

# MILITARY RECORD PRESERVATION IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1914-1992

## A HISTORY OF DIRECTORATE DOCUMENTATION SERVICE<sup>1</sup>

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**Directorate Documentation Service has one of the largest archives depots in South Africa. The origins of the organisation can be traced back to the First World War, although legal status was only accorded twenty five years ago (14 May 1968). This gave permanency to the SADF Archives and halted the indiscriminate destruction of archives, which had occurred since 1918.**

### ORIGINS

Directorate Documentation Service has two roots. The first of these, was the General Information Bureau which was established at Defence Headquarters on 1 October 1914. This office and its successor, the Officer in Charge of Records (O.C. Records), are the predecessors of Section Personnel Archives and Reserves of the Directorate.

The Bureau acted as the official information link between the troops in German South West Africa and the public back in the Union. The Bureau dealt with enquiries of all sorts - missing persons, pay problems, lists of rebels caught and Germans interned, Union Defence Force (UDF) casualties; and, in particular, the Bureau released reports regarding the progress of the campaign. This was extremely important for civilian morale in view of the conflicting reports appearing in local newspapers. However, the General Information Bureau ceased to function following the capitulation of the German forces in South West Africa on 9 July 1915.<sup>2</sup>

By the end of 1915, South African troops were en route to East Africa where they engaged the enemy in unison with Imperial troops. This necessitated a liaison office of a different type and an office not dissimilar to the General Information Bureau, was established on 15 September 1915. This office, known as the Officer in Charge of Records, Imperial Service Contingents (or "O.C. Records" for short),<sup>3</sup> opened and maintained a personal file for each volunteer who served with Imperial forces in East Africa and later further afield. To assist him, Records Offices were opened at various military centres within the Union and with the South African forces in the field.

Every South African recruited for service with an Imperial Service Contingent was required to pass through the hands of one or other record office.<sup>4</sup> However, record keeping did not always take place optimally; and there were cases of troops arriving in the East African theatre with no record having been made in the Union. This perhaps hints of the record chaos which appears to have existed when the first South African troops were despatched to the theatre in 1915. In all, no less than 254 666 South Africans served in uniform during the First World War. Of these, 12 354 were killed in action or died on active service. This gives some indication of the number of files involved.

The O.C. Records was furthermore tasked with the compiling of historical

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all of the archival material referred to in the references of this paper are in the custody of Directorate Documentation Service (SADF Archives).

<sup>2</sup> Archive of the Director, General Information Bureau (GIB), Box 1, file B1 General Information Bureau; and E. Jonker: *Die Militêr-Historiese en Argivale Dienste van die Departement van Verdediging*, *Militaria* 1(1) 1969, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Archive of the Secretary for Defence (DC), Box 1471, file DC 367/7 Office Hours at O.C. Records.

<sup>4</sup> Archive of the Officer in Charge of Records, Imperial Service Contingents (O.C. Records), Box 92, file O.R.133/2 Working of Record Offices Special Report on system for Chief of General Staff and Adjutant General.

information on certain South African units.<sup>5</sup> This arguably might be deemed the origin of the Unit Histories element of Directorate Documentation Service.

Following the conclusion of hostilities in November 1918, an intensive demobilization took place. Some 240 000 troops had to be returned to civilian life; and the office of O.C. Records was tasked to facilitate this by providing service records from the personnel files, when required, and seeing to the post-war administration of

these volunteers. This included, of course, the issue of war stars and medals. This is a function which Section Personnel Archives and Reserves still performs.

## CENTRALISATION OF ARCHIVES

The various sections at Defence Headquarters level, right down to the most lowly unit in the field, contributed to the creation of a substantial holding of both correspondence and personnel files. In fact, by 1918, the Department of Defence held so much documentation which was no longer needed for administrative purposes after the war, that it probably became the first post-Union government department in South Africa for whom an archives depot was justified. The management of this enormous amount of paper was to prove a mammoth task.



*After the First World War, Sir Roland Bourne, Secretary for Defence 1912-1922, established the infrastructure to gather, classify, index and preserve archives generated by the Department of Defence.*

Following the cessation of hostilities in November 1918, most of the units mobilised for the duration of the war, were disbanded. There was therefore some urgency to transfer the records generated by these units to an archives depot. This was first recognised by Mr A.E. Basden, the Chief Clerk Defence, under whom the Central Registry at Defence Headquarters resorted. In view of the cessation of hostilities, Basden deemed it: "desirable to make as early a start on this as possible so that we may be

ready to take over the records, for final indexing and disposal in the Archives, of those offices which will close down as circumstances permit".<sup>6</sup>

In January 1919, the Secretary for Defence informed the heads of Sections that the time had come to collect, classify and index the records which had accumulated during the war. Heads of Sections and commanding officers were instructed to carefully sort files in their custody into three categories:

- (a) ephemeral records - for immediate destruction.
- (b) records that should be retained for a few years only, and then be destroyed.
- (c) records that should be preserved as permanent archives.

Once the local officer in charge was satisfied, the ephemeral records were

<sup>5</sup> O.C. Records, Box 109, file O.R. 185 Historical Records SA Imperial Service Units. Minute ISU. 146/1/47 dd 20 Dec 1917 from the Staff Officer for War Recruiting to the Officer in Charge of Records.

<sup>6</sup> DC, Box 1909, file DC 251/1 Records Amalgamation of War Records. Minute dd 26 Nov 1918 from the Chief Clerk Defence to the Secretary for Defence.

to be destroyed and the remainder were to be transferred to Pretoria, where they were to be centralised in a special section of the Central Registry.<sup>7</sup>

This in effect meant that a second "record office" was to be established as a branch of the Central Registry, as the war-time office of the O.C. Records (Lt Col Harvey), was still in existence. This unsurprisingly led to a measure of friction between the military and civilian sections of the Department in general, and Colonel Harvey and the civilian clerks of the Defence Secretariat in particular, as each vied to be recognised as the official archives organisation.

The competition manifested itself immediately after the dissemination of the instructions issued by the Secretary for Defence in January 1919, calling for all obsolete war records to be centralised in the Central Registry. The Deputy Adjutant General, the head of the military section dealing with personnel matters, immediately protested that many of the camp and depot records dealt with individual soldiers' cases to which his staff needed unhindered access. To his mind, the move proposed by the Secretary would entail continual cross-reference between his section, the O.C. Records and the Central Registry. However, if he was not able to obtain control of the archives, the Adjutant General was willing to support Colonel Harvey in his bid.

However, Basden, the Chief Clerk in the Defence Secretariat, could not support this view as the nature of the archives of the Camps and Depots was neither commensurate with that of the personnel records in the custody of the O.C.

Records nor of matters which concerned the Adjutant General only. Basden believed that the Deputy Adjutant General wished to establish another "archival branch" for the Department within his own section. This Basden argued had to be avoided at all costs. After all, it was policy to close down special war sections and branches, such as the O.C. Records, as early as was possible and it was entirely against that policy to expand the functions of the O.C. Records or establish another similar office. Furthermore, Basden believed that the records

ought to have been dealt with by experienced registry clerks such as he had. These clerks worked in the Central Registry, an office common to **all** departments of the Union Defence Force.

