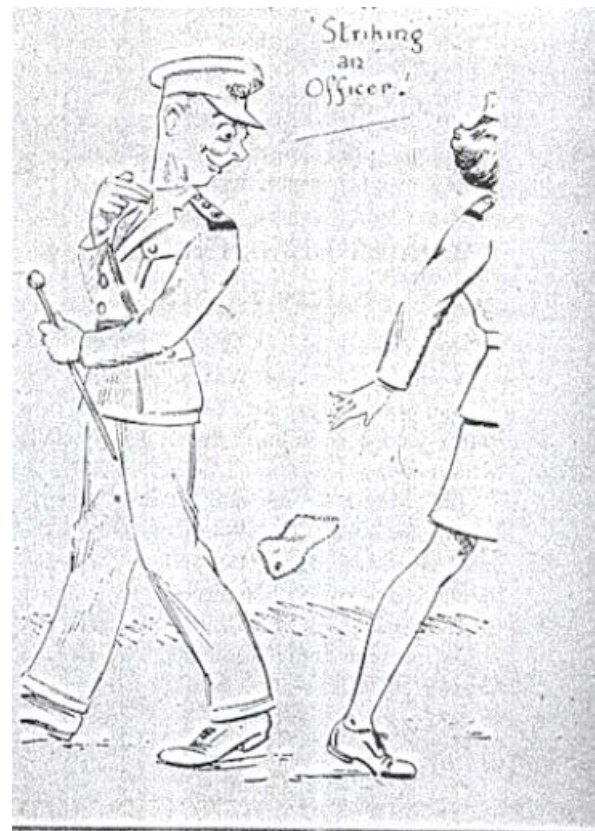
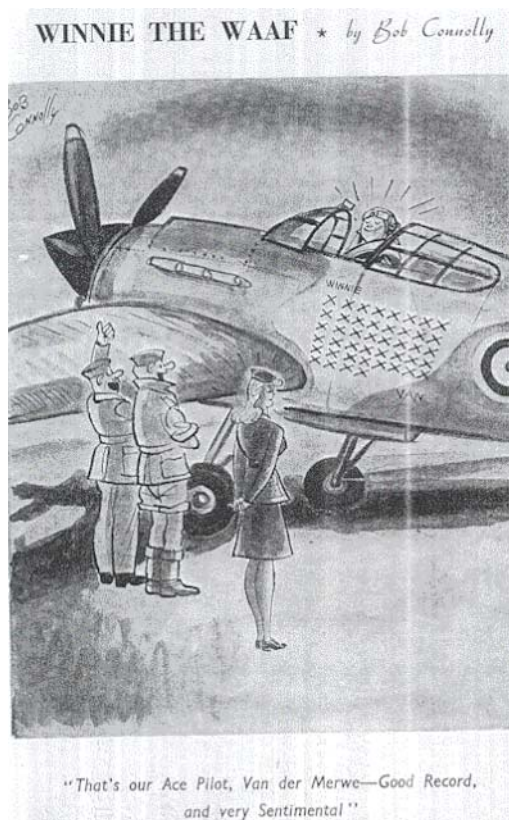
(Cartoons taken from *WAAFS*, March, April, 1943)

Another issue raised by the figure of “Winnie the WAAF” was that of the interaction between female recruits and their male counterparts. In a play on the idea of the ace

² Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. BE/1/A/2. *WAAFS*, March 1943, Vol 2, No 11, p19.

³ Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. BE/1/A/2. *WAAFS*, April 1943, Vol 2, No 12, p19.

pilot where each kill was recorded by an “X” or some other symbol painted on the body of the plane, a cartoon appearing in 1942, suggested the alternate connotation of the “X” – the kiss – and the number of “Xs” appearing on the plane were instead a token of his infatuation with “Winnie”.⁴ In another cartoon appearing in February 1944, entitled “Three Offences”, one of the offences is termed “Striking an Officer” and showed an officer distracted by the figure of a well-endowed recruit.⁵ The two examples suggest the difficult adjustment made by men and women working in a new relationship in a sphere that was previous completely male. On a more negative note it was implied that female recruits might have been a distraction to men, diverting their attention from the war itself.



