

SA FORCES IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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UNION DEFENCE FORCE: LAND FORCES

Organisation of Union Defence Force

(a) *Pre-War.* At the outbreak of war in September, 1939, the armed forces of the Union consisted of a Permanent Force of 352 Officers and 5 033 men, and an Active Citizen Force of 918 Officers and 12 572 men. Of the Permanent Force, 173 Officers and 1 664 men formed the South African Air Force, 47 Officers and 562 men were members of the South African Artillery and 17 Officers and 1 705 men formed the Special Service Battalion, a unit consisting of men who served on a short-service basis for a minimum of one year. The rest were concerned principally in the supply services and in administering the Active Citizen Force. The latter was roughly parallel to the Territorial Army in Britain, since membership, although nominally compulsory, was in effect restricted to volunteers from among the various age groups called up annually for compulsory registration. Members of the Active Citizen Force were enrolled in units, some of which could show a history dating back to the middle of the last century, and were required to perform 1½ to 4 hours of non-continuous training per week, and 15 days of continuous training, in camp, each year.

(b) *Outbreak of War.* On 22nd September, 1939, soon after the outbreak of war, the Active Citizen Force units were authorized to accept volunteers for the period of the duration of the war, and part-time training was intensified, while each unit was required to undergo a month's continuous training. On 16th February, 1940, owing to objections that the Defence Act did not serve save in the defence of South Africa, and to the difficulty of defining the areas involved, the Active Citizen Force was reorganised on the basis of volunteers who undertook to serve anywhere in Africa. A shoulder flash of a strip of orange-scarlet, seven-eighths of an inch wide, was adopted as the badge of those who had undertaken this obligation.

(c) *Formation of 1, 2 and 3 Divisions.* The chief difficulty in the way of training was the shortage of equipment, and many substitutes and improvisations were devised. Difficulties were gradually overcome, and on the 20th May, 1940, the First South African Infantry Brigade was mobilized for fulltime service, and after a short period of training, left for East Africa on the 16th July, 1940. Later in the year an increasing number of units were called up and other Brigades were formed. 1 SA Divisional Headquarters (with Brig Genl Geo. E. Brink, DSO, later Maj Genl, and CB, CBE, as General Officer Commanding) was formed and left for East Africa during November. 2 SA Divisional Headquarters was formed on the 23rd October, 1940, but the Division did not leave the Union until June, 1941, when it proceeded direct to Egypt. (Maj Genl I.P. de Villiers, MC, later CB, was appointed General Officer Commanding).

Meanwhile other units were formed, including the South African Tanks Corps, the South African Artillery was enlarged and strengthened, and the auxiliary services were reorganised on something approaching a modern basis. The units remaining in the Unions were organised for home defence and garrison duty as the Third South African Division. (Maj Genl Manie Botha, CMG, DTD, was the General Officer Commanding).

2. Italian East Africa

(a) *1 SA Brigade – June – December, 1940.* On the arrival of 1 SA Brigade in Kenya in June, 1940, the situation of the colony was critical, and remained so for several months. Only two divisions, the 11th and 12th African, held the 750 mile front. During the period the Italians took advantage of their great superiority in numbers to overrun British Somaliland, and on the Kenya frontier they seized British Moyale and pushed some sixty miles



General Smuts inspecting South African forces in East Africa.

south to Buma. The 1st SA Brigade under command of Brig D.H. Pienaar (later Maj Genl and CB, CBE, DSO) was placed under command of 12 (African) Division, which was based on Wajir in the direct path of any further Italian advance. None took place. The enemy frittered away his opportunity, and by November the arrival of 1 SA Division made it possible for our forces to take the offensive. On 16 December, 1940, 1 SA Brigade in co-operation with 24 Gold Coast Brigade made a successful raid on El Wak, and at virtually no cost inflicted heavy casualties on an enemy battalion. As a result of this operation, our troops established an ascendancy over the Italians which they never lost.

- (b) *Difficulties of Advance.* On taking over command of the East African Force on the 1st November, 1940, Lt Genl Sir Alan Cunningham was faced with the problem of crossing several hundred miles of waterless desert before he could attack a numerically superior enemy. The collapse of the Italians in the Western Desert encouraged him to take the offensive, but no advance would have been possible without the support of SA Road Construction Companies, SA Motor Transport Companies (Troop and Water carrying) and of the 36 Water Supply Company SA Engineer Corps which developed boreholes in the vast tracts of waterless bush between the Tana and Juba rivers. Without detracting in any way from the qualities of the fighting troops, it must be emphasised that the main problems of the East African

campaign were administrative. The provision by South Africa of well-equipped Motor Transport Companies and Engineering units was of vital importance.

- (c) *1 SA Division Capture of Mega – November, 1940–April, 1941.* 1 SA Divisional Headquarters opened at Gilgil on the 1st November, 1940, and on the 1st December, 1940, the Division became responsible for the Marsabit sector. 2 SA Infantry Brigade held Marsabit itself, and occupied outposts on the Northern frontier. On the 30th December, 1940, 25 East African Brigade, which was in the Turkana, west of Lake Rudolf, came under command. The Kenya front was now held by three Divisions. 1 SA Division was responsible for 250 miles of inhospitable country, stretching from the Sudan border to the area of Moyale.

In January 1941, the General Officer Commanding East Africa Force, ordered the Division to advance across the Chalbi desert to the Abyssinian frontier, with the double object of encouraging a patriot revolt in the province of Galla Sidamo, and of outflanking the Mega-Moyale escarpment. It was considered, at this stage, that no major movement against Abyssinia would be possible before the end of the rains in May.

On the 14th January, 1941, 2 SA Infantry Battalion began to concentrate in the area of Dukana (which had already been occupied by a company of Abyssinian irregulars). 1 Natal Mounted Rifles took El Yibo and the Field Force Brigade occupied El Sardu. The enemy was pushed back over the frontier.

On the 1st February, 1941, 1 SA Division began operations against Hobok, El Gumu, and Gorai. The Division crossed the frontier and by the 3rd February, 1941, these places had been occupied.

The Division now moved against Mega and Moyala, with the object of safeguarding its flank and easing its difficult line of communication. Both brigades took part in the attack on Mega, which fell on the 18th February. One thousand prisoners were taken.

The General Officer Commanding East Africa Force now considered employing the Division in supporting operations beyond the Juba River, which had been crossed

successfully on the 22nd February, (11 para 2.d.), but in view of the rapid advance of 11 (African) Division and 1 SA Infantry Brigade its role was changed. 2 SA Infantry Brigade was made available for operations in British Somaliland and, because of German successes in North Africa, Divisional Head Quarters and 5 SA Brigade were despatched to Egypt. On the 6th April, Divisional Head Quarters handed over responsibility for its sectors to 12 (A) Division.

- (d) *Advance on Addis Ababa 11th February, 1941–5th April, 1941.* On the 15th January, General Officer Commanding East Africa, ordered 11 and 12 (African) Divisions to advance against Kismayu and the line of the Juba. 1 SA Brigade formed part of 12 Division. The operation met with such brilliant success that its scope was continually extended, until what had been initially a limited attack on Kismayu, developed into a triumphant advance on Addis Ababa.