The question was finally decided by the Chief of the General Staff, Brigadier General J.J. Collyer, in February 1919. He instructed that the work would devolve upon the Central Registry. As a result, all correspondence files already transferred to the O.C. Records, were handed over to the Central Registry.<sup>8</sup> This in effect led to a division of the work:

- (a) the archival section in the Central Registry became custodian of all general archives and is the ancestor of the SADF Archives, currently a section of Directorate Documentation Service.
- (b) the O.C. Records became custodian of all personnel files, and is ancestor of the Personnel Archives and Reserves Section.

### ESTABLISHMENT OF A MILITARY ARCHIVES DEPOT

On 28 July 1919, General Collyer discussed the question of collecting and storing all the records with Mr G.H.



*Colonel W.E.C. Tanner, Adjutant-General (1919-1921, 1925-1933), wished to draw the archives organization within the ambit of his own office.*

<sup>7</sup> DC, Box 882, file 23479 War Records. Circular minute DC 1/50350 dd 6 Jan 1919.

<sup>8</sup> DC, Box 1909, file DC 251/1 Records Amalgamation of War Records.



Byrnes, a clerk in the Defence Secretariat. Byrnes was instructed to see what accommodation and fixtures were required and to take charge of the section. Acting on Collyer's instructions, Byrnes identified which records could be transferred and a directive was issued for them to be sent to the old Artillery Barracks to the west of Defence Headquarters. On 1 August 1919, a start was made to take delivery of records from Defence Headquarters. This first transfer to the "military archives" was completed on 12 August.<sup>9</sup> The records were received by Byrnes, then "Clerk in Charge, Stationery" (August 1919). Within two months his post was upgraded to "Clerk in Charge, War Records" (September) and "Custodian, War Records" (October).<sup>10</sup> In effect, an archives depot under the direct control of the Secretary for Defence was established with effect from 1 August 1919. This, the first "military archives", is the second root in the history of Directorate Documentation Service.

Soon records were being received from all sections, branches, bases, camps, hospitals and depots, both within the Union and from East Africa and Europe. In one month alone (September 1919), the following were received:<sup>11</sup>

Archive	Quantity
Defence Headquarters (General)	8 trolley loads
Defence Central Registry	11 cases
Defence Central Registry	1 trolley load
Cape Corps (Kimberley)	13 cases
Base and General Depot, Durban	43 cases
Base Durban	8 cases
SASSC (Nyasaland)	4 boxes
Director Medical Services	2 trolley loads
Supplies (various)	46 cases
Transport and Remounts	20 cases

By October 1919, Byrnes had three clerks working under him. Once at Defence Headquarters, the archives were sorted, card indexed and stored in such a way that files could be easily traced when required. All records re-

ceived by the Custodian were categorised as:<sup>12</sup>

- (a) "Permanent Archives": those files of historical importance. These were carefully indexed and filed.
- (b) "Personal files" were not considered of sufficient importance to be placed in the permanent archives. They were, however, essential to keep for many years in case of enquiries; and it was considered that the simplest form of record for practical purposes was the amalgamation of the personal files received from the Sections in one portfolio for each individual. After the amalgamation, the portfolio of a volunteer included:
  - (i) personal record, viz. the Record Office file.
  - (ii) medical record, viz. various medical papers collected and docketed, including boards.
  - (iii) pay record, viz. the Pay Office file.
  - (iv) disciplinary record, viz. the Provost Marshal's file.

This category of files was to be kept by the Officer-in-charge of Records.

- (c) Financial records, other than those transferred to the permanent archives or included in a personal file, were kept until no longer required for administrative purposes and then destroyed.

- (d) Other records, mostly from camps, hospitals, depots and other units, remained where they were until the archives generated at head-quarter level had been processed. With time most of these files were

destroyed once no longer required for administrative purposes. This to a great extent explains the large hiatus in the material at unit level during the First World War and the period thereafter.

<sup>9</sup> DC, Box 1909, file DC 251/1 Records Amalgamation of War Records. Minute dd 17 Sep 1919 from G.H.Byrnes, Oi/c War Records to the Chief Clerk Defence.

<sup>10</sup> DC, Box 882, file 23479 War Records. Circular minute DC 9/50350 dd 1 Oct 1919.

<sup>11</sup> DC, Box 1909, file DC 251/1 Records Amalgamation of War Records. Minute GHB/1000 dd 29 Sep 1919 from G.H.Byrnes, Custodian to the Chief Clerk Defence.

<sup>12</sup> O.C. Records, Box 92, file O.R.133/3a Centralization of War Records; and DC, Box 882, file 23479 War Records. Circular minute DC 12/50350 dd 21 Oct 1919.

In general, the amalgamation of records received a favourable response from the various sections of the UDF. However, the Adjutant-General, soured by the failure of his plans to expand his section, still believed that:<sup>13</sup>

"The creation of an additional record office at Artillery Barracks (Custodian of War Records) is a waste of time and money. The only officer, in my opinion, who can and is in a position to thoroughly sort and collate war records is the Officer i/c Records."

In October 1919, the policy regarding the transfer of archives changed, and preference was now given to the "out station records" generated at Military District level. A large number of enquiries were constantly made from Defence Headquarters regarding the records of depots and units and it was thought that time would be saved by the transfer of these documents to the Archives. By the end of November 1919, approximately 19 consignments of files had been received at Artillery Barracks by the Custodian, comprising the records of some 30 distinct offices.

Most of these files had been unpacked and sorted. However, there were a number of factors which considerably increased the difficulties in dealing with the records:

- (a) Many of the records were packed hurriedly and carelessly without any classification, despite this being contrary to the instructions issued in the DC circulars.
- (b) The filing systems in use at different offices differed considerably, and although in the abstract it should have been possible to find particular correspondence from the registers, in practice this was not always possible. The Custodian ascribed this to careless registration and indexing, and to "indifferent systems of record keeping".<sup>14</sup>

On 15 January 1920, the post of Officer in Charge of Records, Imperial Service Contingents (O.C. Records) was replaced by that of Staff Officer War Registers. This official was directly responsible to the Chief of the General Staff. In June of that year, the Staff Officer War Registers with his staff of 125 clerks moved from Prospect House to Artillery Barracks; and on 1 July 1920, the offices of the Custodian of War Records (office of the Secretary for Defence) and the Staff Officer War Registers (office of the Chief of the General Staff) were amalgamated to form the office of the Staff Officer War Records - the first custodian of both correspondence and personnel archives. On 11 October 1921, this office was transferred to the Adjutant General's section.

The centralisation of records did not take place without a hitch. In some instances, archives were in the possession of previous commanding officers, who had taken their unit correspondence files home with them after the war; and some of them appeared unwilling to part with them. This was the case of the SA Veterinary Corps<sup>15</sup> and the Water Supply Corps.<sup>16</sup> While in other cases, such as the records of the CMR and SAMR, the volume of archivalia was so great that it prevented the despatch to Artillery Barracks.

