Review article

LEGISLATIVE DISCONNECT OR INSTITUTIONAL GATEKEEPING? CHALLENGES OF RESEARCHING SOUTH AFRICA'S MILITARY PAST

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Abstract

The Department of Defence Archive in Pretoria is the repository of all military documents generated by the Union Defence Force, the South African Defence Force and the South African National Defence Force. This makes it the foremost source of primary information for researchers of South African military history. However, an almost total ban on access to archival documents from 1 January 1970 onwards complicates research into later periods. In fact, anyone researching post-1970 military-related topics has to apply for access to archival documents through the Promotion of Access to Information Act. The traditional weapon in the armoury of the historian – the systematic trawling of archives – is thereby negated, while the methodology of post-1970 historical research differs significantly from commonly accepted historical practices. Finding aids, the only access route to classified information in this analogue archive, offer only the briefest descriptions of the content of files, and researchers need almost esoteric intuition to identify documents that are even remotely relevant to their research. Additionally, a fee is payable for declassification, and the process can take several months to complete. This review article reports on the theoretical workings of the Promotion of Access to Information Act, and uses an actual research example as a case study to illustrate the practical implications of conducting research at the Department of Defence Archive in South Africa based on classified military documentation.

Keywords: Department of Defence (DoD) Archive, military archives, classified information, Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA), Defence Act, gatekeeper mentality

Introduction

Gary Baines cautions that war carries with it an inherent obligation of remembrance. This is especially true, since the residual effects of wars are known to affect societies long after the cessation of hostilities. The obligation to remember, as Baines correctly points out, however, comes with a forewarning. It is more often than not the silence and disinterest of the majority of society that sanctions the few to record the collective past.[3]

He thus recommends that the historian interested in South Africa's so-called 'Border War' – and by inference the broader topic of the War for Southern Africa – should critically engage with the unstable and dynamic power relationships that underpin the collective memory of this turbulent time. As such, three pertinent questions confront the researcher interested in South African military affairs:

- Who are the 'few' sanctioned by society to record the collective military past?
- In which way do they record the military past?
- What are the dominant meanings they ascribe to the military past?[4]

The historiography surrounding the War for Southern Africa passed through five distinct phases that span the levels of war in their methodological approach. The five phases identified by Ian van der Waag and Deon Visser are:

- the so-called 'initial accounts', mostly written by journalists;
- official, government-sanctioned histories;
- campaign or battlefield histories, usually compiled under government auspices;
- regimental histories, often written from within a particular unit; and
- personal accounts or memoirs.

These phases differ vastly from one another in terms of both who writes the history and the specific approach he or she follows. As a result, the methodological approach of each of these phases to record the collective past and build on the historiography of the War for Southern Africa remains quite distinct.[5] The phases exhibit something of a knee-jerk reaction, with governments dissatisfied with the popular images projected by journalists, resulting in their own, officially sanctioned, versions. Individual units frequently feel slighted by official accounts, and write their own regimental histories, which in turn often negate the role of the individual, leading to memoirs. Each of these phases however has a clear motive. The distinction between the phases is exacerbated by the authors associated with the identified phases, and indeed their respective approaches to the phases. According to André Wessels, the vast majority of authors of Border War literature are amateur or popular historians or journalists, with no real historical training or background, a distinct disregard for archival research, and a predominant emphasis on the commercial or popular markets in South Africa. As a mnemonic community of sorts, these authors mainly comprise former national service members and retired generals, with only a small number of trained professional historians involved in studying the broader course of the War.[6]
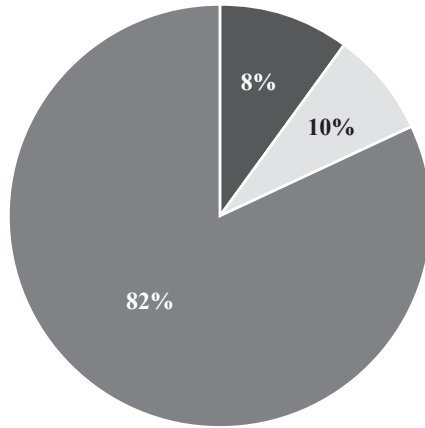
Despite the above-mentioned attempts, Van der Waag and Visser maintain that the broader history of the War for Southern Africa – and by inference South African military history to a large extent – remains generally unwritten due to several reasons. The principal reasons proposed for this apathy are that "[t]oo little time has lapsed, emotions run high and [the] wounds inflicted are painful, exposed, and they refuse to heal."[7] Alarmingly, this state of affairs continues to persist despite the wealth of primary