The operations began with the capture of Afmadu on the 11th February, by 22 (East African) Brigade.

1 SA Infantry Brigade and 24 Gold Coast Brigade passed through. The plan for 24 Gold Coast Brigade was to reach the Juba at Bulo Erillo, threaten Jelib and so draw away the enemy reserves. Meanwhile 1 SA Infantry Brigade was to cross the river near its mouth at Gobwen and form a bridgehead at Jumbo. It was appreciated that pressure on the Juba would lead to the capture of Kismayu.

On the 13th February, 24 Gold Coast Brigade took Bulo Erillo after severe fighting. The enemy that evening evacuated Kismayu. The following day 1 Brigade attacked Gobwen, supported by 12 light tanks of 1 SA Tank Company. The enemy retreated across the river to Jumbo. 1 Brigade did not cross as planned, but on the night 17th/18th February, made a surprise crossing at Yonte and drove off a counter attack, in which the assaulting colonial infantry were mowed down by a Company of 1 Transvaal Scottish. This was perhaps the decisive action of the campaign. The following day 24 Gold Coast Brigade crossed at Mabungo. On the 20th February, 1 Brigade crossed in force and the two brigades proceeded to the envelop-

ment of Jelib which was occupied on the 22nd February. Enemy resistance along the Juba collapsed and thousands of prisoners were taken.

11 (Africa) Division took over the pursuit, with 23 Nigerian Brigade leading, supported by South African light tanks. The Nigerians covered 250 miles in two and a half days, and on the 25th February, occupied Mogadishu. This was the most rapid advance yet recorded in history. In view of this unforeseen success, the General Officer Commanding East Africa obtained permission to march to Harar. With the crust of enemy defence broken, progress was rapid.

The next enemy defence to be encountered were those at the Marda Pass, guarding the approaches to Harar. These, the Nigerian Brigade attacked and broke on the 21st March. 1 Transvaal Scottish, supported by a section of 1 SA Light Tank Company, mopped up an enemy flanking position at Gojetti.

The enemy stood at Babile. The Royal Natal Carbineers turned the enemy's left flank and on the 24th March, the Nigerian Brigade continued to advance.

The next delaying position was at Bisidiomo. Two battalions of the Nigerian Brigade made the attack, supported by two batteries of 7 SA Field Brigade. On the 26th March, Harar surrendered.

The General Officer Commanding East Africa now obtained permission to advance on Addis Ababa. 1 SA Infantry took the lead on the 27th March. 1 Transvaal Scottish brushed aside some opposition. Heavy demolitions blocked the road down the pass into Dire-dawa, but an East African Field Company opened the road in 48 hours. On the 29th March, 1 Transvaal Scottish patrols, after very slight opposition, entered Dire-dawa.

Two roads run west towards Addis Ababa. Along the southerly of these the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles advanced, and after a brisk engagement took Deder on the 30th March. Along the more northerly the rest of 1 SA Infantry Brigade proceeded. Virtually no opposition was encountered, and demolitions alone hampered the advance. At

Miesso the Divisional Commander ordered 22 Brigade to continue the advance. After forcing the line of the River Awash, 22 Brigade entered Addis Ababa on the 5th April, 1941. The following day 1 SA Infantry Brigade entered the capital. The two field regiments – 4 and 7 SA Field Brigades – had played an invaluable part in the advance.

A landing at Berbera, when 11 Division was approaching Jijiga, greatly shorted the lines of communication. At the end of March, 2 SA Infantry Brigade was despatched there to help clear up isolated pockets of enemy in eastern Somaliland.



Transvaal Scottish entering Addis Ababa.

- (e) *Dessie and Amba Alagi.* After the fall of Addis Ababa, enemy forces held out both south and north of the capital. The General Officer Commanding East Africa Force ordered 1 SA Brigade to fight its way north to Dessie, and from there, with the assistance of Sudan Force, to open the road to Massawa. On the 13th April, 1 Royal Natal Carbineers, with supporting artillery, armoured cars, and engineers began the advance north from Addis Ababa. Co-operating with them were Campbell's Scouts, a force of Abyssinian irregulars.

Heavy demolitions beyond Mussolini Tunnel slowed the advance, but on the 14th April, 1 Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles occupied Debra Sina. On the 16th April, the advance continued. The following day the Brigade came under shellfire in the approaches to Kombolcha Pass. 1 Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles moved along the high ground east of the road, with 1 Transvaal Scottish on their left. Campbell's Scouts operated round the flanks. On the 19th April, 1 Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles repulsed an enemy counter-attack. The following night 1 Royal Natal Carbineers relieved 1 Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles, and on the 22nd April, the Royal Natal Carbineers and 1 Transvaal Scottish attacked and shattered the enemy defences. The advance continued with the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles leading. Dessie came under shellfire and surrendered on the 26th April. 5000 Italians and 3000 native troops were captured.

On the 1st May, 1 Royal Natal Carbineers occupied Waldia, and four days later Campbell's Scouts entered Alomata. The Brigade now advanced on the mountain position of

Amba Alaji to support the Sudan force, which had won great victories in Eritrea, and destroyed the pick of the Italian army. On the 8th May it came under command of the Sudan force. Working in conjunction with 5 Indian Division, the Brigade closed in on the enemy defences. On the 14th May, 1 Transvaal Scottish attacked Mt. Corarsi and occupied it the following day. 1 Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles patrolled towards Fort Toselli. Preparations were made for a final assault on the Amba Alaji position on the 18th May. On the 16th May, however, the enemy sued for an armistice and on the 19th May, the Duke of Aosta, Viceroy of Italian East Africa, surrendered with 5000 men, the remnant of the Italian army of Eritrea. 1 Brigade proceeded to Massawa and Egypt.

- (f) *Battle of the Lakes (1 Natal Mounted Rifles and 1 Field Force Battalion).* After the fall of Addis Ababa on the 5th April, considerable Italian forces, amounting on paper to seven divisions, were located in the lakes region south of the capital. This area is covered with dense forests, and is badly served by roads which become impassable in heavy rain. Moreover, April is the peak period of the rains.

Nevertheless, the General Officer Commanding East Africa decided to attack, firstly with the object of opening up a direct line of communication to Kenya, and later with the intention of destroying the whole Italian force. 12 (African) Division, operating from Neghelli and Yavello, attacked from the South. This operation made slow progress in face of mountainous country, heavy rain,

and the unusual tenacity of the enemy. 11 (African) Division attacked from the North. The Division consisted of 23 (Nigerian) Brigade, and 22 (East African) Infantry Brigade. Meanwhile 2 SA Brigade was held up at Berbera awaiting shipping for Egypt, and at the end of April, the General Officer Commanding East Africa decided to detach 1 Natal Mounted Rifles and 1 Field Force Battalion from this Brigade to support 22 (East African) Infantry Brigade.