(Cartoons taken from *WAAFS*, June 1942, February 1944)

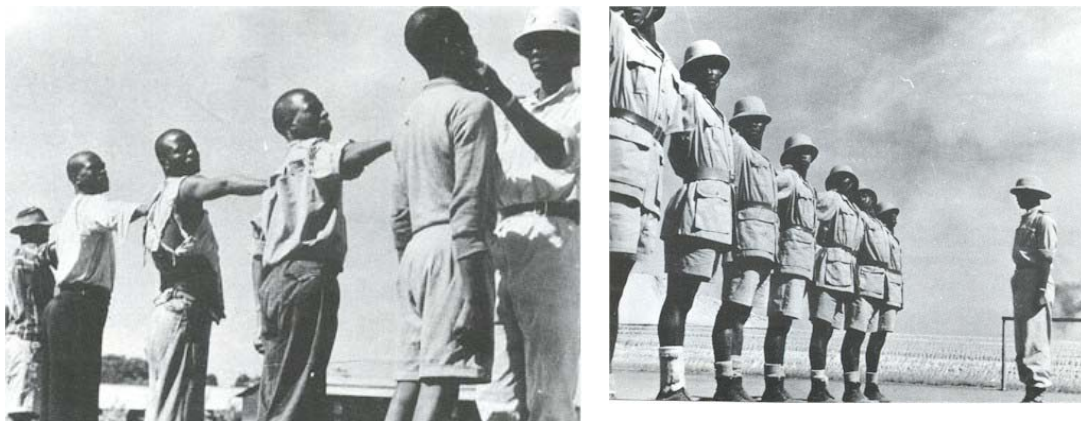
Characters such as “Winnie the WAAF” suggested that the adjustment to military rules and regulations would be difficult for women. She was significant of the complexity and ambiguity of women’s role in the military - hand in hand with the new possibilities opening up to them and their Allied counterparts, giving them the

⁴ Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. BE/1/A/1. *WAAFS*, June 1942, Vol 2, No 3, p20.

⁵ Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. BE/1/A/3. *WAAFS*, February 1944, Vol 3, No 10, p18.

chance to prove themselves, was the belief that war remained a male occupation and a clear distinction made between the roles of men and women in the military. Simultaneously this ambiguity was present in the Non-European Army Services as well.

Four battalions were created allowing African soldiers to take on security duty within South Africa, hence freeing White men to take up combat roles overseas. The Native Military Corps (NMC) was created to extend the scope of the activities of these African servicemen and they were trained in a similar manner to their Coloured and Indian counterparts for roles ranging from drivers to stretcher-bearers and cooks. The key distinction between the men of the Non-European Army Services and the regular defence force was that the former were not allowed into combat and instead given auxiliary or supporting roles.⁶



("The Raw Material" and "The Final Product". Photos taken from Ian Gleeson. *The Unknown Force*. Rivonia: Ashanti Publishing, 1994)

The images above have been taken from Ian Gleeson's book *The Unknown Force* where he gives a narrative account of the military service of African, Indian and Coloured men during the Second World War. His images are derived from the archives and are used illustratively, giving no context of their initial use during the War. The images are of recruits for the Native Military Corps (NMC) – a non-combatant division within the South African Union Defence Force reserved for African volunteers. The photograph entitled "The Raw Material" is taken at an angle and is of a line of new recruits wearing assorted ragged clothing. Each man looks to

⁶ Ian Gleeson. *The Unknown Force*. (Rivonia: Ashanti Publishing, 1994) p111.