sources preserved at the Department of Defence (DoD) Archive in Pretoria. This point has more recently been reaffirmed by scholars such as Abel Esterhuyse, Benjamin Mokoena and Lindy Heinecken.[8] The argument carried by Van der Waag and Visser that "[t]here is hardly an aspect of this history that cannot be interrogated and, as numerous researchers find, query opens the trapdoor to a vast, sunken, documentary labyrinth of a virtually forgotten past" unfortunately comes with somewhat of a caveat.[9] While the DoD Archive indeed contains a vast amount of primary sources documenting the history of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) and its predecessors, access to the majority of its archival holdings remains restricted – thereby leaving the proverbial trapdoor only partially open to researchers.

The aim of the study on which this article reports, was to examine the theoretical workings of the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) critically against the backdrop of conducting research at the DoD Archive in South Africa based on classified military documentation. The article first provides a broad overview of the archival holdings of the DoD Archive, before discussing the relevant national and departmental legislation and regulatory frameworks that govern access to classified information. An actual research example is then used as a case study to illustrate the practical implications of conducting research into classified military documentation at the DoD Archive. The article concludes with several proposals offered by the authors to address the most pressing challenges in conducting research into classified material at the DoD Archive.

The DoD Archive – a tentative breakdown of the archival holdings

The DoD Archive in Pretoria, also known as the DoD Documentation Centre, is the custodian of all military documents generated by the DoD since the inception of the department in 1912.[10] The archive contains extremely valuable primary sources, numbering some 3 038 archival groups and comprising nearly 38 linear kilometres of archival material. Supplemental to this, the DoD Archive also preserves the personnel records of former soldiers, which amounts to another 30 odd linear kilometres of material. All told, the holdings of the DoD Archive thus total some 68 linear kilometres. The archival material naturally details South Africa's military past over the preceding century (1912-2020), and includes valuable documentation on the country's participation in both world wars, the Korean War, as well as the broader ambit of the so-called War for Southern Africa (see Graph 1).[11] The DoD Archive is thus the first port of call for both professional and amateur researchers of South African military history.
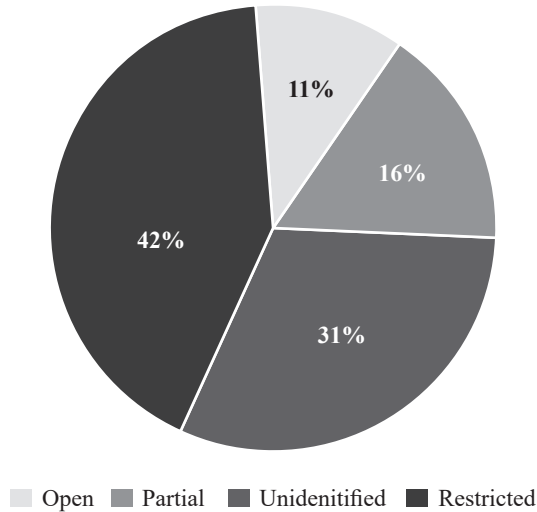
Before 1950 ▫ **1950-1965** ▪ **War for Southern Africa (1966-1989)**

Graph 1: Approximate periodic breakdown of the holdings of the DoD Archive[12]

Records in the DoD Archive generally fall into two distinct categories – classified and declassified material. The former is subdivided into top secret, secret, classified, and restricted documents. All records in the DoD Archive relating to military operations and administrative matters created up to and including 31 December 1969 are deemed open and declassified, and are thus automatically available to researchers. This includes all archives related to the establishment of the Union Defence Force (UDF), both world wars, and the Korean War. A further exception is made for all correspondence files classified as restricted that were created up to and including 31 December 1975. All archival documents falling outside these periods, regardless of their security classifications are thus automatically deemed classified and therefore largely inaccessible to researchers.[13]