However, despite such hitches, archives continued to flood in to Artillery Barracks from units scattered all over the country. This centralisation of archives at Defence Headquarters, however, caused a number of problems, which today, either directly or indirectly, have an influence on historical researchers who wish to make use of the material.<sup>17</sup> The appraisal and arrangement of the records was left to persons not fully conversant with the archival practice. As a result, many of the files of a number of different units

<sup>13</sup> DC, Box 1909, file DC 251/1 Records Amalgamation of War Records. Minute dd 5 Nov 1919 from the Adjutant General to the Deputy Adjutant General.

<sup>14</sup> DC, Box 1909, file DC 251/1 Records Amalgamation of War Records. Minute dd 24 Nov 1919 from the Custodian to the Chief Clerk Defence.

<sup>15</sup> DC, Box 882, file 23479 War Records. Minute VD.9/309 dd 19 Nov 1919 from the Staff Officer Veterinary Service to the Quartermaster General.

<sup>16</sup> DC, Box 878, file 23282 Historical Records of South African Imperial Service. Minute 467 dd 17 Jan 1919 from the Director of Irrigation to the Quartermaster General.

<sup>17</sup> I.J. van der Waag: "The Marriage of Clio and Mars: The practice of military history within the South African Defence Force" (unpub ms Pretoria 1992), pp.19-26.

(offices) were amalgamated or divided into one or more larger groups.

While the disturbance of the provenance of these records proves most irritating to the historian today, it is a problem which can be overcome as archivists conversant with these groups can guide visiting historians through them. It is, rather, the mass destruction of records which took place from the early twenties which proves an insuperable problem. The War Records branch did not manage to escape the post-war rationalisation, despite the fact that the tempo of archives being transferred from units did not slacken. The higher authorities could not understand that the general rationalisation of the UDF after 1919 and the concomitant disbandment of units, caused a flood of archives to the War Records office. Budgetary cuts and retrenchments in staff seriously handicapped the archival work. The allotted accommodation was inadequate, and it proved easier for the Staff Officer War Records to issue destruction authorities on the files, than to find shelf space. Numerous files which would otherwise have been kept were as a result, destroyed.<sup>18</sup> The destruction of these files has unfortunately caused a serious hiatus in the record of our military history.

## REORGANIZATION

The retrenchment of all the staff of the old Custodian of War Records, placed an extra burden on the staff of the section, who would otherwise have only had to deal with the administration of the personnel files of the ex-volunteers. On 12 October 1926, the Adjutant General wrote to the Chief of the General Staff:<sup>19</sup> "The present staff at War Records is too small to cope with this work. In any case I consider the Archives would be better if forming a branch of the Central Registry and with the impending move of GHQ to Artillery Barracks the time seems opportune to put the matter in order."

This was quite a turnabout. Only five years earlier the Adjutant General had crossed swords with the Secretariat on the issue of control of defence archives; and now that he had full control, he sacrificed the organization as part of the general rationalisation of his section.

The Chief Archivist at the Union Buildings, was not prepared to take over the records and the decision was subsequently taken to re-establish a departmental archives depot as a branch of the Central Registry. The change took place during the centralisation of the registries at the new Defence Headquarters; and the control of archives was returned to the Chief Clerk with effect from 1 December 1927. In correspondence, the office became known as "Central Archives".<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, this move led to the demise of the War Records branch. The Chief of the General Staff was now convinced that a reduction in the staff of the branch, initially established as a temporary office during the First World War, had become necessary. The War Records branch was disbanded on 15 July 1928. The Chief Clerk assumed the duties of the War Records branch on 16 July 1928, and the documents in the War Records branch were amalgamated with those in the Central Archives Section.<sup>21</sup>

However, the position regarding record preservation did not improve after the establishment of the Central Archives Section in 1927. The two crises, sufficient qualified staff and adequate accommodation, had not alleviated and, as a result, the position regarding the disposal of files continued much as before.

As in the past, boards of survey consisting of local officers were convened on the spot to appraise files. In general, these boards deemed all files which

<sup>18</sup> O.C. Records, Box 103, file O.R.151 Annual Reports War Records; and box 121, file O.R.240/1 Complaints War Record Office Artillery Barracks.

<sup>19</sup> DC, Box 1911, file DC 251/7 Records of Defence Department Formation of an Archives Depot as a Branch of Central Registry. Handwritten note on minute dd 12 Oct 1926 from the Adjutant General to the Chief of the General Staff.

<sup>20</sup> DC, Box 1911, file DC 251/7 Records of Defence Department Formation of an Archives Depot as a Branch of Central Registry.

<sup>21</sup> AG(4), Box 322, file O.R.3/151 Re-Organization War Records Section; and DC, Box 1911, file DC 251/7 Records of Defence Department Formation of an Archives Depot as a Branch of Central Registry.



were no longer needed for administrative purposes, to have no value. This appears to have been the practice since the end of the First World War. In 1919, for example, the archives of the Provost Marshal of the Union (ref. P.M.), were saved only because the Controller of Commandeering (in the office of the Financial Under Secretary) required them for reference purposes.<sup>22</sup> And so, these records (some 32,5 linear metres) which contain valuable material on enemy subjects residing within the Union during the First World War, and the records of the persons connected with the rebellion of 1914-15, were saved.

The keeping of only documents required for administrative purposes, was still policy in the 1930s. Throughout that decade, local boards of survey met and condemned almost all files at a unit level. In 1934, for example, the archives of the Umvoti Mounted Rifles, and of all the commandos in Eastern Province Command were destroyed by fire "after careful perusal and consideration"<sup>23</sup>

### **THE WAR RECORDS BRANCH 1939-1959**

Although South Africa only entered the Second World War on 6 September 1939, the updating of the records of the Permanent Force Reserves already commenced in February of that year. Some 5 763 personnel files were subsequently transferred from the Central Archives Section to the Adjutant General (Section 4), where the latest changes of address were recorded.

For this purpose, a War Records Branch was established soon after the declaration of war, as a branch of the office of the Director General of Reserves.<sup>24</sup> War Records was transferred to the Adjutant General's Section in December 1939,<sup>25</sup> and resorted under the Deputy

Adjutant-General (Personnel) with effect from 1 February 1941.<sup>26</sup>

The functions of this office, although more extensive than those of its First World War counterpart, were also very personnel-orientated. War Records had to maintain a complete and accurate record of each South African who left the Union on active service. To this end, personnel files were opened, based upon information supplied by the units.

