

## In Memoriam: Deon Visser 1953-2016



We learned with great sadness that Lieutenant Colonel Deon Visser, who joined the Military Academy community in 1986, passed away on 23 May 2016. Deon was a close colleague, a kind and loyal friend, a respected military officer, and an esteemed military historian. He was these things to all who knew him.

Deon Visser was born in Pofadder in the Northern Cape and he kept the often sage, always clever, philosophy of those dry parts. He matriculated in 1971 at Hoerskool Nuwerus and in 1972, as a national serviceman, underwent military training at the Army Gymnasium, at 1 SAI and 6 SAI. His B-studies then followed in quick succession. He completed a BA degree in 1975 and a BA Hons with distinction in the following year. He enlisted into the Permanent Force on 7 January 1977 and was appointed as a military archivist at the Military Information Bureau in Pretoria. He continued his studies on a part-time basis through the University of Pretoria and, in 1983, completed an MA in

History. On 1 May 1984, he accepted an appointment as a chief museumologist at the Museum for the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein before his appointment on 1 April 1986 as a senior lecturer in Military History at the Military Academy. He was promoted to associate professor of Military History in 2006 and retired at the end of June 2013.

Professionally, Deon leaves a legacy in many spheres. The first was in his scholarship of teaching. He understood the importance of educating military officers and of the foundational grounding young officers should have in military history and military theory. Over his twenty-seven years at the Military Academy, he taught at all levels, from the first year through to the PhD. Literally hundreds, if not thousands, of students passed through his classes. He was a fair and generous lecturer. He was also one that knew where the plumb line is and he always applied the standard. For this he was respected and the outpouring on Facebook following the notice of his passing to higher service, messages posted by former students and colleagues, is testament to the high regard and esteem in which he is held.

Deon also recognised the important interface between his teaching and his research and that, at university level at least, success in one is mutually dependent on the other. His first journal article was published in 1978, some 38 years ago. He started early and many publications followed. He delivered important contributions in particularly two key areas. The first of these was in the genre of unit or regimental history. This started with the 1978 article, in *Militaria*, on “Die Middellandse Regiment”, which led to a full-blown MA thesis (1983) on the vicissitudes of the same regiment during the Second World War. His interest in unit history eventually led in 2000 to his doctoral

dissertation on the history of the Military Academy, which was also published as a *Supplementa to Scientia Militaria* in that year. This led seamlessly to his second key interest - military education and the making of military officers. A cursory internet search renders a list of articles that followed his PhD, many of which are cited internationally. Deon hoped to translate his doctoral study into English, update it from 1990, and publish the whole as an Academy history. Sadly this was not done.

With these interests, Deon was always a keen and active member of the Military Academy community. He was a stalwart in the faculty, serving at different times as head of the Department of Military History, as chair of the School for Security and Africa Studies, as chair of the Faculty Research Committee, and on various Stellenbosch University structures. He was the chairman of the Military Academy Rugby Club for many years too, at a time when the Military Academy entered teams into various rugby leagues.

On a more personal level Deon was a close colleague and, in addition to our work in the faculty, we shared common roots, at the Military Archives and with *Militaria*. In 1996, he was part of our small team that saw the transfer of that journal to our faculty and played a key part in its accreditation with effect from 2000. I recall many things with great nostalgia: the trip we made in 1998, following Roberts's advance up the railway line to Bloemfontein, visiting all of the blockhouses along the way; the 2003 conference of the Society of Military History in Madison, where we encountered an awful local brew called "Spotted Cow"; the wisdom imparted on a daily basis, as he nestled back in his chair and sucked on his pipe.

Deon was a true leader, one with a quiet determination. Much of this took place out of the public eye. He played a critical part in grooming the younger, newly-appointed members of the faculty and the wider unit. Sensitive to the links between the past and the present he discussed, with whom ever entered his office, the major processes of change that occurred over the past decades and the importance of our work at the Military Academy and the importance of doing it properly. He was a man for decorum, but also someone willing to draw a cork when the right opportunity offered.

*Ian van der Waag*