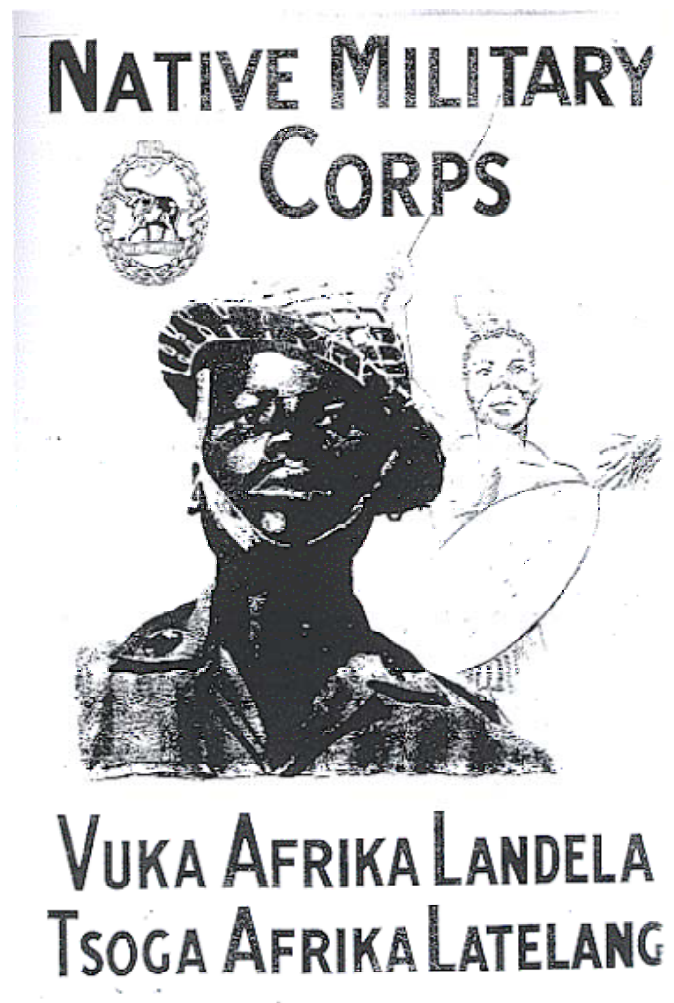
his right and his right hand is outstretched – this is a device for teaching new recruits the ideal position in which to stand when at attention. The background is that of the ocean.

The second photograph entitled “The Finished Product” appears to be the same men after their basic training. They stand against a similar background identically clad in military uniform – shorts, shirt and a pith helmet. Each man stands at attention looking to his right and a commanding officer stands facing them. This image appears valorised to an extent that the previous image is not. The camera angle is from below silhouetting the men against the sky, giving the image a heroic connotation. There is a clear indication that the second image is compared far more favourably to the first. The captions “The Raw Material” and “The Finished Product” are couched in the language of industrialism and mass production, creating a sense of dehumanisation – the men become objects in the process of transformation.

Much of popular culture dealing with the military shows the transition from the individualisation of civilian life to military life where each person functions as a part of the whole. In “The Raw Material” however, this transition takes on racial overtones. The men are not simply attired in civilian clothing but the ragged state of their clothing moves them from the realm of the ideal notion of the bourgeois civilian to notions of uncivilised which takes on both race and class connotations. The commanding officer’s examination of a recruit implies control over the actual body of the recruit – an imposition of power, which is made even stronger by the race of the commanding officer, suggesting his complicity with the dominant rule of the South African state. The control of colonialism is further enhanced by the explicit domination of the military.

The juxtaposition of the two photographs once again draws comparisons between the military and colonialism through its theme of the “civilising mission” brought about by the transformation of new recruits into the disciplined NMC. The outstretched hands of the men as a guide to their proper positions is important here as an element of control and a counterpoint to perceived anarchy, once again drawing parallels between the military and colonialism. In addition the heroism of the second photograph affirms the social order, by the imposition of military and colonial control

on the recruits, displacing any anarchistic notions and integrating them within the framework of the South African state.



(Picture taken from J. Phelago "The South African State and African Political Response to Participation in the Second World War (1939-1950)")

The image above, while not a photograph, is a theme running through photographs depicting the NEAS. It is of a recruiting poster for the Native Military Corps (NMC) and portrays an image of a Zulu warrior in the background creating a link between the duties of men in the NMC with a heroic, glorious, warrior past. This appears ironic when compared to the following photograph which is of Black men training with assegais – the traditional Zulu weapon which was useless in modern warfare and makes the link with the past seem incongruous, a representation which is strengthened by the juxtaposition of the gas masks and the assegais. The use of the assegais was due to the vehement opposition to the arming of Black men for the war.



(Photo taken from Ian Gleeson *The Unknown Force*)

While the assegais create a link to a heroic, noble past, their force is curtailed by their use in conjunction with the gas masks. The image thus serves to contain the violence implicit in the arming of Black men, retaining the control of the military and the South African state.