On the 13th May, 1 Natal Mounted Rifles played a notable part in the successful attack of 22 Brigade on Shashamanna. On the 17th May the Brigade captured Dalle. The advance was continued on Soddu, with a view to cutting off the Italian forces facing 12 Division. The two SA Brigades had the role of holding Dalle and protecting the flank of 22 Brigade. Soddu fell on the 22nd May, and thereafter enemy resistance in the Lakes crumpled up before the advance of the East African and Nigerian infantry. Artillery support, however, was almost exclusively South African (Two Field Brigades and one Medium Battery), and a SA Light Tank Company (12 Tanks) was attached to 11 Division. 11 and 12 African divisions joined hands on the 23rd May, when a section of 1 SA Armoured Car Company attached to 12 Division reached Wambo, which was held by 1 Field Force Division. As a result of the successful operations of 11 (African) Division against Jimma and Lechemti, General Gazzera surrendered on the 3rd July, 1941. In the Battle of the Lakes more than 40 000 Italians and colonial troops were eliminated.

- (g) *Gondar*. After the surrender of the Italians in the South, a force of approximately 25 000 Italian and Colonial troops held out in the Gondar area. In November, 1941, 12 (African) Division began operations against Gondar, and after stiff fighting captured the place on the 27th November. A few SA Units took part in the operations, viz:

Detachment South African Armoured Cars.

9 Field Company South African Engineering Corps.

17 Field Park Company South African Engineering Corps.

1 South African Field Workshops.

Air support was provided by three South African Air Force Squadrons.

- (h) *General*. As stated in paragraph (b) the chief problems of the East African Campaign were administrative and technical. The following figures indicate the South African contribution in this respect: (ie total number of units in the campaign)

Engineers:

6 Field Companies

4 Field Park Companies

7 Road Construction Companies

1 Water Supply Company

Medical:

1 General Hospital

3 Casualty Clearing Stations

4 Field Ambulances

3 Motor Ambulance Convoys

Supplies and Transport

33 Motor Transport Companies

(In addition two Motor Transport Companies served in the Sudan in support of the advance into Eritrea.)

The total Union Defence Force (Land) battle casualties in East Africa amounted to 270, of whom 73 were killed.

3. North Africa

- (a) *Preparation – 4 May, 1941–17 November, 1941*. 1 SA Division Headquarters opened in Egypt on the 4th May, 1941. The Division concentrated in the Amiriya area, and became responsible for the Nubiriya defence line, covering the Delta.

On the 24th May, 1 SA Division took over Mersa Matruh using initially 5 SA Infantry Brigade, and a Polish Brigade which was temporarily under command. 2 SA Infantry Brigade completed its concentration, and also moved into the fortress. On the 30th June, 1 SA Infantry Brigade arrived at Matruh, replacing the Polish Brigade; the Division was together for the first time since the beginning of active operations. The Division busied itself in improving the Matruh defences, and in building a 17-mile-long outpost line. It did such training in desert warfare as pioneer activities and the shortage of desert-worthy transport would permit. There were frequent air-raids during this period

2 SA Division moved to Egypt direct from South Africa, and the bulk of the Division

landed on the 20th June, 1941. The division concentrated at Mareopolis, taking over responsibility for the Nubirya line, and it too started desert training, although also hampered by lack of transport.

At the beginning of August, 2 SA Division moved to El Alamein, and undertook the construction of a defensive position.

On the 3rd November, 1 SA Divisional Headquarters and 1 and 5 SA Infantry Brigades moved from the Matruh area, and concentrated south of Bir Istabl. Intensive training followed, and on the night 16/17 November, this training brought the Division (still minus 2 SA Infantry Brigade) to an area 30 miles east of the Libyan frontier.

(b) *Preparation – 4 May, 1941–17 November, 1941.* On the 18th November, 1941, Lt Genl Sir Alan Cunningham who had taken over command of the newly formed Eighth Army, began an offensive in Cyrenaica. The plan was for 30 Corps comprising 7 Armoured Division, 1 SA Division, and 22 Guards Brigade, to cross the frontier in the Maddalena area, and swing northwest towards Tobruk. 7 Armoured Division was to seek out the enemy armour and destroy it. 1 SA Division was to seek out the enemy armour and destroy it. 1 SA Division was to guard the left flank of 7 Armoured Division in this operation, and then advance past Sidi Rezegh to threaten the rear of the enemy investing Tobruk. This would assist the garrison in making a sortie, and the garrison and 1 SA Division would link up in the El Duda area. The 13 Corps, comprising 2 New Zealand Division, 4 Indian Division, and 1 Army Tank Brigade, would in the meantime isolate Halfaia Pass, Sollum, and Bardia. It was hoped the enemy would be crushed between the two Corps and the Tobruk garrison. The enemy forces consisted of two German armoured divisions, a German motorized division, an Italian armoured division, and seven Italian infantry divisions, all under the immediate command of Genl Rommel. His great advantage lay in the superior quality of his tanks.

On the night 17/18th November, 1 SA Division crossed the frontier. The following day 1 SA Infantry Brigade received orders to attack the enemy armour and infantry at Bir el Gubi. On the 20th November, the Brigade

made contact with the enemy, and until the 22nd November, remained in the area, with artillery active in both sides, and the air force active on the enemy's side.



Action in the desert.

Meanwhile, a British armoured brigade, on the 20th November, seized Sidi Rezegh landing ground. The Corps Commander ordered 5 SA Infantry Brigade (under command of Brig B.F. Armstrong) northwards towards Sidi Rezegh, with the object of linking up the following day with the Tobruk garrison in the El Duda area. The enemy moved up the Italian armoured division from El Gubi and ordered a junction of all his armoured divisions in the Sidi Rezegh area.

7 Armoured Division was involved in heavy fighting on the 21st November, and the enemy reoccupied Sid Rezegh airfield. 5 SA Infantry Brigade, now under the command of 7 Armoured Division, was forced to halt some miles south of Sidi Rezegh to await the outcome of the tank battle.

On the 22nd November, 5 SA Infantry Brigade received orders to continue its advance, and to take Point 178, a beacon on the escarpment three miles south of the tomb of Sidi Rezegh, and link with the Tobruk garrison at El Duda. Point 178 was strongly held. 3 Transvaal Scottish attacked the position in the afternoon, and, after incurring 115 casualties withdrew. The Brigade laagered with 3 Transvaal Scottish to the north. 1 SA Irish on the west, 1 Regiment Botha on the east, Brigade Headquarters in the centre, and the B Echelon (the soft supply vehicles etc) on the south.

On the morning of the 23rd November, an enemy tank force appeared on the south side of 5 Brigade's position, and at 0730 hours some tanks made an attack on the south of the laager, burst into the B Echelon area and considerably disorganised it. Soon after midday, an enemy infantry attack in 3 Transvaal Scottish sector drew off reserves to the north, and a demonstration by tanks to the north-west drew off the few surviving tanks of the west-flanking British tank brigade.

At about 1545 hours the main enemy attack, using over 100 tanks supported by infantry, came in from the south-west and the Brigade Headquarters was taken prisoner at about 1615 hours. Fighting continued until dark, the South African artillery fired until ammunition was exhausted, and serious losses were inflicted on the enemy. Some stragglers escaped under cover of darkness, but the entire Brigade was overrun.