After the conclusion of hostilities in 1945, the War Records Branch, as in the First World War, was tasked with the winding up of the post-war responsibilities in respect of the ex-volunteers. In view of the important role the office had to play in the whole demobilisation process, it was imperative to maintain the War Records Branch for a considerable time after the conclusion of hostilities. However, most of the War Records staff were volunteers and could not be expected to remain on indefinitely. Hence at this time, the office began to employ permanent civilian public servants.<sup>27</sup>

In 1957, there were some 410 000 personnel files housed at Defence Headquarters. These contained the whole war record of each volunteer. In addition, there were records for some 70 662 NMC members; and thousands of general correspondence files which had been generated by the South African units while in the Middle East theatre during the Second World War.

As a result, a Board of Survey was appointed by the Adjutant General in 1957, with a view to examining and making recommendations for the disposal of these files. These archives, estimated at some 200 tons, then in the custody of the War Records Branch, were appraised by a retired comman-

<sup>22</sup> DC, Box 1909, file DC 251/1 Records Amalgamation of War Records. Minute DC.10/50350 dd 8 Oct 1919 from the Secretary for Defence to the Provost Marshal of the Union.

<sup>23</sup> AG(4), Box 151, file AG(4)408/2 vol 1. Disposal of Obsolete Documents Board Proceedings.

<sup>24</sup> The Adjutant General was tasked with the administration of officers; while the Director General of Reserves fulfilled the same function for other ranks.

<sup>25</sup> Archives of the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) Group 2, Box 664, file CGS 1077 War Records Section. Circular minute D.R.37/20 dd 12 Dec 1939.

<sup>26</sup> CGS Gp 2, Box 687, file CGS 1171 Organization AG Section Establishment Sub-Sections. Circular minute AG(3)154/68/1 dd 7 Feb 1941.

<sup>27</sup> WR, Box 6, file WR.1/38 War Records Staff position at conclusion of hostilities. Minute dd 1 Dec 1942 from the Adjutant-General to the Secretary for Defence.

dant and two sergeant-majors; not exactly qualified archivists.<sup>28</sup> The culling took place over approximately five years; and one cannot help wondering what valuable information was lost. This might, however, explain the general hiatus in correspondence files, at unit level, for the Second World War period. The appraisers withdrew the war diaries which were amalgamated to form an omnibus group which developed to what is now known as the "War Diaries" (ref. W.D.); and destroyed most of the general correspondence files *en masse*.

The War Records Branch continued until 1959, as a semi-autonomous office, still tasked with the post-war administration of the ex-volunteers. In that year the office became part of the Military History Section (Krygshistoriese Afdeling).<sup>29</sup> It still survives to this day as the Section Personnel Archives and Reserves, and is an element of Directorate Documentation Service.

### ARCHIVE ADMINISTRATION 1939-1948

During the progress of the war, the general correspondence generated by the Department of Defence increased considerably. The Central Archives Section continued to function under the Central Registry. The War Records Branch assumed the functions of an intermediate depot, and instructions were issued to the effect that when a unit was disbanded, all records generated by the unit which were not required for administrative purposes, would be forwarded to the Adjutant General (War Records).<sup>30</sup>

However, it was not long before the intermediate depot had also run out of space. In 1942, the British Army, faced with a similar accommodation prob-

lem, suspended the King's Regulations which dealt with the disposal of archives. With effect from 11 February of that year, they increased the tempo of destruction by shortening the statutory period for which documents had to be kept, and discontinued the convening of boards of survey.<sup>31</sup> The Quartermaster General suggested that the Union Defence Force adopt a similar measure and "dispense with records say prior to 1936".<sup>32</sup> Fortunately, the Secretary for Defence did not fall for this and eventually the accommodation problem was temporarily alleviated by the creation of intermediate depots at an arm of service and even at unit level, in the case of the Non-European Army Service.<sup>33</sup> At the end of 1943, an archives depot was created at the Mobile Air Force Depot with a view to preserving the records of SAAF units which had been disbanded.<sup>34</sup>

The records housed in these intermediate depots were centralised in the Central Archives Section after the war. However, the Chief of the General Staff (Sir Pierre van Ryneveld) and the Secretary for Defence (H.F. Cuff) had a difference of opinion on the application of the *Archives Act*.<sup>35</sup> Cuff's adherence to the letter of the Act, particularly with regard to the disposal of records, probably played a role in the saving of his post after 1948. Other officials, including Van Ryneveld, who had actively assisted in the destruction of military documents, many of which might have embarrassed the Smuts government, were retrenched after 1948. Cuff, on the other hand, covered his bases by simply assuring the new Minister of Defence, Advocate F.C. Erasmus, that he would not authorise destructions without acknowledging the Minister.<sup>36</sup>

Bonfires were held as early as 15 June 1946, at centres throughout South Af-

<sup>28</sup> WR, Box 8, file WR.1/1/1 War Records Staff. Minute 1/1/1 dd 30 Sept 1957 from the Officer i/c of War Records to the Adjutant General.

<sup>29</sup> E. Jonker: "Die Militêr-Historiese en Argivale Dienste van die Departement van Verdediging", *Militaria* (1) 1969, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> AG(3)154, Box 365, file AG(3)154/208/2 Records Destructions. Circular minute AG(3)154/208/2 dd 26 Nov 1943.

<sup>31</sup> Army Council Instruction No. 305 "Disposal of Documents" dated 11 Feb 1942.

<sup>32</sup> DC, Box 1909, file DC 251/3 Disposal of Obsolete Records and Transfer of Public Archives to Archive Depots. Minute Q.91/233 dd 27 May 1942 from the Quartermaster General to the Secretary for Defence.

<sup>33</sup> AG(3)154, Box 365, file AG(3)154/208/2 Records Destructions. Minute AG(3)154/208/2 dd 21 Dec 1943 from AG(3) to DAG(O).

<sup>34</sup> AG(3)154, Box 365, file AG(3)154/208/2 Records Destructions. Minute AG(3)154/208/2 dd 21 Dec 1943 from the Adjutant General to the Director General Air Force.

<sup>35</sup> HWA 668, Box 1, file HWA 668/2/1 Organisasie Beleid. Enc 4 "Confidential Notes".

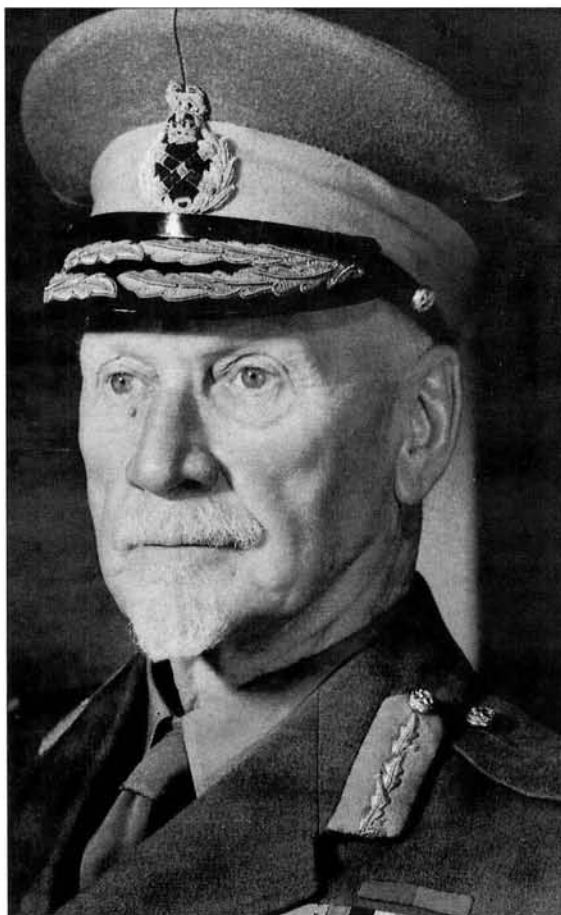
<sup>36</sup> DC, Box 1909, file DC 251/6 Records General Destruction of Obsolete Records. Enc 3 minute DC 251/6 dd 28 Jul 1950 from Cuff to Erasmus.