There existed also the image of the ideal NEAS non-combatant. The man who came to be emblematic of the ideal non-combatant NEAS soldier was Lucas Majozi, the only Black soldier to be awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Working as part of the Field Force Battalion, Majozi served as a stretcher-bearer during the battle at El Alamein. He and his fellow stretcher-bearers traversed a minefield under constant enemy mortar and machine gun fire to bring wounded men to safety. During the course of this Majozi was wounded by shrapnel but continued through the night until he collapsed from exhaustion and loss of blood. He was awarded the DCM for these actions and his portrait was painted by Neville Lewis, the first official war artist, in 1942 and currently hangs in the South African Museum of Military History.⁷ It has since become emblematic of the role played by Black soldiers during the war.

⁷ Gleeson. *The Unknown Force*. p220.



(Photos taken from Military Museum, NEAS cuttings, LQ 355.31 (68) Sou, and the *Readers' Digest Illustrated History of South Africa*. Cape Town: Readers' Digest Association South Africa, 1994 respectively.)

The image on the left however is one that I recently discovered in the Military Museum in Johannesburg. It is a newspaper photograph of Majozi and shows a strikingly different figure from the portrait on the right. Majozi is pictured in relaxed posture, sitting on a vehicle, with a smile on his face. The transformation from that picture to the one on the right is quite remarkable. Here Majozi is portrayed more distantly, looking past the observer. His figure appears against a backdrop of sky and earth giving him a heroic appearance. The Red Cross on his sleeve, symbolic of his role in saving the lives of wounded men, is prominently displayed. In this image Majozi has transformed from the individual, personable figure on the left to become almost iconic of the role which Black men were expected to play during the Second World War – idealised, self-sacrificing non-combatants.

For the White men who formed the regular Defence Force and were sent to East and later North Africa as well as Europe, propaganda made appeals to duty and conventional male masculinity. A strong visual image, both in South Africa and abroad, was of soldiers going off to fight whilst their loved ones at home look on and wave goodbye.⁸ Here the conventional division of the public and private spheres were refigured as the frontline and the home front. The image of their loved ones was the *raison d'être* men fight – it was portrayed as a defensive war where a soldier was

⁸ This is evident in the script of the South African propaganda film *The Call to Serve* courtesy of the Department of Defence Archives.

fighting to protect his way of life, home and family against the invader. This functioned in a similar manner to the way in which the notion of men braving the corrupt public sphere in order to provide for the home - being called upon to sacrifice their own morality so that the women and the home maintained an isolated sense of purity. In this instance the sacrifice may have been their own lives but it served the greater good of preventing the contamination of Nazism in the home. Fighting for their country and the patriotism it entails, thus involved a substitution of the smaller home of the individual soldier for the greater home of the country. War was also portrayed as the ultimate test of masculinity. The duty to country, family and comrades was viewed as paramount and pressure was exerted on those who failed to meet the obligations by slogans such as *You Can't Appease Your Conscience*,⁹ suggesting a sense of moral failure on their part.

The recruiting posters of men in war created an idealised vision of manhood in South Africa – strong, broad-shouldered, White men in uniform. This bore remarkable similarities to the posters of the other Allied countries as well as the Axis powers. Other than patriotism, a feeling of heroism was also evoked and figures in uniform may be seen appearing on hilltops waving flags or steadily trudging through enemy fire – never wavering from the ultimate aim of victory.

⁹ *South Africa's Yesterdays*. Joyce, P., ed. (Cape Town: Readers' Digest Association of South Africa, 1981) p303.



(Pictures taken from Crwys-Williams *A Country at War* and Readers' Digest *South Africa's Yesterdays*)

From the late nineteenth and early twentieth century from Britain to South Africa, middle class men experienced a male “private sphere” ranging from adolescence to manhood. For these boys in private schools as well as military academies, masculinity was constructed in terms of military values – honour, duty and self-sacrifice as well as the placing of emphasis on the group above “selfish” individual material pursuits. The notion of unquestioning obedience was stressed as was “fitting in”.¹⁰ In addition physical activities were given preference over intellectual pursuits as the former emphasised both the group and an acquiescence to higher authority whereas the latter was often viewed with suspicion and “‘clever men’ [were] seen as outsiders who ‘because of their cleverness are probably dishonourable and possibly cowardly.’”¹¹ To raise a generation of soldiers it was preferred that men be little given to introspection which would make them inefficient killers and question authority.

¹⁰ Michael Adams. *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) p29. Cf. also Robert G. Morrell. “White farmers, social institutions and settler masculinity in the Natal midlands, 1880-1920”. (University of Natal Durban: Unpublished PhD dissertation, 1996) for an extensive discussion on masculinity in Natal.