- (c) *Taib el Esem – 22nd November–26th November, 1941.* 1 SA Infantry Brigade, on the afternoon of the 22nd November, received orders to move to 5 Brigade's area. It disengaged from the enemy at Bir el Gubi, but was unable to reach 5 Brigade next day, because an enemy tank force blocked the way. Towards evening 1 Brigade was withdrawn to Taib el Esem to prevent an enemy attack from Gubi along 30 Corps' line of communication. On the 24th November, 1 Brigade (which included 7 SA Field Regiment and a British medium battery) consolidated.

On the 25th November, enemy tanks and artillery made three heavy attacks on 1 Brigade, but these were beaten off with great loss. Supported by the timely arrival of British armour, the Brigade held out until night-fall, and then withdrew to make contact with its supply transport. The artillery played a notable part in repulsing this attack, and the action reflected great credit on Brig Pienaar and his Brigade.

- (d) *Relief of Tobruk.* After the failure to hold Sidi Rezegh, Genl Cunningham had wished to abandon the offensive and regroup on the Egyptian frontier. Genl Auchinleck overruled him, however, and replaced him by Genl Ritchie. Fortunately Rommel, instead of con-



General Dan Pienaar with S/M Gudgeon of the Dukes (Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles).

centrating his armoured divisions, which were too strong for our tanks, dispersed his armour by sending mobile columns to attack our communications with Egypt. The 8th Army continued the offensive and on the 27th November, the New Zealand division succeeded in gaining contact with the Tobruk garrison.

On the 28th November, 1 SA Brigade received orders to move to Sidi Rezegh to link up with the New Zealand division, and came under command of the New Zealand division. Rommel, however, was thoroughly alarmed by the fact that his 21 Armoured Division was cut off east of Sidi Rezegh, and reacted violently against the New Zealand division. 1 SA Brigade, therefore, was pushing into an area where the enemy was concentrating his main effort. On the night of the 30th November, 1 Royal Natal Carbineers was repulsed in an attempt to capture the escarpment overlooking Sidi Rezegh. That day the enemy inflicted heavy losses on the New Zealand division, and drove it out of Sidi Rezegh. On the 1st December, 1 SA Brigade was withdrawn South, with the remainder of 30 Corps. Throughout this period the Brigade artillery was repeatedly in action, engaging targets with good effect.

On the 2nd December, the Brigade took up position at Taib el Esem. It protected the corps maintenance area and harassed the enemy with composite columns.

On the 7th December, the enemy, exhausted by the battle, and heavily attacked from the air, began a general withdrawal to the Gazala line. 1 SA Brigade played no part in subsequent operations against the Gazala line, and on the 20th December, returned to Egypt.

(e) *Bardia and Sollum 16th December, 1941–17th January, 1942.* Meanwhile 2 SA Division passed from Army reserve into 13 Corps, most of 13 Corps forces having had to be thrown into 30 Corps' battle to turn the tide. 2 Division, plus 2 SA Brigade which had moved up from Matruh encountered the enemy at Halfaia, Cova, Sollum, and Bardia. 3 SA Infantry Brigade attempted an attack on Bardia on the 16th December but the enemy forces were found to be much stronger than reported, and the attack was called off after 1 Royal Durban Light Infantry had broken into the perimeter. On the 31st December, 3 Brigade returned to the attack supported by New Zealand Cavalry, a Royal Tank regiment, a medium regiment, and two medium batteries of Royal Artillery, and a regiment of Polish artillery, in addition to the three regiments of 2 Division's artillery. The attack was on the southeast of the perimeter, with Kaffrarian Rifles left, 1 Imperial Light Horse centre and 1 Rand Light Infantry right. The enemy defences were strong and his resistance determined. The Rand Light Infantry and the Imperial Light Horse attained their objectives despite heavy fire, but the Kaffrarian Rifles were repulsed with severe casualties. 1 South African Police (from 6 Brigade) restored the position, the attack was resumed the following night by 4 and 3 Brigades supported by tanks, and Bardia surrendered on the 2nd January. Prisoners totalled 7 775 and South African casualties amounted to 353. Success was attributed to careful planning and the determined fighting of the SA Infantry. The action was remarkable for the fact that the defenders of Bardia were far more numerous than the attackers.

6 SA Infantry Brigade closed in on Sollum. On the 11th January, 1 South African Police cleared the Path Cairn area, and 2 Transvaal Scottish attacked Sollum, the occupation of which was complete on the following day. Plans were made for the assault on Halfaia (whither the garrison of Cova had retreated). Free French forces took over from 2 Brigade

on the east, and 2 Brigade relieved 4 Brigade on top of the escarpment. This released 3, 4 and 6 Brigades for the assault. On the 17th January, a few hours before the attack was due to take place Halfaia surrendered. Bardia, Sollum, and Halfaia cost the South Africans approximately 500 casualties, but they took 14 000 prisoners, including 4 000 Germans. 2 SA Infantry Division moved back to the Sidi Barrani area.

(f) *Regrouping of 1 and 2 SA Divisions – January–May, 1942.* The enemy fell back from Gazala, and having reorganised at El Agheila on the 21st January, advanced once more into Cyrenaica. The Allied withdrawal during the later stages was covered by E Force, a composite column which included a battery of 2 SA Field Regiment and two squadrons of 7 SA Armoured Car Reconnaissance Battalion. 1 SA Division was called on to help stem the enemy advance, and on the 27th January, 1942, it moved westwards. It took up position in the Gazala area, from El Ambar on the coast to Alem Hamza. On the 7th February, the enemy made light contact. 1 SA Division then reorganised. The Free French Brigade, which had been temporarily under command, moved south and 1 Division then held the line with the Polish Brigade (under command) left and 2 Brigade right.

2 SA Division moved to Halfaia, and began to strengthen the frontier defences. 3 SA Infantry Brigade was detached from 2 Division, and on the 21st March, took over El Adem Box. On the 20th April, 3 Brigade moved into the Gazala line, under 1 SA Division command. 1 Division was now commanded by Maj Genl D.H. Pienaar, CB, DSO. The Gazala line was now held with 3 Brigade right, 2 Brigade centre and 1 Brigade left. South of 1 Brigade were 50 Division and the Free French Brigade.

2 SA Division (less 3 SA Infantry Brigade) moved to Tobruk and took over the fortress on the 27th March, 1942. Maj Genl H.B. Klopper, DSO, assumed command of 2 SA Division on the 14th May.

(g) *Gazala and Tobruk, 16th May–20th June, 1942.* On the 26th May Rommel launched his expected offensive. His plan was most ambitious, and aimed at the destruction of the 8th Army. Passing his armour round the

south of the British line, he planned to drive directly on Tobruk, capturing advanced bases and landing grounds on the way. If successful, he would cut off the greater part of the British forces. The plan miscarried, but led to the most violent fighting in the area of Knightsbridge, El Adem, and Bir Hacheim. At times the British seemed to have the advantage, but after a fortnight of continuous fighting, the better tanks and superior tactics of the Germans gained a decisive victory. The unprecedented tank battles around the "Cauldron" were disastrous to British armour, and after the fall of Knightsbridge on the 14th June, the 8th Army was driven into headlong retreat.

1 SA Division at Gazala, and the 2nd at Tobruk, lay on the outskirts of these great battles and were not directly involved. On the 27th and 28th May, 3 Brigade under Brig Palmer, repulsed determined German attacks, and on the 29th May 2 Brigade took 400 Italian prisoners. These attacks were probably a feint on the part of Rommel designed to distract attention from his great drive further east.