rica, including Defence Headquarters and behind the Union Buildings.<sup>37</sup> Smuts had apparently been well aware of the documents still lying in the Central Archives at Defence Headquarters. Late one night, shortly after his electoral defeat, Smuts personally supervised the removal of many more documents. A number of trucks drew up in the large quadrangle that lies behind the main block of Defence Headquarters, and the men removed bundles of documents from the old Artillery Barracks. That same night, these archives were allegedly packed aboard an aircraft and flown to the United Kingdom.<sup>38</sup>

The responsible officers were apparently not thorough enough and on 26 July 1948, another 30 to 40 bags<sup>39</sup> of secret papers were removed from the Cypher Section, directly opposite the office of the Chief of the General Staff at Defence Headquarters. These archives were sent to a paper factory at Springs, where they were pulped before Erasmus' men could prevent their destruction. Suspicions were confirmed when the investigating officer, Colonel R.C. Hiemstra, did not receive the expected co-operation of the Chief of the General Staff, General van Ryneveld, or his deputy, General W.H.E. Poole.<sup>40</sup> Hiemstra subsequently seized all of the documents of

the Intelligence Section and had them sent under guard to Cape Town, where the Minister of Defence was attending the sitting of Parliament.



*Field Marshal J.C. Smuts disposed of a large number of documents between 1946 and 1948, which may have tarnished the image of the United Party.*

However, not all Second World War military archives which have disappeared, were lost at the hands of members of the Union Defence Force. There are references to a number of natural disasters which also played a role. On Sunday, 1 March 1942, for example, the camp of 163 Works Company (SAEC) was subjected to a terrific hurricane, which was followed by a heavy hailstorm. Most of the camp was razed to the ground, and the Orderly Room tent with most of the unit's records was lost.<sup>41</sup>

## THE MILITARY

### ARCHIVES SECTION 1948-1957

Minister Erasmus halted the *ad hoc* disposal of records and the provisions of the *Archives Act* were made to apply to the archives generated by both the military and the civilian sections of the Department.

In 1948, the new Minister of Defence and his aide, Colonel Hiemstra, began to exchange ideas on the establishment of a military archives; and in the same month a Mr M.J. Posthumus

<sup>37</sup> Debates of the House of Assembly, 17 Sept 1948, col 2703.

<sup>38</sup> E.P.Hartshorn: *Avenge Tobruk* (Cape Town and Johannesburg 1960), pp.207-210. Unfortunately, a primary source to corroborate this incident could not be found at Directorate Documentation Service.

<sup>39</sup> One source estimates 30 bags while another estimates between 41 and 43 bags (see MVB, Box 86, file MV62).

<sup>40</sup> Archives of the Minister of Defence - P.W. Botha Collection (MVB), Box 86, file MV62 Afdeling Direkoraat van die Militêre Inligtingsdiens. Enc 12 report dd 9 Aug 1948 from Col R.C.Hiemstra to F.C.Erasmus.

<sup>41</sup> War Diaries (WD), Box 150, 163 Works Company (SAEC) February - March 1942.

made a study of the military archives system in the Netherlands. Posthumus found that the staff were not only archivists but also historical writers. Military records were kept for a reason - in South Africa they were barely being used. Furthermore, the Dutch military



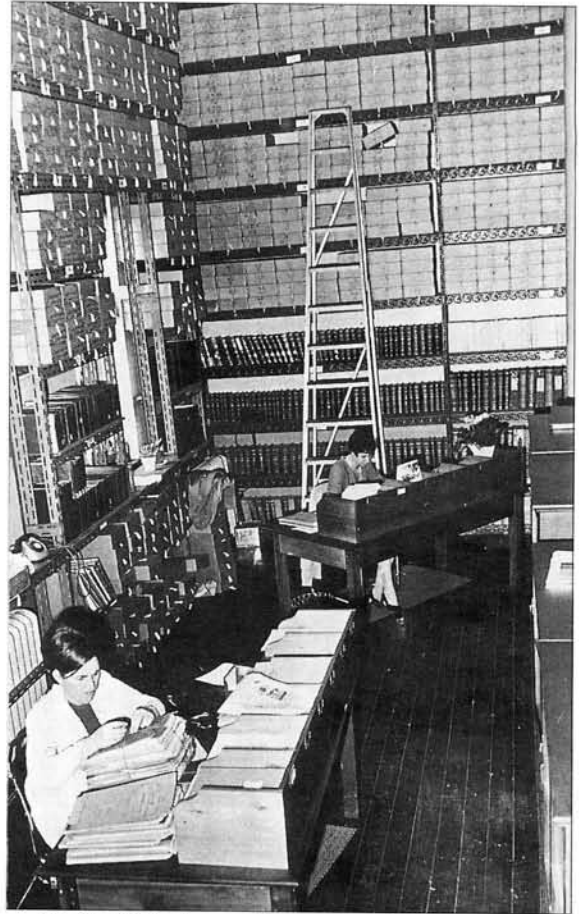
General (then Colonel) R.C. Hiemstra was Minister F.C. Erasmus' man on the spot during the 1948 archives investigations.

historians went back to the Princes of Orange of the sixteenth century and gave equal cover to periods of peace. This, in Posthumus' mind, stressed the importance of the pre-1912 history of the military in South Africa. Under Smuts, the only military history written in South Africa concerned campaigns and wars; and more specifically, the two World Wars.

The ideas contained in the Posthumus report appealed to Erasmus, a person who had not supported South African participation in the last World War. Military history, he believed, should cover the period from 1652, and not

concentrate on the Second World War, as the Union War History Committee of Agar-Hamilton was doing. *Inter alia*, Erasmus believed that the Department of Defence ought to take over this Committee, which had been established by Smuts in the office of the Prime Minister. This was a British tradition; elsewhere in Europe, the military research section was attached to the General Staff.<sup>42</sup>

However, Erasmus' attempt to obtain control of the Union War Histories Committee failed and he came to realise that if he was to establish a military archives on the Dutch model, he had to appoint historians, who had the necessary academic qualifications to fulfil the tasks of both preserving archives and



Until 1968, the archives of the Department of Defence were housed in the Defence Headquarters complex in Potgieter Street, Pretoria.

using them to write military history.