Unfortunately, such broad statements are in fact meaningless, and need clarification in order to make sense of the amount of material that is indeed classified or declassified. An exploratory breakdown of the actual accessibility of the archival collections housed at the DoD Archive, based on the so-called archival Master List and its related metadata, yields several important statistics (see Graph 2). At a cursory glance, at least 42% of the archival collections are classified and thus outright restricted and only 11% deemed declassified and open to researchers. A further 16% of the archival collections contain documents that fall both within and outside the classified periods. Astonishingly, the archival Master List fails to identify the individual periods of nearly 31% of the archival collections.[14]

Graph 2: Tentative accessibility of the archival collections housed at the DoD Archive[15]

A reworking of some of the statistics however allows for a more refined appreciation. Based on the fact that the majority of the archival collections with unidentified periods indeed contain primary material relating to the broader War for Southern Africa, at least 65–70% of the overall archival collections are deemed classified with restricted access. Moreover, this number can be inflated to roughly 80% when the status of the archival collections falling into the partial period is reworked in terms of classified or declassified material. The reworked statistics – save for a few per cent on either side – in fact correlate with those of Van der Waag and Visser expressed in Graph 1. Researchers are thus only assured of immediate access to an estimated 20% of the primary sources housed within the DoD Archive. Access to the remaining 80% of classified archival material is principally regulated by the provisions of the PAIA, as well as other legislative and regulatory frameworks.

These figures stand in stark contrast to those proposed by Wessels in 2017. While Wessels obtained his information from a former director of the DoD Archive as far back as 2013, the statistics Wessels quoted simply do not add up – especially not when compared to the aforementioned graphs and statistics. Wessels suggests:

> [A]pproximately 750 000 of the some seven million records kept … deal with the years of conflict, 1966 to 1989, and … approximately 45% have already been declassified … [A] total of probably more than 50 million pages of archival material is already available[16]

It is impossible for 38 linear kilometres of documents to add up to a mere seven million records. Moreover, the vast majority of the archival holdings – far in excess of the quoted 750 000 records – in fact deal with the broader War for Southern Africa. While Wessels cannot be blamed for the statistical errors he quoted in his article, it becomes undeniably clear that even within the DoD Archive, there was, and still is, no real consensus over the breakdown or the accessibility of its archival holdings.

Accessing classified military information: legislation and procedures

When one accepts our argument above, that the vast majority of the archival material preserved at the DoD Archive is in fact restricted, it is important to note that there are, however, legal mechanisms and administrative procedures in place to govern and facilitate access to this archival material. Three legal documents underpin the continued debate on access to classified military documentation held by the DoD Archive, and these deserve brief mention.

First and foremost, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), addresses several key aspects that form the foundation of any discussion of access to information in general. Section 32 of the Constitution states in no uncertain terms that all South Africans have the inherent right to access any information held by the state. Moreover, section 32 maintains that national legislation must be enacted to give effect to the inherent right of access to information.[17]

Second, the South African Defence Act (No. 42 of 2002) provides key insights about the mandate of the DoD Archive, with specific provisions on the accessibility of information preserved at the archive. Section 83 of the act specifically deals with the 'protection of defence assets'. The section states that the DoD Archive exists under the provisions of the National Archives of South Africa Act (No. 43 of 1996), albeit with a number of exceptions. First, the DoD Archive falls under the management and care of the DoD, and no record preserved in this archive may be transferred to the National Archives.[18] Section 83 of the act further regulates that, according to the provisions of the PAIA:

> No record may be available for public access until a period of 20 years has elapsed since the end of the year in which the record came into existence, which period may be extended by the Minister in the interests of national security; access to records which have been in existence for less than 20 years can only be obtained subject to such conditions as may be determined by the Secretary for Defence.[19]

Section 83 of the Defence Act seems to imply a blanket declassification protocol. Unless the Minister extends the 20-year period, the Defence Act does not indicate any reason why documents cannot summarily be declassified after the required time had lapsed. The potential implication for researchers is considerable: after 20 years, the Defence Act suggests that the onus shifts from the researcher motivating why access to a specific document *should be given*, to the DoD motivating why access *should be denied*.

This concept dovetails neatly with the third legislative document that regulates access to classified documents, the PAIA.

