

# South African Journal of Military Science

## Guest Editorial

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In this special edition of *Scientia Militaria*, the articles reflect contemporary issues associated with the capacity building of its personnel – the most valuable resource of any organisation – to strengthen the armed forces. Through the higher education of soldiers, the armed forces are indirectly strengthened. Although the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) has been utilising psychologists for many years, the academic discipline of Military Psychology in South Africa is still in its infancy.

Military Psychology was first lectured in 1992 by Dr Jacques Gouws, at second-year level, as part of the BMil degree at the South African Military Academy (SAMA). And in 1993, the BMil Hons (Industrial Psychology) at SAMA included Military Psychology for the first time. Since the introduction of Military Psychology at SAMA, many students have published their research locally and internationally. In 2016, Professor Gideon van Dyk (who succeeded Dr Jacques Gouws) edited the first academic book on military psychology in Africa (*Military Psychology for Africa*). In 2020, the second South African book on military psychology, edited by Nicole Dodd, Piet Bester and Justin van der Merwe, titled *Contemporary issues in South African military psychology*, followed, showcasing the work of SAMA students (see the book review by Fontaine in this edition).

This special issue of *Militaria Scientia*, dedicated to military psychology in South Africa, can be viewed as one of the milestones for military psychology in South Africa. Since the conceptualisation and distribution of the initial call-out for articles, much has happened worldwide, of which the war in Ukraine is probably the most relevant to the armed forces. It is expected that this war will also experience an insurgency element, and later a peace support operation, which will likely include post-conflict reconstruction and development. This war reminds us that we live in a volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world, and that personnel in the armed forces should be psychologically prepared at all times. The articles – and, indeed most of the book reviews in this edition – resonate well with what is currently happening in Ukraine, confirming the critical role that military psychology plays in preventing war, surviving war, and dealing with the aftermath of war.

In the foreword to this current issue, the Director Psychology, Brigadier General Warren Burgess, highlights the recent achievements and successes accomplished by military psychologists currently serving in the SANDF. He provides a historical overview of how Military Psychology has evolved, and gives specific details on how the need for psychological services progressed within the SANDF since the early 1960s. Additionally, Brig. Gen. Burgess offers a futuristic model – based on real-time combat experiences and unpublished notes – for the psychological debriefing of individuals who have experienced trauma in the line of duty. Finally, he ends on a personal note, appealing to current and future military psychologists to continue in their pursuit of “perfection through innovation”.

In the first article, Jacques Gouws focuses on the preventative part of military psychology, and discusses its front-line strategic and diplomatic role in preventing wars. He refers to how the role of psychology has matured: from the selection and placement of soldiers to dealing with the complex demands of the modern battlefield. Gouws emphasises that the world can no longer afford to continue armed conflict in order to settle territorial and international disagreements, as this leads to ongoing and unnecessary strife. Finally, he suggests the strategic deployment of military psychology to counter the psychological factors in areas with potential conflict. He concludes by providing insight into military decision-making to enhance the role of military psychology in curtailing war.

Piet Bester and Johnny O’Neil address the problems that modern military leaders experience on the battlefield – not only in cases where they have to assist the soldier at primary level (i.e. in the trenches), but to also make sense of what is happening. The authors emphasise the importance of *sensemaking* in the VUCA world-related battlefield. They further suggest approaching sensemaking with a best-fit worldview of *social constructivism in complexity*, from where the military leader acts as a sensemaker across the sensemaking and meaning-making nexus. Additionally, a process of sensemaking and meaning-making on the battlefield is postulated. Finally, toolkit elements are provided to assist military commanders in acting as *sensemakers*.

Extending the idea of the military leader as a sensemaker, Johnny and Sumari O’Neil focus on sensemaking training in preparation for effective mission command in the African battlespace. In this article, *sensemaking* is considered a necessary cognitive skill that should be integral to a commander’s psychological preparation and training. Moreover, *mission command* is highlighted as a decentralised form of command, which allows subordinate commanders the freedom to take initiative without relying excessively on the hierarchy of command in the military organisation. The authors argue that mission command is the most relevant approach needed for the VUCA African battlespace. To conclude their article, they suggest practical ideas on how to develop sensemaking as a cognitive skill for military commanders (e.g. including it as a commander’s training prior to deployments by developing situational awareness through game-based training, simulations and case studies, and by providing feedback during training).

In a qualitative study, Adele Harmse, Sumari O’Neil and Arien Strasheim report the results of semi-structured interviews with 12 SANDF officers to determine their experiences

during extended periods away from home. The results indicate that extended absences may adversely affect the deployed member and his or her family, and that the negative effect may spill over from the family to the deployed member. The authors identify various areas for improvement regarding support to the deployed member and his or her family, and emphasise that organisational support is required before, during and on completion of the deployment (i.e. the reintegration process). Implementing their suggestions may limit the stress that soldiers and their families experience; thus, directly strengthening the family unit, and indirectly enhancing the armed forces' capacity.

Nicolette Visagie, Didi Zungu, Stephanie Joubert, David Schoeman and Renier du Toit focus on peace support operations, when they compare the positive and negative experiences of soldiers deployed to two different mission areas (i.e. Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which both had different mandates). These authors make a novel contribution by providing a *booster matrix* (positive experiences) versus a *stressor matrix* (negative experiences), categorised in terms of the sphere of functioning within the deployment arena (i.e. the organisational, clinical and relationship spheres). These findings can be used by deploying military commanders to develop interventions to enhance positive aspects, and/or mitigate negative elements; thus, enhancing the wellbeing of soldiers during deployment.

Danille Arendse addresses Covid-19 as a VUCA world event. She conducted a unique quantitative study to explore the experiences of SANDF members who had participated in the first repatriation flight from Wuhan, China. This repatriation was aimed at bringing people home safely and quarantining them in South Africa in terms of Covid-19. The *Stigma and Related Matters Questionnaire* was developed by Arendse, and was used in her study to gain insight into possible stigma, perceptions and emotions that might have been held by SANDF members towards the repatriated individuals of whom the SANDF members had to take care during their repatriation and quarantine. Results of this study suggest that the majority of SANDF members did not report any stigmatising or discriminatory beliefs around Covid-19, nor did they believe that those who had been repatriated, were stigmatised. However, future researchers are urged to do follow-up studies to determine the validity of this newly developed questionnaire, and to determine whether results replicate.

A selection of book reviews by Palesa Luzipo, Piet Bester, Yolandi-Eloïse Fontaine and Anri Delpont concludes this special issue of *Scientia Militaria*.

As guest editors, we want to thank each person who – directly or indirectly – contributed to this special edition. A special word of thanks to our reviewers, who acted as the quality gatekeepers, and to the personnel who worked behind the scenes regarding the technical layout and language editing. In addition, we need to mention Dr Evert Kleynhans, the editor of *Scientia Militaria*, who walked the extra mile to make this publication possible. All your contributions are appreciated. Without you, this publication would not have been possible.

As a final thought, building psychological capital through people-development practices implies a long-term commitment. We therefore trust that this special edition will provide key insights into military personnel on strategic, operational and tactical level to enhance best practices during planning, management and operations. Finally, we anticipate that this special edition will inspire practitioners and academics to expand their work and share their knowledge with the international scientific community, broadening the literature and science of Military Psychology.

## The Guest Editors

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