This was achieved two years later with the establishment of a Military Archives on 14 June 1950.<sup>43</sup> In that year, differ-

<sup>42</sup> Archives of the Minister of Defence - Erasmus and Fouché (MVEF), Box 120, file MV78 Krygsargief.

ences flared up again between the Secretary for Defence and the Chief of the General Staff, regarding the custody and care of archives; and the decision was taken that the military would take over their own records. This of course, involved a great amount of sorting and shifting and building of shelves as the military records were separated from the archives of the Secretariat.

By 1952, the physical separation of the files was completed and the door between the military and civilian sections on the top floor of Defence Headquarters, was locked. The Secretary for Defence retained control of his own archives only. As the archives of a secretariat (of the Central Government) these archives had to be transferred to the Central Archives Depot of the State Archives Service. However, shortly after the militarisation of the Secretariat for Defence in October 1966, these archives were transferred to the Military History Section where they were re-amalgamated with the military records.<sup>44</sup>

Control of the military archives now resorted under the Chief Signals and Intelligence Officer (CSIO), Cmdt G.N. Robertson, in the General Staff Section.<sup>45</sup> The Archives made good progress. It brought about a new interest on the part of units, in their own history; and the help of the Archives was being requested more and more frequently to assist in the compiling of unit histories. During the fifties, two military museums were also established, one at The Castle (Cape Town) and the other at the S.A. Military College (Voor-trekkerhoogte). These museums resorted under the Archives.<sup>46</sup> The functions of the Staff Officer Military Archives now included the care and preservation of military archives,

the writing of military history and the establishment of military museums. From 1954, the organisation was also tasked with the administration of heraldry within the SADF. In view of these non-archival functions, the name of the office was changed to "Military History Subsection" with effect from 7 January 1957.<sup>47</sup>

## MILITARY HISTORY SUBSECTION 1957-1968

In 1950, when the CSIO became custodian of military archives, it was evident that the Archives and War Records would eventually have to be amalgamated. It was, however, decided to postpone the merging of these offices until the bulk of the 1939/45 campaign stars and medals had been issued, and once the demobilisation and other files had been incorporated into their respective War Records files. The War Records branch was eventually transferred to the General Staff Section in 1959, and was absorbed into the Military History Subsection.

In February 1959, the Staff Officer Military History Section requested the transfer of his office to the Adjutant General's Section, in view of the fact that much of his work, namely that inherited from War Records, functionally belonged with the Adjutant General. The Minister of Defence approved the transfer with effect from 1 July 1959.<sup>48</sup> With effect from 1 November 1966, the subsection was upgraded and became known as the "Military History Section".<sup>49</sup>

In 1961, the archives of the Union War Histories Section were transferred to the Military History Subsection. These encompassed 2 485 books, 25 788 files, 1 538 Government Gazettes and Orders, 8 948 newspapers and journals

<sup>43</sup> J.A. Combrinck : Die ontstaan en ontwikkeling van die SAW Argief, *Argiefnuus*, Sept 1976, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> J.A. Combrinck ; Die ontstaan en ontwikkeling van die SAW Argief, *Argiefnuus*, Sept 1976, p. 8; and DC Group 3, Box 124, file DC 739/1 Old and Obsolete Records. Minute HWA 668/6/1 dd July 1966 from the Chief of Defence Force Administration to the Director of Archives.

<sup>45</sup> DC, Box 1909, file DC 251/6 Records General Destruction of Obsolete Records; MVEF, Box 120, file MV78 Krygsargief; and HWA 668, Box 1, file HWA 668/2/1 Organisasie Beleid.

<sup>46</sup> HWA 668, Box 1, file HWA 668/2/1 Organisasie Beleid. Enc 5 "Memo Weermagsargief" by CSIO.

<sup>47</sup> HWA 668, Box 2, file HWA 668/2/1 Organisasie Beleid vol 2. Minute KG/AOH/1/2 dd 18 Dec 1957 from the Commandant General, SADF to the Adjutant General.

<sup>48</sup> HWA 668, Box 2, file HWA 668/2/1 Organisasie Beleid vol 2. Enc 33 telex dd 2 June 1959 from the Adjutant General to the Commandant General, SADF.

<sup>49</sup> HWA 668, Box 3, file HWA 668/2/3, circular dd 1 Nov 1966 from the SSO Military Historical Subsection to all HWA subsections.



and some 1 000 photographs. The material included original war diaries and general correspondence files from the Second World War; the administrative files generated by the Union War Histories Section; and numerous unpublished manuscripts produced by the historians of the Section.<sup>50</sup> These archives were sorted and accessioned as the following archive groups:

- (a) the war diaries were sorted according to unit and campaign, and taken up in the "War Diaries" group (ref. W.D.).
- (b) the correspondence generated by the Section was accessioned as the "Union War Histories Administrative Files" (ref. UWH Admin).
- (c) the manuscripts were sorted according to theme and accessioned as the "Union War Histories Manuscripts" (ref. UWH).

The question of legal status for the military archives had enjoyed attention since 1950. However, this issue was only resolved some 18 years later. The core of the problem lay in article 6 of the *Archives Act* (No 6 of 1962), which provided for the transfer of:

"all archives in a government office or in any office of a local authority which are not in terms of any Act of Parliament required to be kept in the custody of a particular person, shall be transferred to the appropriate archives depot if they are thirty years old or older."

The *Defence Act* (No 44 of 1957) did not make provision for the Commandant General to permanently keep his own archives; and, furthermore, with the establishment of the Department of Defence in 1912, there were already military archives older than 30 years which were no longer required for administrative purposes. According to the letter of the Act, these archives qualified for transfer to the State Archives.

On 16 August 1967, after close liaison between the State Archives and the Defence Force, the Minister of Defence

requested the Minister of Education, Arts and Science to approve the establishment of a separate military archives depot in terms of section 5(d) of the *Archives Act*.<sup>51</sup> With effect from this date, the name Military History Section was replaced by that of "SADF Archives".<sup>52</sup> Despite the change in designation the military historical and archival functions remained together. The SADF Archives received legal status with effect from 14 May 1968.

It must, however, be stressed that 14 May 1968 did not see the establishment of a military archives. Instead, from this date, the Director of Archives now recognised the military archival organisation which had developed within the Department of Defence since 1 August 1919. The *de facto* position had now become *de jure*.

### THE MILITARY HISTORICAL AND ARCHIVAL SERVICE 1968-1972

On 29 July 1968, the SADF Archives together with the other existing military historical functions of the former Military History Section, were amalgamated to form an umbrella organisation called the "Military Historical and Archival Service" (MHAS). This organisation resorted under the Chief of Personnel (as the Adjutant General's Section and later Chief of Defence Force Administration, had become known).<sup>53</sup>

The activities of MHAS grew dramatically and, in particular, enquiries regarding the 'contemporary history' of the SADF increased in volume. In order to meet this need, an actuality service with a newspaper cuttings department, commenced. This later proved to be an unhappy addition to the otherwise historically-orientated functions of the organisation. A documentation service in the true sense of the word, was developing rapidly; and in view of these changes, another change of name

<sup>50</sup> HWA 668, Box 2, file HWA 668/2/1 Organisasie Beleid vol 2. Enc 58 Annual Report Sub-Section Military History (AG7) 1 Dec 60 - 30 Nov 61.