Act 2 of 2000, the PAIA, provides clear guidelines on which grounds the DoD may refuse access to archival documents preserved in the DoD Archive. Section 41 of the act, in particular, contains specific provisions on the 'defence, security and international relations of the Republic'. The section asserts that the information officer of a public body can refuse a request for access to documentation held by the body, especially if its disclosure could adversely affect the defence, security and international relations of the Republic. In such an event, the information officer needs to provide specific reasons – as per the specifications of section 41 – why the access to documentation is refused. The section also specifies that, in instances where the DoD may choose to refuse access to classified information, whether such information indeed exists or not, the information officer may refuse to either confirm or deny the existence or non-existence of such records. The section does, however, state that the requester may lodge an internal appeal or even lodge an application with a court against the refusal of access by the state.[20]

The DoD regularly publishes its own PAIA Manual, which is available on the department's official website. The aim of the PAIA Manual (the Manual) is to:

> [E]nable any member of the public to view the description of the records in the possession of the Department of Defence and [the Manual] contains procedures on how to obtain the information/records whether automatically available or not.[21]

The Manual also outlines the theoretical process of gaining access to classified archival material (see Diagram 1).

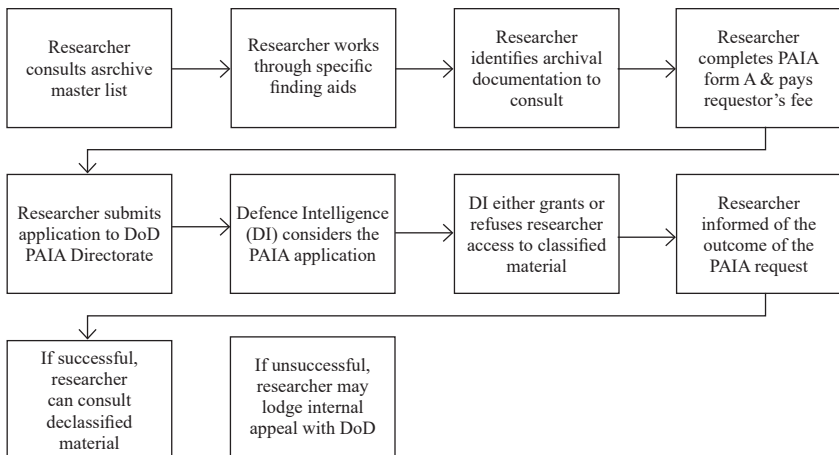| Researcher consults asrchive master list	Researcher works through specific finding aids	Researcher identifies archival documentation to consult	Researcher completes PAIA form A & pays requestor's fee
Researcher submits application to DoD PAIA Directorate	Defence Intelligence (DI) considers the PAIA application	DI either grants or refuses researcher access to classified material	Researcher informed of the outcome of the PAIA request
If successful, researcher can consult declassified material	If unsuccessful, researcher may lodge internal appeal with DoD		

Diagram 1: Theoretical process of accessing classified material in the DoD Archive

The DoD PAIA Manual furthermore lists all categories of records automatically available to researchers for inspection and copying. This list also includes a number of official DoD publications, including the Defence Act (2002), the White Paper on National Defence for the Republic of South Africa May (1996), DoD instructions, policies, annual reports, strategic plans and information bulletins that are available to researchers for perusal. A number of corporate communication publications are also automatically available. The Manual further lists well over 100 separate military operations, whose documentation is automatically available to researchers for perusal. Under each individual operation, the file reference of the applicable letter from Defence Intelligence authorising the release of the files is mentioned, although the actual extent of material declassified is not mentioned. It is, however, unclear whether these letters are in fact available for consultation to both researchers and the staff in the Reading Room. If not, then this information in the Manual remains rather irrelevant, as one would still need to determine the location and extent of these documents within the broader archive.[22]

There is also no single list available at the DoD Archive that catalogues all declassified archival material. Due to questionable administration, or perhaps even muddled bureaucracy, researchers thus run the risk of unknowingly applying for the declassifying of a document, when such a document may already be declassified and freely available to consult. Alarmingly, researchers are thus at the complete mercy of the Reading Room staff who, as a result of understaffing, may or may not draw the relevant material in order to establish whether a document is in fact declassified before the PAIA route is followed. This carries with it both ethical considerations and financial implications.

Table 1: Index to the DoD filing system[23]

File reference	Description
100	**PERSONNEL** – the series of records consists of references, which cover the full spectrum of human resource management in the DoD. This includes recruitment, appointment and employment, education, training and development; career planning, remuneration and performance assessment; SANDF ranks and rank structures, equal opportunities and affirmative action matters; discipline, military justice and labour relations; termination of service, discharge and pension matters.
200	**INTELLIGENCE** – the series of records pertains to military intelligence. This includes all military intelligence policies, security of persons, information and facilities; the collection of information through various means; intelligence appreciations, forecasts of threats, intelligence reports and interdepartmental intelligence affairs.