¹¹ Adams. *The Great Adventure.* p29.

The emphasis on sport helped create team camaraderie and created a male-only world where women were relegated to distant roles.¹² To a large extent sport helped prepare men for a life in the military – other than fostering male camaraderie, bloodsports such as hunting accustomed men to the kill and the greater the number of hunting trophies the greater the physical prowess and the masculinity of the individual. And men in turn equated war with a game and the killing of the enemy with hunting, which desensitised men to death.¹³



(Photo courtesy of Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives)

¹² Adams. *The Great Adventure*. p36-37.

¹³ Adams. *The Great Adventure*. p43.



(Photos courtesy of Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives)

These three images are of soldiers in East Africa. The first is of two soldiers standing in the bush, one holding a rifle. The pith helmet bears strong overtones of the conventional nineteenth century image of White men on safari. This imagery is strengthened by the following photographs. The portrait of a soldier standing in front of his tent, pipe in hand presents a romanticised, dashing, heroic figure reminiscent of popular characters in “boy’s own” adventures such as H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines*. Furthermore it is symbolic of the ideal White soldier advocated by the public schools and the military academies. In the subsequent image of a soldier squatting with his hunting trophies, posing with rifle in hand the parallels between war and hunting are emphasised. The common element of the three images is of a nineteenth century colonial mindset of White adventurers on safari, dominating the natural landscape. It creates a world of male camaraderie that is restricted both on the basis of gender as well as race.

For White soldiers travelling abroad, many for the first time, their representations of the places and people they saw are an important indication of their state of mind

regarding different cultures. The following are images taken by soldiers in North Africa, in particular Egypt.



(Photo courtesy of Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives)

The depiction of Egypt is one that appears strongly influenced by postcard images of the country existing in the popular imagination. Actually, in many instances in the photo album, postcards actually stood in for direct representations of what the soldier had seen. They were placed in the album alongside photographs taken of similar scenes. This suggests that Egypt already symbolised something which the photographs then captured, the emphasis on ancient monuments are indicative of a perception of Egypt in terms of a mythical past, rather than an attempt to deal with the contemporary. The images taken and their similarities to the postcards suggest that the photographer had already in mind a vision of the mythical Egypt which his images merely reaffirmed.¹⁴ The view of Egypt is thus a conservative one, seeing it through the lens of the past.

The following images are what I call “Lawrence of Arabia” photographs. Strongly stereotypical and romanticised, they emphasise an unchanging view of Egypt through their use of Arabs in traditional dress, riding camels in the desert. These images evoke notions of British exploration and colonialism in North Africa – here the

¹⁴ Peter D. Osborne. *Travelling Light – photography, travel and visual culture*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) p22, 83.

weight is not on the White hunter as with the earlier East African images, but on the White adventurer and explorer.



(Photos courtesy of Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives)

The following photographs taken from the same album are a depiction of Egyptians engaging in everyday tasks. They form part of a sequence of images depicting similar subject matter and bear a strong similarity to anthropological images taken during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By not naming the subjects, their main effect is of creating a nameless “other”. The three images of a man using a spinning wheel and of two street barbers suggest a “pre-industrial” quality and by inference creates a contrast with the photographer who represents the industrialised, modern West.¹⁵ Egyptian people are portrayed as quaint, exotic, representative of a pre-industrial past, captured by the camera, a feature of European modernity. The images thus by creating a sense of the “other” produce a gulf between the subjects and the photographer.

Photographs taken by White South African soldiers during the Second World War thus contain a strong conservatism in terms of both race and gender. They suggest a world of male ritual and bonding with little place for women. At the same time this

¹⁵ Brian Street. “British Popular Anthropology: Exhibiting and Photographing the Other” in *Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920*. Edwards, E., ed. (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992) p123.

world is strongly influenced by colonialism through its use of imagery of hunting and romantic adventure, as well as its depiction of the “non-Western” world.