<sup>51</sup> E. Jonker : Die Militêr-Historiese en Argival Dienste van die Departement van Verdediging. *Militaria*, 1(1) 1969, pp. 9-12.

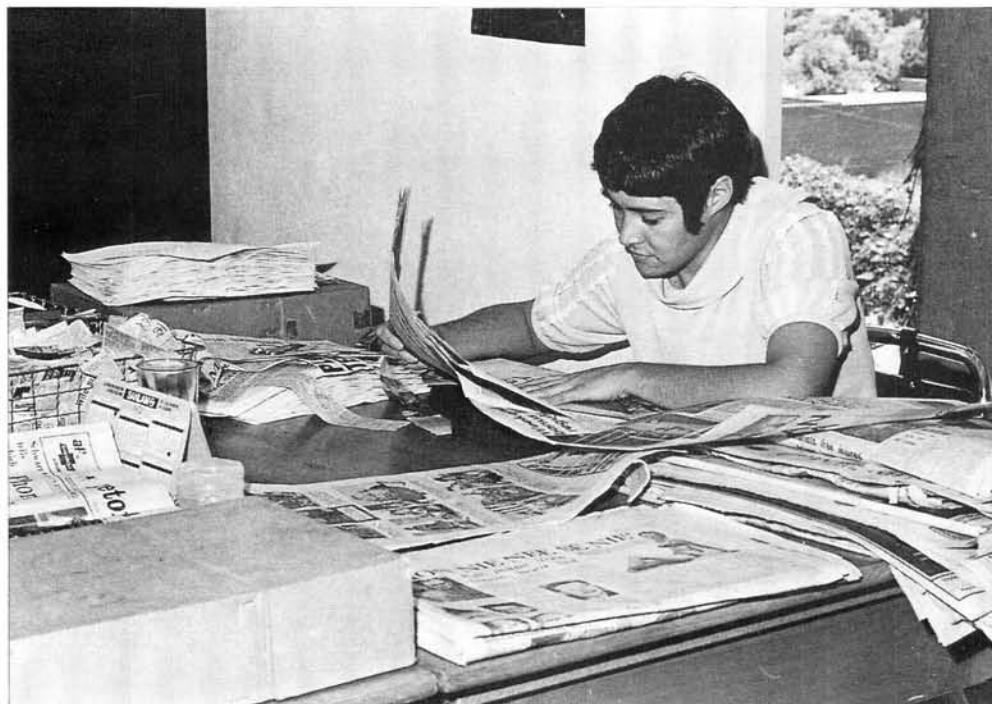
<sup>52</sup> Archive of the Military Historical and Archival Service (MHAS), Box 1, file HWA/A3/5/2, Enc 4 Press Release by the Minister of National Education.

<sup>53</sup> R. von Moltke : Die ontstaan en ontwikkeling van die Stafafdeling Hoof van Staf Personeel. *Militaria*, 12(2) 1982, pp. 48-49.

was approved in October 1972. The organisation became known as the "Central Documentation Service, SADF".

During the late sixties, the Military Historical and Archival Service made its debut in the field of military history with the commencing of a military history journal known as *Militaria*, and what was to be a yearbook series - they have since become known as the

Black Publication series. However, from the mid-seventies, the practice of military history within the SADF began to lose momentum. The addition of all the non-historical functions to the Military Historical and Archival Service and its successors, from the early seventies, had begun to tell. Much of the resources which should have gone into historical projects were tapped off for other projects and other publications. The effect is clearly discernible. The



*The newspaper cutting department of the Military Information Bureau.*



*The Black Publications Series. The last number appeared in 1987.*

Black Publications began to appear most irregularly; and *Militaria* became a quarterly journal instead of appearing once every second month. From 1977, the shortage of historical articles was so acute that *Militaria*, in contravention to policy, began to transmogrify into a multi-disciplinary periodical.

### **DOCUMENTATION SERVICE, SADF 1972-1982**

In October 1972, control of the organisation was transferred from Director General Personnel to the office of the Director-General Management Systems, one of the four fragments of the former office of the Chief of Defence Force Administration.

In 1974, sweeping changes were made to the command and control structure of the SADF. These changes also had important implications for the Central Documentation Service. The reference library service of the SADF was integrated with the section; and a decision was reached that the Historical Writing and Archival services of the Central Documentation Service be separated from the rest of the organisation and be placed under the control of the Director General, General Administration (DGGA) - another remnant of the Chief of Defence Force Administration. Fortunately, this never materialised. After an investigation, the continued existence of the Central Documentation Service, comprising these two functions together with the Central Library (DHQ), was approved by the Minister of Defence.

The increase in size brought a change in the nature and status of the organisation; and on 1 February 1975, the Central Documentation Service became a full directorate with the designation "Directorate Documentation Service" (Doc S). The Directorate began to be perceived as a general service-rendering information service. More and more, time was spent on the provision of a general information rather than the provision of a traditional archival service to the SADF. This was particularly the case after the absorption of the Central Library at De-

fence Headquarters. And so, the Directorate transmogrified into an information service with a capability to select, classify and disseminate all types of information; and the office received a functional-orientation at the cost of its professional archival-historical nature.<sup>54</sup> The Archival Section of the present Documentation Service is still battling with a backlog which started to accumulate from this time.

Further organisational changes took place within the SADF during 1975. On 1 November of that year, Director General Management Systems was disbanded, and Directorate Documentation Service was transferred to the Comptroller, SADF. On 5 November 1976, the office of the Comptroller, SADF became known as Chief of Staff Management Systems; and from 13 February 1978, as Chief of Staff Finance.

To somebody not *au fait* with the background, the presence of Directorate Documentation Service within the organisation of Chief of Staff Finance appeared inexplicable and illogical. It was therefore accepted that, despite a very happy liaison, Chief of Staff Finance could not offer a permanent home to Directorate Documentation Service; and the directorate was duly transferred to a seemingly more appropriate staff division.

### **MILITARY INFORMATION BUREAU 1982-1986**

Directorate Documentation Service was transferred to Chief of Staff Intelligence (Sub-Division Communications Operations) with effect from 1 January 1982, and acquired a new designation, more commensurate with the intelligence function, namely the "Military Information Bureau, SADF" (MIB).

The activities of the Bureau, included the collection and dissemination of military information over and above the archival functions, the library, actuality and research services. The SADF Archives was thus one of five subsections under the MIB umbrella. The organization also had a Section Ethnol-

<sup>54</sup> Reports, Box 178, DGBS/DBD/305/6/171 Verslag oor Sentrale Donkumentasiediens, SAW, pp. 2-4.



ogy which became involved in the archaeological excavations at Schoemansdal and in KwaZulu/Natal.