300	**OPERATIONS** – the series refers to the records on military operations. It covers a wide array of topics, including strategic planning and appreciations; order of battle, mobilisation and demobilisation, conventional and unconventional warfare as well as specific operations; air and maritime defence; search and rescue operations and training exercises; assistance to and co-operation with other institutions and countries.
400	**LOGISTICS** – the series of records includes all matters related to the logistics of the DoD. In this widest sense, it entails the aspects of military operations dealing with research, design and development, acquisition, storage, distribution, maintenance, evacuation and disposal of material; acquisition or erection, maintenance, operation and disposal of facilities; as well as acquisition or provision of services.
500	**DEPARTMENTAL MANAGEMENT** – this is a comprehensive series encompassing all departmental management aspects. These include command and control; organisational control including the establishment and/ or disestablishment of force structure elements; the DoD budget and auditing; ceremonial and heritage matters; records management; and information, communication and technology systems of the DoD.

Researchers are also required to make use of archival finding aids to locate the information they are looking for in the DoD Archive. These lists are all available in paper format, with no electronic database available to expedite research or simply pinpoint information. Generally speaking, each archival group has its own finding aid. The information listed in the finding aid thus reflects the actual information preserved in each archival group. Moreover, each document listed in a finding aid has accompanying metadata, which includes a unique file reference (see Table 1) as well as a brief description of the document and its date range. Unfortunately, file references are not uniformly used across the defence force, and have changed considerably during the past century. Researchers have no choice but to consult these lists in order to identify the particular records they require. The finding aids, unsurprisingly, do not indicate the status of a document in terms of its classification. Simply put, there is thus no easy way to locate the information in the DoD Archive that falls into the classified period.

32 Battalion – A case study on contemporary military research

A case study is an effective way of testing the theories, outlined in the first part of this article, in practice. To this end, a unit like 32 Battalion, which was involved in the Border War for its entire duration, makes an ideal topic.

Master List

Any researcher who has visited the DoD Archive will know that the starting point for a new research project is the Master List – essentially a directory of the finding aids available at the archive. The Master List contains the names and abbreviations of archival groups, along with a host of accompanying metadata, such as physical extent and period covered. Fortunately, this list is declassified and completely accessible. Researchers can thus identify which finding aids they would like to consult. Unfortunately, this simple process is far more complicated than it seems at first. In the case of 32 Battalion, the obvious finding aids to consult are the actual 32 Battalion archival groups. These five groups contain 629 boxes, or just under 70 linear meters, of documents. However, anyone with a basic knowledge of the Border War, willing to consult all 178 pages of the Master List, will readily be able to identify at least 3 000 additional boxes (333 linear meters) that may contain relevant information. Table 2 indicates the archival groups that are immediately identifiable with 32 Battalion, as they are found in the List of Lists.

Table 2: Archival groups immediately identifiable with 32 Battalion

Archival group	Boxes	Dates
1 Military area	191	1965–1979
1 Military area	236	1959–1976
1 Military area	13	1975–1979
1 Military area sector 20	246	1977–1987
101 Task force	17	1974–1977
101 Task force	175	1975–1977
2 Military area	275	1973–1978
32 Battalion	135	1977–1989
32 Battalion	126	1976–1989
32 Battalion	167	1979–1988
32 Battalion	68	1976–1979
32 Battalion	133	1977–1988
Operation Protea	29	1980–1981
Operation Savannah	5	N/A
Savannah	29	N/A
Sector 10	559	1976–1987
Sector 10 Headquarters Intelligence	108	1979–1989
Sector 10 Headquarters	15	1977–1989
Sector 10 Headquarters	344	1977–1989

Sector 10 Operations	438	N/A
Sector 20	98	1977–1989
Sector 20	213	1977–1989
Sector 20 Headquarters	15	1977–1989
Sector 20 Headquarters Intelligence	60	1980–1989
Sector 20 Headquarters	76	1974–1989
TOTAL	**3 771**	

Secondary sources on 32 Battalion can easily fill a shelf in a researcher's library. Few of these, however, are useful in leading a researcher to primary sources. Piet Nortje's two volumes on 32 Battalion[24] are notable exceptions for providing a list of archival documents that the author consulted, even though there is no traceable reference method. Consulting these and other secondary sources soon leads the researcher to the realisation that the DoD Archive has much more information about 32 Battalion than the initial impression from the List of Lists. Table 3 contains a list of archival groups that also contain documents relating to 32 Battalion, based on references from secondary sources and links found in the more obvious groups.