In 1943 a shift occurred in the support of the war. There were difficulties on the home front in terms of rationing, blackouts and the constant fear of the rise of National Socialism within the country. For women on the home front, many with male family members on the front lines being taken prisoner-of-war or killed, and having to cope with their new roles in the work place and as heads of the family, there was a drop in enthusiasm for a war which had been going on for almost four years with little end in sight. A shortfall in recruitment of women in the Auxiliary Services was one of the signs of the malaise termed “war weariness”, leading to a change in recruiting policy for women, which was to take on a note of greater personal interaction between recruiter and prospective recruit and the former had to take into account the individual needs of the recruit.¹⁶ This presents a more clinical and manipulative vision of recruiting where broad sweeping statements such as “fighting the good fight” were no longer applicable. However war weariness remained a strong feature of the second half of the war, already limiting the possibility for lasting social change.

As the war neared its end and there was the prospect of thousands of men returning from the front lines, propaganda aimed at women began to take on a more conservative note. The war was portrayed as having had a much harsher effect on men on the front lines than on women on the home front – resulting in different experiences and outlooks on the world.¹⁷ The experiences of men on the front lines and its accompanying psychological effects were something of which women were expected to have little comprehension. Men were perceived as having made far more sacrifices than women due to injury, imprisonment and the constant threat of death in combat. For their part women were expected to be patient and understanding, putting

¹⁶ Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. W.A.D.C. Box 11, Ref D.R. (W) F27, p6.

¹⁷ Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. *The Women's Auxiliary*, Issue 45, May 1944, p65.

their own needs on hold as well as the progress they had made, in order to create a safe, stable environment allowing men to recuperate from their experiences.¹⁸

For many women after six years of war and the responsibility of being the sole breadwinner there was nostalgia for a return to the pre-war status quo and a resumption of their place in the home. In addition the propaganda aimed at women from the outset of war was inherently conservative, occurring within a patriarchal framework which, to a great extent, shaped women's responses. South African propaganda made an appeal to the family where Smuts and his wife, affectionately known as "Ouma", were portrayed as the heads of the family.¹⁹ Women's efforts during the war were portrayed as a means of preserving the social and patriarchal order of the South African state, which effectively served to limit the possibilities created by the war – evident in the visual images of the time. Simultaneously, White South African women unlike their counterparts in the former colonies of Australia, Canada and even the United States, formed part of a White minority with an overwhelming Black majority which brought into play the notion of women as defenders of the purity of the White race. This served to some extent to compel them to form part of a unified White solidarity and curbed the potential of the war in creating change in race and gender roles.²⁰

The proximity with which the NEAS worked to the "regular" troops and the experiences they shared allowed for the fostering of cross-racial understanding. However, the situation was not without its problems. There was a general sense that the NEAS was more undisciplined than the rest of the Union Defence Force. Their misconduct was believed to be so serious that there was the suggestion of withdrawing them from service overseas.²¹ Ranging from misdemeanours such as petty theft and intoxication while on duty, to the more serious offences of rape, murder, unrest and riots, the latter while occurring in few numbers, were given great attention and seen as an indictment on the entire NEAS system.²²

¹⁸ Documentation Centre – Department of Defence Archives. *The Women's Auxiliary*, Issue 54, February 1945, p29.

¹⁹ Chetty. "Gender Under Fire." p 72.

²⁰ My thanks to Dr. Catherine Burns for her suggestions.

²¹ Gleeson. *The Unknown Force*. p162.

²² Gleeson. *The Unknown Force*. p162.

While some of the disciplinary issues could be attributed to the poor screening process of recruits, the gap in communication between members of the NEAS and White officers and a lack of “service tradition” where new recruits could be inculcated with the military values of those serving before them, many of the more serious incidences of misconduct was related to the policy of dilution. Dilution became an official policy by the end of 1941 and was put into action in 1942 due to a shortage of manpower. It was created to put NEAS personnel in all non-combatant posts in previously White units, freeing the men who had previously occupied the posts for combat. To do this it broke up existing NEAS units and employed those servicemen in units both domestically and in North Africa in an enormous variety of support roles ranging from cooks to drivers, mechanics to stretcher-bearers.²³ Despite the implementation of this policy there was concern of the:

...negative effect impassive and prejudiced officers and NCOs would have...non-white recruits, often with little or no military background, and with inferior education and training, were to be thrown in at the deep end with white servicemen who had already been “through the mill”...They had not been adequately trained to meet the standard for frontline units.²⁴