However, the archival and historical functions of the Bureau did not enjoy the same measure of attention. The staff, numerically hopelessly inadequate, were not able to satisfactorily execute the archival functions. *Inter alia*, the inspection of registries, the appraisal of archives and the disposal of ephemeral material ceased to take place. This immediately led to increased pressure on the accommodation, as the ephemeral material began to consume valuable rack space. Furthermore, various factors including the withdrawal of the SADF from South West Africa and the concomitant organisational changes within the SADF, caused a large flow of archives (and, of course, more ephemeral material) to the SADF Archives. In May 1989, a train of 13 carriages from South West Africa, arrived at the Voortrekkerhoogte station with no less than three linear kilometres of files aboard. These were the archives of the disbanded South West African Territorial Force, and of some of the South African formations and units which had served in the Southern African campaign.

The Military Information Bureau was disbanded on 31 December 1986, and its functions were separated and decentralised. The reference libraries, ethnology and the military museums became the responsibility of Arms of Service, Commands and, in some cases, units; while the actuality and information service became part of the Directorate Information Service at Military Intelligence Division. The disbanding of MIB had a severe effect on the practice of military history. It involved the total destruction of the publication programme at the SADF Archives, as a result of the transfer of Section Publications and Projects to Directorate Public Relations. The Black Publications series stopped - the last number appeared in 1987; and the military-historical journal *Militaria*, until April 1993, was "lost" to both the organization and the military-

history community as a whole. Furthermore, the computerisation of archives also ground to a halt, as a result of the transfer of the indexing and coding personnel to Directorate Information Service (Military Intelligence Division).<sup>55</sup>

The original nucleus of the old Directorate Documentation Service was all that remained. This nucleus, comprising Section Archives and Section Research and Historical Writing, became a separate entity known as the "SADF Archives", with veteran archivist Colonel J.A. Combrinck as the Senior Staff Officer.

And so, despite the disadvantages, the SADF Archives succeeded in separating itself from the a-historical functions. This, to a large extent, enabled the organisation to concentrate on the activities of a normal archives depot. However, this was not easy to achieve, and the provision of military information has remained an inseparable part of the Archives functions.<sup>56</sup> The SADF Archives functioned as a section of Directorate Information Service within Military Intelligence Division, from 1 January 1987 to 31 March 1990.

### **DIRECTORATE DOCUMENTATION SERVICE 1990-1992**

On 1 April 1990, the organisation once again became known as "Directorate Documentation Service, SADF" (Doc S), following the amalgamation of the SADF Archives and the Research and Historical Writing Section, with Project Histogram (Military Intelligence Division), the Library Services (including SADF Central Library at Defence Headquarters) and the Personnel Information Bureau (PIB) at Personnel Division.

The Directorate was placed under the control of Chief of Staff Personnel (Chief Director Manpower Development), the successor organisation of the Adjutant General. Thus, so to speak, the history of the SADF Archives has made a complete circle since 1972, falling for short periods under

<sup>55</sup> Registry Directorate Documentation Service (Doc S), file HSP/DOKD/106/1/6 dd 8 Sep 1992 from Director Documentation Service to the Chief Director Manpower Maintenance.

<sup>56</sup> J.A. Combrinck : Die Geskiedenis, Lief en Leed van die SAW Argief, *Argiefnuus*, July 1988, p. 41.

various staff divisions only to arrive back with the personnel function in 1990. Colonel J.A. Combrinck became Director Documentation Service with effect from 1 April 1990; and he was succeeded by Colonel C.J. Nothling on 1 February 1992.

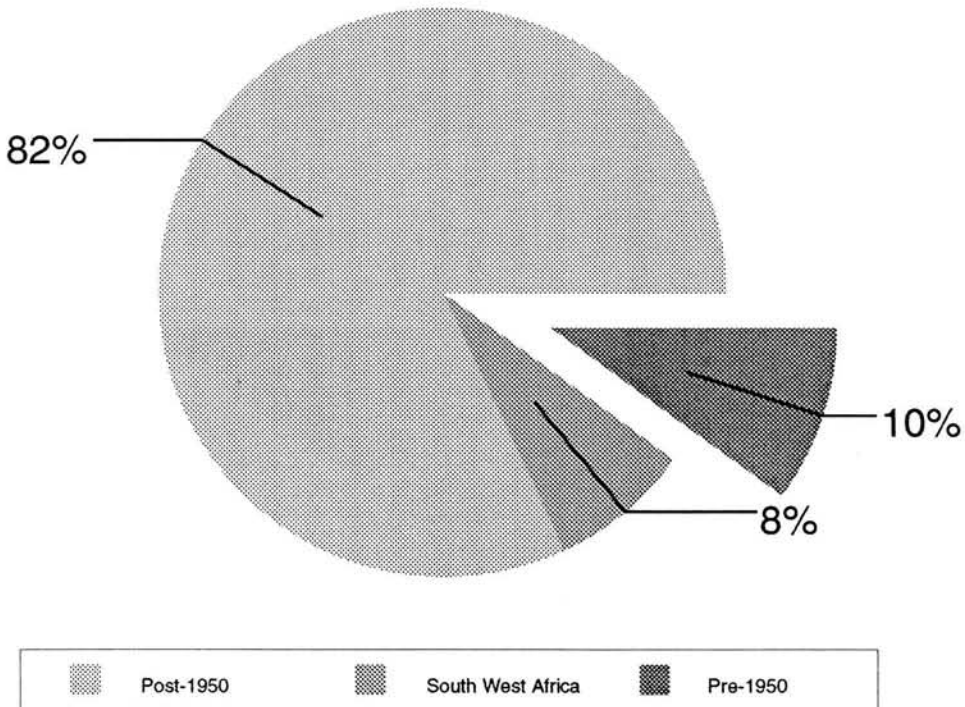
Today Directorate Documentation Service is one of the largest archives depots in the country with, it might be added, the smallest number of academic personnel.<sup>57</sup> In 1992, the office controls some 35 linear kilometres of files, of which only 3,67 linear kilometres predate the establishment of the Military Archives Section in 1950 (figure 1). In other words, only 10% of the total holding of the SADF Archives was generated during the first forty years (c. 1910-1950) since the establishment of the defence force, while the remaining

90% was generated during the following forty years (1950-c. 1990). This may, perhaps, be ascribed both to the paper explosion of the twentieth century and the indiscriminate destruction of military records until the 1950s.

The Directorate is the highest authority and policy-maker in terms of military-historical writing, the SADF filing system and all other archival matters, battle honours, names provision and professional management of the SADF library service.

*\*Major I.J. van der Waag SAMS, is posted to Directorate Documentation Service (SADF Archives).*

**Figure 1**  
**Total holding of the SADF Archives**



<sup>57</sup> Doc S, file HSP/DOK D/514/2 dd 21 June 1990 from Director Documentation Service to the Chief Director Manpower Development.