Table 3: Supplementary archival groups related to 32 Battalion

Archival group	Boxes	Dates
Chief of Staff Operations Group 1	97	1966–1977
Military Intelligence Division Group 8	43	1977–1983
Sector 10 Training Unit Group 3	62	1982–1989
Sector 20 Headquarters Itsa	26	1980–1989
South West Africa Command Headquarters	1 133	N/A
South West Africa Command Headquarters Operations	19	1975–1978
South West Africa Territory Force Hq Sub Div Count Int	131	N/A
South West Africa Headquarters Intelligence	143	1969–1980
South West Africa Territory Force Headquarters Intelligence	246	1978–1989
South West Africa Territory Force Headquarters Intelligence Group 3	48	N/A
South West Africa Territory Force Headquarters Operation	135	N/A
South West Africa Territory Force Headquarters Comops Battalion	157	N/A
Oelschig Collection	16	1992–1994
TOTAL	**2 256**	

Combining the 2 256 boxes, or 250 linear meters, of documents in Table 3 with those in Table 2, leaves the researcher with more than 600 linear meters of documents to consult. This is a daunting undertaking, but one that archival researchers relish: the opportunity to spend countless hours trawling through endless documents in the hope of a Eureka moment. It only needs a cursory glance at the dates in Tables 2 and 3, however, to realise that very few of the documents are not covered by the blanket classification on documents dated later than 1970. The PAIA manual indicates that documents relating to Operations Savannah and Protea have been declassified, but it does not indicate *which* documents these are. Researchers cannot therefore know whether the documents they require are among those accessible, and the column in the Manual labelled "Manner of access to records" is ominously blank.[25] Trawling, then, is out of the question. The researcher needs to turn to the finding aids of the archival groups that were identified to narrow down the search.

Finding aids

While it is, theoretically, possible to apply under the PAIA to have all the documents listed above declassified, time and budget constraints make this practically impossible. It will take many years (if not decades) and have huge financial implications to have such a vast number of documents declassified. This means that researchers need to identify potentially valuable documents by using the finding aids that were identified in the List of Lists. All finding aids are declassified and are fully accessible to researchers. Finding aids contain the box number of each individual file in the particular archival group, the file number and volume, a brief description of the content of the file and the dates covered by the file. While this sounds like much information on which researchers could base their PAIA applications, in reality the descriptions are often too brief or not informative. A typical description might be "Personeelbestuur"[26] (personnel management), without any indication about the nature of the management. While this is not a particular problem with declassified or unclassified documents, applying for declassification based on a single word is risky at best. There is no way for the researcher to know whether this particular file deals with personnel transfers, remuneration, leave allowances or any other personnel matter. Depending on the nature of the research being conducted, the file might, therefore, be extremely valuable or completely useless.

Another, similarly ambiguous file description is "RVO",[27] the Afrikaans abbreviation for "Rade van Ondersoek" (boards of enquiry). A researcher interested in the legal system of 32 Battalion will probably find this file valuable regardless of the content. Someone with a narrower interest, though, is in the same situation as the researcher with the personnel management file, with little indication of which particular board of enquiry is contained in the file. By making use of the date indication in the finding aid (in this case "11/1/78–11/1/78"), a knowledgeable researcher is able to predict, to an extent, what a file is likely to contain. It is, however, little more than an educated guess, and certainly no guarantee that it will be worth the time, effort and cost involved in having the file declassified.

The SADF also used a number of 'standard' file descriptions, of which "konferensies, kongresse, seminare, simposiums en vergaderings"[28] (conferences, congresses, seminars, symposiums and meetings) is a particularly frustrating example. Documents in these files range from discussions on the diversity of alcohol available in the unit canteen to operational requirements and logistics. Once again, the researcher has no way of knowing which particular file – there are several dozen files with this description in the 32 Battalion archival groups alone – will be valuable and which will not. Nonetheless, at this point, the researcher has to make a decision about which files to include in the PAIA application, as there are no further avenues to explore.