On the 28th May, 2 Division post at Commonwealth Keep, 8 miles west of Acroma,

was overrun and 1 and 2 SA Divisions organised composite columns to protect communications with Tobruk.

2 SA Division was left to hold Tobruk, as the anchor of a new defended area Tobruk-El Adem-Belhamed. The High Command had never intended that Tobruk should be isolated but on the night of the 16th June the commander of 7 Armoured Division ordered the garrison of El Adem to withdraw. On the 17th June, the British Armour was decisively defeated at Sidi Rezegh and 20 Indian Brigade abandoned Belhamed.

On the 7th June the day after the defeat of British armour around Knightsbridge, 1 SA Division was ordered to attack the enemy on its front. Heavy casualties were suffered for little result.

On the 14th June, 1 Division received orders to evacuate the Gazala line. Although 2 and 3 Brigade rearguards were cut off at Mrasses, the Division succeeded in reaching Tobruk. On the 15th June, it passed through that fortress, despite grave congestion of transport. In company with the remnants of 13 Corps, 1 Division withdrew to the Egyptian frontier.



General Smuts (fourth from left) with (l to r) Generals Dan Pienaar, Theron, Sir P v Ryneveld, De Villiers and Klopper.

On the 17th June, German armour penetrated to Gambut, and isolated the fortress of Tobruk (30 mile perimeter). The place was held by:

2 SA Division (4 and 6 Brigades and two composite battalions) – holding the Western Perimeter

201 Guards Brigade (much weakened by heavy fighting) – in reserve

11 Indian Brigade – holding the South-eastern perimeter

Three Field Regiment (including 2 and 3 SA Artillery)

Two Medium Regiments Royal Artillery

A composite Anti Tank regiment (improvised from SA Artillery and Royal Artillery)

Two Anti Aircraft Regiments (including 2 Anti Aircraft Regiment SA Artillery)

32 Army Tank Brigade (52 runners) – in reserve.

In addition, there were several thousands Royal Army Service Corps and Royal Army Ordnance Corps base personnel.

Maj Genl Klopper was fortress commander. On paper his forces were somewhat stronger than those which successfully held Tobruk the previous year, but in actual fact the Guards Brigade had suffered severe casualties in recent fighting, the artillery was deficient in transport and very short of medium ammunition, and the tanks were obsolete Matildas and Valentines, quite incapable of combating the German tanks. Moreover, the minefields had been gravely depleted. Whatever may have been the reasons for holding the place, it proved quite incapable of standing up to a determined assault.

After a heavy air bombardment, the enemy attacked at dawn on the 20th June. Two German armoured divisions, supported by heavy artillery fire and divebombing attacks, were thrown against a Mahratta battalion on the southeast corner. To reinforce the attack the enemy had one German motorised division, one Italian armoured division, and three Italian infantry divisions. The air attacks were incessant and terrific, and the garrison was entirely without air support. By 0800 hours the perimeter was pierced, by 1400 hours Indian Brigade was overrun. The British armour was destroyed in ineffectual counter attacks, and the Guards Brigade

overwhelmed. By 1600 hours the enemy reached the town and harbour of Tobruk, and proceeded to overrun Fortress Headquarters. Although the two South African Brigades holding the Western perimeter, had played virtually no part in the fighting, the situation was already hopeless.

Genl Klopper proposed to attempt a mass breakout during the night, but after receiving reports that the greater part of the transport had been lost, he ordered a new defence line to be improvised during the night, in the extreme west of the perimeter. On the following morning he came to the conclusion that effective resistance was impossible.

The greater part of the garrison was taken prisoner although isolated units continued to resist for 24 hours in the outer perimeter. Numbers attempted to escape and a few succeeded in reaching the 8th Army. The enemy captured immense supplies and stores and took some 25 000 prisoners including 10 722 South Africans.

(h) *El Alamein Defensive Battle – 29th June–14th July, 1942.* On the 30th June, 1 SA Division was ordered back to El Alamein. The Division arrived in the area south of El Alamein on the 24th June, and on the 26th June, the three brigades were ordered into the box. On the 28th June, 1 and 2 Brigades left the box and took up positions east and south of it.

Losing little time after taking Tobruk, Rommel drove straight for Alexandria and captured Mersa Matruh on the 29th June. The enemy continued his advance beyond Matruh, eliminating in the process much of 2 SA Anti-Tank Regiment who were operating with 50 Division.

On the 30th June, at midday, the last of the allied rearguard passed through El Alamein. Soon after enemy tanks and motorised infantry appeared and the seven-mile front which 3 SA Infantry Brigade was holding with a bare thousand infantrymen, a regiment of 25 pounders and battery of British Anti-Tank guns, came under siege.

An Indian Brigade under 1 SA Divisional command, was overrun at Deir el Shein some miles to the Southwest of El Alamein. The South Africans occupying the prepared

positions were kept under heavy shell fire for the first three days of July, but threatening movements by the enemy were checked by division artillery, and on the 2nd July, British armour counter-attacked successfully to the South.

On the 3rd July, enemy movement on 3 Brigade front was broken up by artillery fire. The crisis had passed and a lull followed. Both armies were exhausted, and activity was confined to artillery fire and air attacks.

On the 9th July, 9 Australian Division arrived at El Alamein. The following day it attacked Tel El Eisa. South African columns co-operated in this and subsequent operations by which the Australians gained command of the ridge.

On the 13th July, a heavy German attack of 24 tanks and 400 infantry came in against 1 Royal Durban Light Infantry and was driven off after bringing 3 Brigade casualties in the First Battle of El Alamein to 252. Thereafter Australian successes and developments to the south eased the South African position. By the 14th July, the tide had turned.

- (i) *El Alamein Offensive Battle – 14th July, 1942–10th November, 1942.* On the night 26/27th July, 1 Royal Natal Carbineers, 1 and 2 Field Battalions and Divisional engineers prepared the way for the passage of two British brigades which would, it was hoped, reach Daba. The attack failed. Both sides continued their preparations and on the 30th August, Rommel made his final bid for the Nile. It was a formidable attack but made little headway in the face of the skilful tactics of General Montgomery, who had taken over command of the 8th Army. By the 3rd September, it had been completely repulsed. General Montgomery now drew up his plans for a major offensive. The 2 and 3 SA Infantry Brigades, which were to take part in the initial attack, were successfully withdrawn from the line for rehearsal.

An artillery barrage opened the Battle of El Alamein, at 2140 hours on the 23rd October. South African artillery during the night fired 62 000 rounds of 25 pounder ammunition. At 2200 hours the infantry went in: 1 SA Division was one of the four attacking divisions. 1 Natal Mounted Rifles led 2 Brigade attack and 1 Rand Light Infantry led 3 Brigade.

These attained the first objectives, and 1 and 2 Field Force Battalion and 1 Cape Town Highlanders, and 1 Royal Durban Light Infantry and 1 Imperial Light Horse continued the attack. 3 Brigade attained its final objective at 0500 hours, ½ Field Force Battalion were held up after suffering heavy casualties, and 2 Brigade's consolidation was delayed. The Engineers had distinguished themselves in making gaps through the enemy minefields.