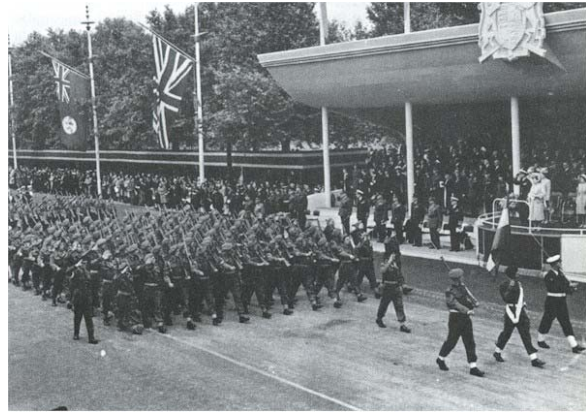
The dilution policy and the subsequent closeness with which the two groups in the same units worked also compounded the problem. Facing the same dangers in similar circumstances led to a questioning of the unequal privileges afforded the White members of the UDF in terms of pay, leave and other features. This discrimination caused no small amount of resentment and was responsible for many of the disciplinary problems arising from the ranks of the NEAS.²⁵ Working together for a common cause - democracy – and facing common war hazards thus not only had the effect of fostering mutual respect but also led to a questioning on the part of the NEAS troops of the discrimination within the South African military system – and perhaps within South African society as a whole.

However, at the end of the war, returning NEAS soldiers who were honoured in a special parade in Johannesburg found a different life from that for which they had fought.

²³ Gleeson. *The Unknown Force*. p138.

²⁴ Gleeson. *The Unknown Force*. p139.

²⁵ Gleeson. *The Unknown Force*. p164.



(Parades in Johannesburg and London. Photos taken from Ian Gleeson. *The Unknown Force*. Rivonia: Ashanti Publishing, 1994)

The photographs above take on a note of irony – the distinctions and accolades given to the NEAS both domestically and internationally signalled a change for the better but this was not to be. Many had hoped that their efforts in the war had demonstrated their capabilities but they were unable to capitalise on this. The only job opportunities available were for unskilled labourers. Schemes to train Black ex-servicemen as cooks or waiters only lasted for a short period. In addition grants and loans for a small amount were only approved should the returning soldier demonstrate financial loss incurred as a result of military duty. Furthermore:

Both a disability pension and a grant were available, but the scales were low and the medical and social welfare structures, particularly in rural areas, were inadequate. An ex-soldier who had employment and lived more than two miles from his workplace was entitled to a bicycle. All of them received a suit of clothing, made of the same material as the khaki army uniform, only with a civilian cut.²⁶

Perhaps most painful was the reception they received when returning home with a bicycle as compensation and the taunt: “Is this what you fought for?”²⁷ It was clear how Black masculinity was perceived by the South African state: these men became “boys” again on their return to the White nation state of their birth.

White soldiers, on the other hand received housing subsidies and access to tertiary education. Their ability to ascend a colour and racial ladder was assured by their war involvement, and their pre-eminent position at the apex of gender, race and class power in South Africa was both literally and discursively cemented. The great difference in compensation accorded the different race groups despite all men facing the same hardships and dangers of war, compounded the racial inequality ex-soldiers

²⁶ Gleeson. *The Unknown Force*. p264-265.

²⁷ Gleeson. *The Unknown Force*. p264.

experienced on their return. The ability of working class White ex-soldiers to gain access to their own homes and a university education – made possible by the South African state – may have helped reinforce a racial as well as a class distinction where even previously working class White families were given the opportunity to adopt a middle class lifestyle whereas the conditions for ex-Black soldiers remained the same – and were actually worsened once the full effects of Apartheid took hold.

The South African efforts in the Second World War, particularly in opposition to the rise of fascism both domestically and internationally, suggested that the rise of the Apartheid state would hardly be unopposed. Many returning White ex-servicemen who had fought against fascism in the European theatre of war were not likely to support the infringements on democracy in their own country. The spark that ignited protest and led to the formation of the Torch Commando was the disenfranchisement of Coloured voters in the Cape. The mobilisation of ex-servicemen on this issue was however, not due to racial sympathy but to what they perceived as an attack on the constitution of South Africa. In a speech at a rally outside City Hall in Johannesburg, the war hero “Sailor” Malan made reference to the ideals for which the Second World War was fought:

The strength of this gathering is evidence that the men and women who fought in the war for freedom still cherish what they fought for. We are determined not to be denied the fruits of that victory. It is good to see this support in protest against the rape of the Constitution and the attack on our rights and liberties as free men. In Abyssinia, at Alamein and a score of bloody campaigns we won the right to a voice in our country’s affairs...²⁸

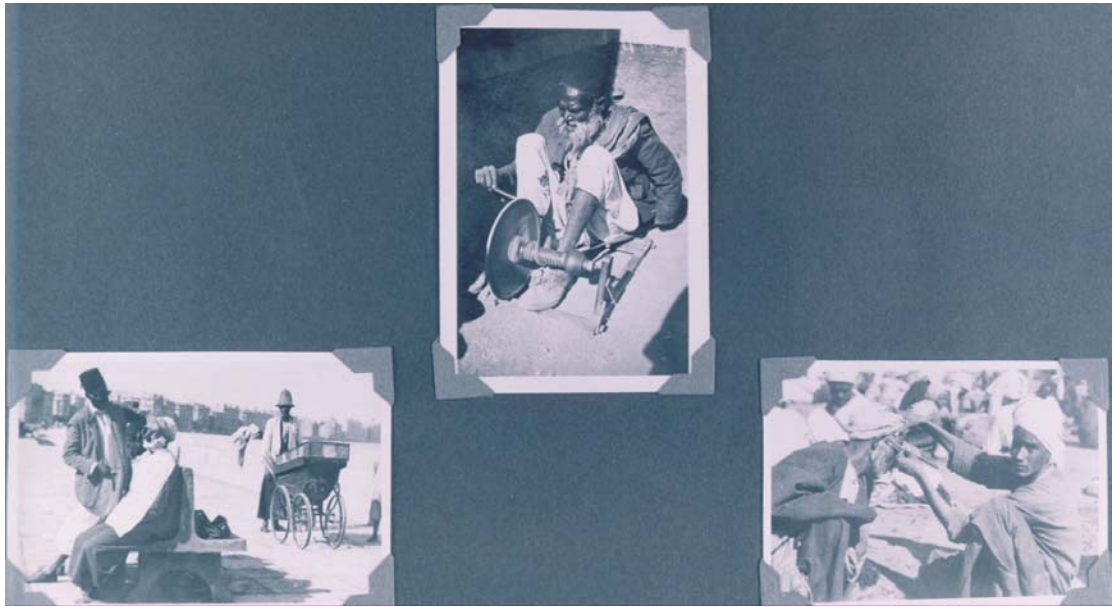
However, the Torch Commando did not actually take a stand against the increasingly repressive racial legislation being passed by the Apartheid state. Standing on the brink of a new way forward for South Africa the Torch Commando became very much a product of its time when it refused to allow Coloured ex-servicemen into its ranks and did not take a stand on African rights. Thus despite a membership that peaked at a quarter of a million in 1952, the Torch Commando failed to create any significant change and the movement eventually passed into oblivion.²⁹ Thus despite the organisation being composed of ex-servicemen who had fought fascism in the war, it was the ideal of democracy rather than any particular commitment to non-

²⁸ Olive Walker. *Sailor Malan: A Biography*. (London: Cassell and Co Ltd, 1953) p162-164.

²⁹ *Reader’s Digest Illustrated History of South Africa – The Real Story*. Dougie Oakes, ed., Cape Town: The Reader’s Digest Association of South Africa, 1995) p395.

racism that motivated them. However, since one cannot have a genuine democracy in the presence of discrimination and the organisation was unable to make an effective decision on the latter, it lost the potential for thwarting the path that the Apartheid state was taking.

While the Second World War opened up new windows of opportunity for South African society in terms of race and gender, giving a glimpse of another way forward for the country and suggesting a break between segregation which had come before and apartheid which came after, this occurred within a limited framework. From the outset of the war it was apparent that there was a certain ambiguity evident in the creation of new race and gender roles. This is particularly evident in the images of the era which, although depicting the new opportunities and activities of White men and women as well as Black men in military service, did so by using pre-war and even colonial imagery. This served to limit the possibilities created by the war from the outset and ultimately conservatism won the day and, instead of moving forward and taking its place as a member of the nations of the world, South Africa retreated into isolation, becoming a pariah, due to its growing repression of significant numbers of its population – people who had contributed to the struggle against fascism in the Second World War now found it in their own country.



[Lt Eaton Image]