Documents

Once the PAIA application has been finalised – probably between two and six months later – the researcher can return to the DoD Archive and access the documents that have been declassified. Unless the research topic is particularly sensitive, it is likely that the majority of the documents requested will be available. In the case of one of the author's applications, 137 files were declassified and only ten were refused.[29] At this point, for the first time, researchers are able to view the content of the files that they identified several months before. Some of these files will hopefully contain useable information. Other will have some information that is not useful. Yet others however will not contain any relevant information whatsoever. The following two examples serve to illustrate this point.

In the first case, the finding aid for the archival group 32 Battalion, Group 3, indicates that file 106/19/16/1 in box 42 contains information about "Personeelbeheer: Dissipline: Onsedelikheid: Homoseksualisme" (control of personnel: discipline: immorality: homosexualism).[30] This description is much more comprehensive than many others, and someone conducting research about, for example, sexuality in the SADF would be justified in thinking that this would be a particularly useful file to consult. Upon receiving the declassified file, the researcher would find that the description is echoed, verbatim, on the file cover. However, the documents contained in the file are exclusively about retraining and reinforcement of national service members and bear no relation whatsoever to the description on the cover and in the finding aid.[31]

In the second case, incidentally again from the 32 Battalion, Group 3 archival group, the description of file 309/1 is "Spesifieke Operasies: SA Leër Agree"[32] (specific operations: SA Army Agree). The logical assumption is that this file deals with Operation Agree, part of the South African planned withdrawal from Namibia in 1989. A comparison of the description with the file number supports this assumption, as file numbers in the 300 range are related to operations (cf. Table 1).[33] Researchers interested in, inter alia, the latter phase of the Border War or South African Defence Force (SADF) operations during the War should theoretically find useful information in this file. The file does, indeed, contain information about a 32 Battalion operation, Operation Potjie. None of the secondary literature on 32 Battalion has any reference to this particular operation, and it soon becomes apparent why: Operation Potjie was a *potjiekos* (a traditional South African stew, typically cooked in a cast-iron pot over an open fire)

competition.[34] It was never an actual SADF operation, and the document contains no information about SADF operations.

While experiences such as these make for entertaining fireside anecdotes to researchers using declassified documents, the humorous aspect is somewhat diminished when these experiences happen in terms of classified documents. Not only would researchers have had to pay for the declassification of a completely useless file, but they would also have had to wait several months in anticipation of gaining access to information pertaining to their research – only to find that the wait was in vain. While the two examples illustrated here are extreme cases, many other files are of equally dubious value, either because they do not contain information relating to the researcher's topic, or because the information is not relevant.

Legislative disconnect or institutional gatekeeping?

If one takes the aforementioned discussion into consideration, the answers to Baines's original questions become somewhat clearer. The so-called 'few' sanctioned by society to record South Africa's collective military past comprise only a handful of professional and amateur historians. Of these, only a select few have written on the War for Southern Africa. The principal reasons for this state of affairs are to a large degree the evident legislative and administrative stumbling blocks associated with research into the classified periods at the DoD Archive. As a result, the majority of popular and professional historians simply revisit formerly declassified archival material instead of navigating the pitfalls of the PAIA in an attempt to get to 'new' information. It is thus also no surprise that the vast majority of authors of 'Border War' literature continue to remain amateur or popular historians or journalists, who flood the market with so-called 'personal accounts' or popular histories. Their distinct disregard for archival research in this regard works in their favour. The recording of the War for Southern Africa thus continues to remain somewhat of a missed opportunity, and will remain so until the apparent legislative disconnect or institutional gatekeeping at the DoD Archive is addressed.

The DoD Archive has faced some stern criticism over the past decade or so due to current declassification processes still in place. The criticism at times may have been undeserving, or rather levelled at the wrong entity.[35] While the DoD Archive is indeed at the centre of the problem due to its preservation of the actual classified material, it only executes both national and departmental legislation. Moreover, the actual periods that are considered open or classified remain the domain of Defence Intelligence and not that of the DoD Archive. The fact of the matter is, however, that the current provisions of the PAIA, and its practical application at the DoD Archive, inhibit access to information rather than promote it. As a result, one may even argue that in essence, apartheid secrets are being preserved ad infinitum.