From the 24th October, onward, the Division was given a holding role on the Matireiya Ridge.

On the 2nd November, the second phase of the operations opened. 4 and 6 SA Armoured Cars slipped through the enemy's defences and joined British units in playing havoc with the German lines of communication. They took part in the most dramatic pursuit in Military history, and were the first 8th Army troops to re-enter Tobruk on the 12th November.

On the 10th November, the Division began to move to Quassassin, where it was later joined by 4/6 Armoured Cars, who had helped pursue the enemy as far as Benghazi. The Division embarked for South Africa at the beginning of 1943. From then, for a year, the Union Defence Force in the Mediterranean theatre was represented operationally by the South African Air Force and by units of the South African Engineering Corps.

South African casualties at the main Battle of El Alamein amounted to 734. Total South African casualties in North Africa were 23 625, of which battle deaths accounted for 2 104. There were 3 928 wounded and 14 247 prisoners of war.

4. The Union and the War with Japan

- (a) *Union.* The entry of Japan into the war in December 1941, rendered the defence of the Union against invasion a matter of some urgency. Accordingly in June 1942, the forces in the Union were reorganised into Inland Area (comprising Northern, Central, and Witwatersrand commands, with Headquarters at Johannesburg) and Coastal Area (comprising the Fortress Commands of



El Alamein – a scene from the film "Desert Victory".

Cape, Outeniqua, Port Elizabeth, East London, and Durban with headquarters at Cape Town). Maj Genl Brink was appointed General Officer Commanding, Inland Area, and Maj Genl De Villiers, General Officer Commanding, Coastal Area. The defences at Union Ports were strengthened, and air and sea patrols of the Union's coast line were intensified. In these preparations full use was made of part-time units, particularly in Coastal Area. The remaining Active Citizen Force units were organised as a Mobile Field Force with Headquarters at Ermelo in the Eastern Transvaal. On the 23rd September, 1942, military forces in Southern Rhodesia were brought under Union Command.

No attempt at air or land attack was made by the Japanese, but the German submarine offensive began in Cape waters in October 1942 with the sinking of 9 merchant ships in two days. Combined Operations Headquarters Cape Town was established in March 1943, to co-ordinate anti-submarine measures which remained a problem for some months.

It was as part of the general strategy of the war against Japan, that the Union sent a contingent to Madagascar.

- (b) *Madagascar.* British forces first landed in Madagascar on the 5th May, 1942, to forestall the very considerable risk of a Japanese invasion, and captured the naval base of Diego Suarez, on the northern tip of the island.

On the 25th June, 7 SA Infantry Brigade landed at Diego Suarez. The Brigade was commanded by Brig G.T. Senescall, DSO, and comprised the First City Regiment, Pretoria Regiment and Pretoria Highlanders, with A Squadron of 1 SA Armoured Car Commando, 6 Field Regiment, and 88 Field Company South African Engineering Corps. The Brigade moved into camp at Sakaramy and prepared defensive positions. In September, General Officer Commanding East Africa Command, was entrusted with operations against the Vichy forces in the South, and began a complicated operation with a view to conquering the island. The events

which followed can scarcely be regarded as serious warfare, as French resistance was largely formal. Conditions were arduous, however, and on occasion the Sengalese infantry fought with spirit. Malaria casualties were high.

A detachment of SA Armoured Cars distinguished itself in covering the advance of 22 (East African) Brigade from Majunga, and took part in the only serious fighting of the campaign.

The First City Regiment advanced from Sakaramy to Maromandia, after being much hampered by road blocks and broken bridges.

Detachments of the Pretoria Regiment took part in the bloodless occupations of Tulcar and Voheamar.

On the 9th September, a Company of Pretoria Highlanders occupied Nossi Bè without resistance after a preliminary bombardment by HMS Manxman.

The Vichy Governor surrendered on the 2nd November, 1942, and SA troops returned to the Union on the 7th December, 1942.

Union Defence Force battle casualties at Madagascar totalled 18 of whom 4 were killed.

5. Italy: 6th South African Armoured Division

- (a) *Introduction.* 6 SA Armoured Division was formed in South Africa on the 1st February, 1943, with Maj Genl W.H. Evered Poole, DSO (later CB, CBE, DSO), as General Officer Commanding. At the end of April, the Division sailed for Egypt, where it trained intensively at Khatatba. The Division consisted of 11 Armoured Brigade and 12 Motor Brigade with supporting arms.

In April 1944 the Division crossed to Italy and concentrated in the Altamura-Matera-Gravina area. The conditions facing the Division were very different from those encoun-



The 6 SA Armoured Division has joined other South African Forces in Italy. This picture shows a middle east port during the embarkation of the division after thorough training as an armoured division. (SADF Archives: Ad 392)



Field Marshal Alexander and General Smuts, in Italy.

tered in Libya. It would have to operate in mountainous country, ideally suited to defensive warfare, and attack positions manned by a skilful and stubborn enemy. In summer, rain and mud, in winter, snow and intense cold would impede an advance. There was little scope for turning movements. The enemy would have to be driven from his positions by sheer hard fighting.

This type of war would make heavy demands on all arms, but particularly the Engineers.

- (b) *12th SA Infantry Brigade Group S. Elia.* On its arrival in Italy, 12 SA Motorised Brigade under Brig R.J. Palmer, DSO, was detached from the Division, and served under New Zealand Division in a mountainous sector of the line North of Cassino, in the S. Elia area. The Brigade took over the sector on the 6th May, and relinquished it on the 23rd May. It had a holding role during the great attack on Cassino and the Gustav line, for which part of the Divisional Artillery was called on for supporting fire.
- (c) *The Advance on Florence.* At the end of May, the Division concentrated at S. Agata. 24 Guards Brigade Group under Brig. A. Clive, DSO, passed under command of the Division. The Division was put under command of 1 Canadian Corps. The break-out from Anzio was complete, and the 5th Army was driving on to Rome. 6 SA Division was ordered to advance along Highway 6, and fought its first action as a division on the 3rd June, when 24 Guards Brigade took Piglio

and 12 SA Motorised Brigade entered Paliano.

On the 6th June, the Division, now in 13 Corps and the left-hand formation of the 8th Army, passed through Rome, and 11 SA Armoured Brigade under Brig Furstenburg, DSO, took the lead, screened by tanks of the Natal Mounted Rifles/South African Air Force Battalion, the Division reconnaissance regiment. By night, forward elements had reached Civita Castellana, and the advance continued towards Viterbo. It was a bold thrust, aimed at taking advantage of the enemy's confusion. 11 SA Armoured Brigade then again assumed the lead, crossed the Aqua Rossa on the 10th June, and soon ran against an enemy defence line. A brilliant charge by the Special Service Battalion tanks broke through the anti-tank screen. Prince Alfred's Guard tanks moved up into the battle, and supported by the Divisional artillery, the Brigade fought its way forward to Celleno, and for slight casualties inflicted heavy losses in men and guns. It was a confident and vigorous action which went far to justify Field Marshal Alexander's words the previous day: "South Africans are the spearhead of the advance."

On the 11th June, the advance was continued in heavy rain. The 24 Guards Brigade with Pretoria Regiment (Princess Alice's Own) tanks under command, took the lead. It was the commencement of a long and cordial association between the Guards and the Pretoria Regiment. That day they ran against a strong position at Bagno Regio. A Divisional attack on the 12th June failed to achieve its purpose, but the place was taken on the 13th June, after a skilful flank march by 1 Royal Natal Carbineers.

12 SA Motorised Brigade took over the lead and on the 14th June, First City Regiment/Cape Town Highlanders entered the vitally important road junction of Orvieto.

Demolitions had greatly hampered the advance, despite the indefatigable work of the three engineer squadrons. Now poor roads and bad weather further slowed down operations.

On the 19th June, the Division came up against the Trasimeno line, of which Chiusi was the main strong point in the Divisional

sector. It was held by crack troops – a battalion of Herman Goering Division. An attack by First City/Cape Town Highlanders on the night of 21st June, failed with heavy loss. On the 26th June, the place fell as a result of an attack by two British divisions on 6 Division's right. The 24 Guards Brigade after heavy fighting, in which they were supported by tanks of the Pretoria Regiment (Princess Alice's Own), took Sarteano on the 25th June. The advance continued in the face of stubborn opposition by rearguards, and by the 5th July, had come up against the Hilde line, which the enemy held in strength.

It was not until the 15th July that the advance could be resumed. The Division entered the Chianti hills covering the southern approaches to Florence. A bitter struggle followed for the mountains and ridges overlooking the Florence road. Witwatersrand Rifles/De La Rey Regiment distinguished themselves in heavy fighting for M. Quercia-bella and M. Fili, and by the 25th July, the Guards Brigade was within sight of Florence. The place was only captured, however, after very severe fighting, in which the Division co-operated with 2 New Zealand Division and a British brigade. 11 Brigade encountered determined opposition at Mercatale and along the River Greve, but early on the morning of the 4th August, elements of 1 Special Service Battalion and Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment entered Florence. (Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment formed the motorised infantry battalion in 11 Armoured Brigade.)

On the 6th August, the Division began to move to Siena for a period of rest.

Total casualties incurred in the Division to this date were 2 100, all ranks.

- (d) *The Advance into the Appenines.* On the 22nd August, the Division was put under 5th Army (commanded by General Mark Clark), and became part of IV United States Corps. On the 26th August, it relieved an American Division on the Arno, west of Florence. On the 1st September the Division crossed the Arno and pushed into the Albano hills overlooking the river. Enemy resistance was slight at first and the Royal Natal Carbineers entered on a wide front and reached the outposts of the Gothic Line. It was of this line that a German commentator had said in

1943: "There is a line in Italy on which Germany will resist with all her might."

A great battle developed to the east, as 11 United States Corps assaulted the Gothic Line on the direct road from Florence to Bologna. The Division conformed by pushing deeper into the mountains. Enemy resistance stiffened and there were fierce actions at M. Alto (which was captured by the 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles, an Indian Battalion under 11 Armoured Brigade) and at M. Porro Del Bagno, which was stormed by the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment on the 18th September. The Division advanced along the axis Prato-Castiglione dei Pepoli, and on the 27th September, the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment entered the latter town across the main watershed of the Appenines.

It soon became clear that the enemy was in force, and would oppose any further advance.

It was not possible to push up the narrow valley, through which ran the road to Bologna, without capturing the formidable ridges on either side. It was a grim form of war fought out under cold rains, penetrating winds, and lack of cover. The capture of each height only revealed another and stronger position ahead. Our men were now opposed by 16 SS Division composed of fanatical Nazis. They had not been in action since May, and their aggressive patrolling gave evidence of high morale.

The Guards Brigade attacked on the right, and 11 Armoured Brigade on the left. The former captured M. Catarello after heavy fighting, the latter pushed up the slopes of M. Vigese, which was occupied on the 6th October, after a series of actions in which Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment and Royal Natal Carbineers (under 11 Brigade Command) distinguished themselves. An

American composite group under 6 Division Command, covered the left flank.

The key position of M. Stanco lay ahead and this was assaulted on the 7th October, by the Frontier Force Rifles. The attack succeeded, but on the 8th October, the battalion was counterattacked and thrown off M. Stanco.

Brig Furstenburg now ordered the Royal Natal Carbineers to secure M. Stanco. They attacked on the 10th October, but before they could consolidate, they also were driven off the feature.

Genl Pool now brought up the 12 Motorised Brigade. On the 13th October, a heavy artillery bombardment opened the largest set-piece attack undertaken by SA troops in the war up till that date, with the exceptions of Bardia and Alamein. The attack was made by Witwatersrand Rifles/Regiment De La Rey and First City/Cape Town Highlanders, and Stanco was captured at a cost of 141 casualties. 112 prisoners were taken. The success of the attack would have been impossible without the most careful administrative planning. Ammunition supply presented immense difficulties on the soft-surfaced tracks.

12 Brigade continued the advance against M. Salvaro, which the enemy held in strength. Royal Natal Carbineers and First

City/Cape Town Highlanders took M. Pezza on the 17th October, Witwatersrand Rifles/Regiment De La Rey stormed Point 806 on the 19th October, and on the 23rd October Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment captured Point 826, and completed the occupation of the dominating Salvaro feature, the capture of which was vital to any further advance along the valleys leading to the plains of the Po.

Plans were made to exploit the success by further attacks, but winter was at hand, and Genl Mark Clark ordered the 5th Army to consolidate along the line gained. The front remained static during the winter, apart from active patrolling. Intense cold and heavy falls of snow added to grave administrative problems.

On the 24th February, 1945, the Division was relieved and moved to Lucca for a period of rest and reorganisation.

The casualties suffered by the Division during this period totalled 2 042.



A Sherman tank in the Appenines: 1944.

- (e) *The Advance from the Appenines.* On the 5th April, 6 SA Armoured Division became responsible for its old sector of the Appenine line. The 24 Guards Brigade were now out of command, 13 SA Motorised Brigade, under Brig J. Bester, DSO, was the third brigade of the Division.

On the 15th April, 11 United States Corps initiated a general offensive. After air attacks, 12 SA Motorised Brigade, with very heavy supporting fire, attacked M. Sole and M. Caprara. The First City/Cape Town Highlanders gained the summit of M. Sole soon after midnight, and the hill was secure by 0430 hours. The First City/Cape Town Highlanders casualties amounted to 49. The Witwatersrand Rifles/Regiment De La Rey were heavily shelled on their start line. They reached the crest of M. Caprara before first light, but suffered 134 casualties in the operation. On the afternoon of the 16th April, the first City Cape Town Regiment occupied M. Abelle.

The Royal Durban Light Infantry advanced along a ridge running past from Sole, but were stopped short of Collina. Early on the morning of the 18th April, the enemy withdrew, and the Royal Durban Light Infantry continued the advance. The 13 Brigade crossed the Reno, and 11 Brigade exploited the success. The offensive on the 5th and 8th Army fronts had met with brilliant success, and the enemy had been driven through the mountains into the plains of the Po.

The Special Service Battalion and Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment led the advance into the plain, and by-passed Bologna. The Pretoria Regiment (Princess Alice's Own) guarded the right flank while American divisions co-operated in the area.