In order to remedy the observed legislative disconnect or institutional gatekeeping at the DoD Archive, the authors propose the following:

- A single, consolidated list of previously declassified material should be drawn up at the DoD Archive and be made available to researchers to consult in the Reading Room. This list should be updated continuously as new material is released. Researchers who are after more general sources on the War for Southern Africa may then opt rather to consult some of the already declassified material instead of following the PAIA route. This, after all, is nothing more than good archival practice.

- The DoD Archive needs a functioning website where the Master List as well as any digital finding aids is made available for researchers to consult. The list of declassified documentation should also be made available on the website. Potential researchers will thus have the ability to predetermine which files they wish to consult, and will not have to journey to Pretoria simply to identify the files they want to declassify. The current state of affairs, especially when considering international researchers, remains untenable.

- Defence Intelligence, in consultation with the DoD Archive and subject matter experts, such as military historians and archivists, should revisit the retention periods of archival documents. If the 20-year rule were followed, for instance, researchers would currently have been able to critically engage with archival documents on Operation Boleas – the first combat deployment of the SANDF after 1994. While such a blanket approach to the lifting of embargoes is not feasible, especially when the specific provisions of the PAIA are taken into account, drastic measures are required to readdress the access to classified material in the DoD Archive. For a start, the authors propose that the retention periods be lifted to 31 December 1989, save for sensitive information contained in select archival groups. This would mean that all strategic and operational documents of the so-called 'Border War' would be declassified outright – a definite move in the right direction. Defence Intelligence should be spending their time determining which files need to remain classified rather than examining files for declassification, as is currently the case. Section 83 of the Defence Act (2002) makes provision for such a step.

Conclusion

It is clear that historical enquiry about the Border War and the War for Southern Africa poses significant challenges. At face value, the PAIA seems to be a researcher's ally; the very name of the Act suggests that it exists to further access to information. This suggests that historians' struggles must then be due to institutional gatekeeping. However, practical experience at the DoD Archive suggests that the difficulties and delays experienced with the declassification process are perhaps due to understaffing and poor archival practices rather than a definite gatekeeper mentality. Thus the most likely, albeit oversimplified, explanation for the current state of affairs is a disconnect between the applicable laws and the practical execution thereof. Both legislation and DoD Archive officials in theory appear geared towards assisting researchers and facilitating

research on the War for Southern Africa, but in practice, the process is still convoluted, complicated and definitely not user-friendly, particularly when it comes to interpreting the three different applicable laws. The authors' suggestions above are certainly not a comprehensive solution to the problem, but rather executable steps towards a greater goal that could make an immediate difference and, hopefully, contribute to increased research about an important part of South African military history.

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ENDNOTES

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[4] *Ibid*.

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[8] L Heinecken. "Reflections on insider-outsider experiences of military research in South Africa". In Carreiras, H, Castro, C & Frederic, S (eds), *Researching the military*. London: Routledge, 2016, 36–48; AJ Esterhuyse & BPO Mokoena. "The need for progress in an era of transformation: South African professional military education and military effectiveness". *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 7/1. 2018. 1–17.

[9] IJ van der Waag & GE Visser. "Between history, amnesia and selective memory: The South African armed forces, a century's perspective". *Scientia Militaria* 40/3. 2012. 3–4.

[10] For more on the history of the DoD Archive, see IJ van der Waag. *The marriage of Clio and Mars: The practice of military history within the South African Defence Force*. Pretoria: Directorate Documentation Centre, 1993; IJ van der Waag. "Military record preservation in South Africa, 1914–1992: A history of Directorate Documentation Service". *Militaria* 23/4. 1993. 16–31; IJ van der Waag. "Military records as a genealogical source in South Africa". *Familia* 29/4. 1992. 74–77; IJ van der Waag. "Recording the Great War: Military archives and the South African official history programme, 1914–1939". *Scientia Militaria* 44/1. 2016. 81–110; EP Kleynhans. "Deneys Reitz and the First World War: An introduction to the Department of Defence Archival Holdings". *Scientia Militaria* 44/1. 2016. 238–249.

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28 E.g. DoD Archive, 32 Bn Gp 2, Box 260, File 522/1, Vol. 1, Konferensies, Kongresse, Seminare, Simposiums en Vergaderings / Konferensies.

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32 DoD Archive, Finding Aid: 32 Battalion, Group 3.

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