12 South African Motorised Brigade came up on the left flank. Witwatersrand Rifles/Regiment De La Rey and Prince Alfred's Guard tanks secured intact a bridge over the Panaro River. 11 South African Armoured Brigade and the Royal Durban Light Infantry cut off large numbers of enemy south of the Panaro, in the area of Finale nell Emilia, and in concert with 4/22 and 7/23 artillery regiments, eliminated them. Witwatersrand Rifles/Regiment De La Rey led

the 12 Brigade to the Po, and the Royal Durban Light Infantry crossed the river.

13 SA Motorised Brigade continued the advance against crumbling resistance and the Division passed between Padua and Vicenza. 11 SA Armoured Brigade took the lead, and on the 29th April, crossed the Brenta.

On the 30th April advanced armoured elements reached the outskirts of Treviso. Here the Army Command stopped the advance.

The Division concentrated in the Scorze area. From there it set off, on the 1st May, for Milan, to meet a threat from a German force. En route it heard of the surrender of the German armies in Italy.

Divisional casualties during the April offensive amounted to 605. The Division took 4 366 prisoners during the period. Union Defence Force battle casualties in Italy totalled 5 176 of whom 753 were killed.

Non-Divisional Units. No account of the Union Defence Force in Italy and Central mediterranean Forces would be complete without mention of non-divisional troops which in themselves comprised the strength of a division.

With the exception of three squadrons attached to 5 SA Division, the majority of Engineers were employed in a non-divisional role. They comprised:

- Three Road Construction Companies
- Three Railway Construction Companies
- Railway and Harbours Composite Railway-Operating Company
- Two Docks Operating Companies
- Harbour Construction Company
- Two Tunnelling Companies
- Two Survey Companies
- Three Field Engineer Companies

In addition, two road construction companies, and two works companies, were detached under Headquarters, Airfield Construction Company. Water detachments were sent to Greece in October, 1944.

62 Tunnelling Company distinguished itself by reopening the Appenino Tunnel between Prato and Bologna – a remarkable feat of

engineering, recalling the work of 61 Tunneling Company on the Haifa-Tripoli line.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN AIR FORCE

1. **General.** In September, 1939 the South African Air Force consisted of about 1500 men, equipped with 104 aircraft, of which only 8 were of current operational types. At its peak it numbered 45000 (including 6500 members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force), organised into 35 squadrons equipped with the most modern aircraft, and 22 supply and maintenance units. The SAAF further controlled 9 anti-aircraft units, together with five battalions of Cape Coloured infantry, engaged on security duties in the Middle East and North African Theatres.

Five hundred and thirty-three SAAF personnel were seconded to the Royal Air Force, and representatives were to be found in nearly all theatres of the war. One of them, Capt Edwin Swales, DFC, received the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross. Seconded officers commanded various RAF formations, including Air Headquarters, Groups, Wings and Squadrons.

In 1939 the Director General of Air Services was Col (later Brig) J. Holthouse, OBE, who was succeeded – with the title of Director General of Air Force – by Brig (later Maj Genl) C.J. Venter, CB, DFC in 1941, who in turn was succeeded by Brig H.G. Wilmott, CBE.

The SAAF was the first of the services comprising the Union Defence Force to undertake operational duties, and in September 1939, began to assist the Royal Navy in guarding the vital Cape sea route, the first three converted JU 86's arriving at Cape Town on the 18th September.

The only aircraft available for this duty were 17 converted JU 86 air liners, but in spite of their limitations, the German liner *Watussi* was intercepted off the Cape by South African aircraft in December 1939, and proceeded to scuttle herself.

The coastal patrol was soon handed over to Anson aircraft organised into three flights, which maintained convey escorts and anti-submarine patrols from bases along the South African coast

2. **East Africa.** When Italy declared war on the 10th June, 1940, three SAAF squadrons (No 1 Fighter and Nos 11 and 12 Bomber) were

already in Kenya, and the first blow of the war in East Africa was a raid by South African bombers on Italian Moyale on 11th June.

From that time onward, the South African squadrons maintained the offensive. At the beginning, their equipment consisted of four Hurricanes, obsolete Hawker Hartbeest and Fury aircraft together with the 17 converted JU 86s and a squadron of obsolescent Fairy Battle bombers. A squadron of Hurricanes and Gladiators was added later, and three Glen Martin bombers used initially, only for training. Notwithstanding the great superiority of the Italian Air Force both in numbers, and the quality of their aircraft, SAAF bombers systematically raided aerodromes in Italian Somaliland and southern Abyssinia destroying aircraft on the ground, petrol and ammunition dumps, buildings and motor transport, and dropping propaganda leaflets. The fighters defended the port of Mombasa and over 600 miles of frontier as far as Lake Rudolf, escorted bombers, and shot down enemy raiders. An Army Co-operation Squadron carried out reconnaissance, dropped bombs on enemy transport, and attacked strong-points. Their first major operation in co-operation with ground troops, including spotting for artillery, was in the raid on El Wak on the 16th December 1940.

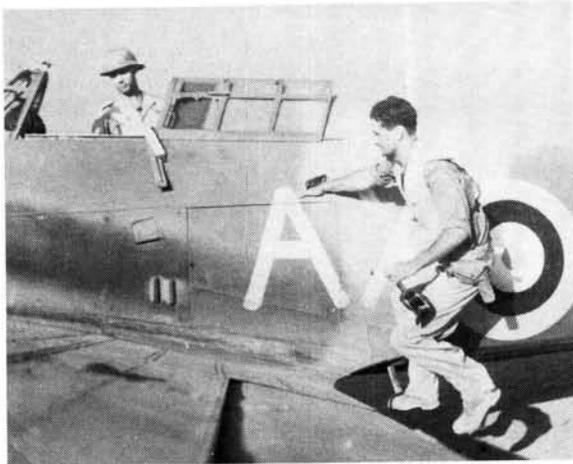
At the end of January 1941, when the advance into Italian territory began, East Africa Force had at its disposal an Air Force under Air Commodore Sowrey, consisting of the following SAAF units:

- Nos 2 and 3 Fighter Squadrons
- Nos 11 and 12 Bomber Squadrons
- Nos 40 and 41 Army Co-operation Squadrons
- No 34 Flight C.R. (General Reconnaissance)
- No 60 (Survey) Squadron
- Glen Martin Flight of No 14 Squadron

The advance of 11 and 12 African Divisions across the Juba to Mogadishu was considerably assisted by the destruction of several enemy aircraft during the first days of February, and the effective bombing of Afmadu and Jelib.

The advance of 11 African Division through Jigjiga and Dire Dawa to Addis Ababa was supported by SAAF squadrons and enabled it to proceed by day with little or no interference from the air. High mobility enabled the squadrons to harass constantly the retreating enemy. In the middle of March, Hurricanes of No 3 Squadron destroyed 15 enemy aircraft and damaged

others at Direidawa, and on the 4th April, two days before the entry of the land forces, 30 aircraft were destroyed on the aerodrome of Addis Ababa.



SAAF plane and pilot about to take off.

Meanwhile No 40 Squadron co-operated with 1 SA Division in its invasion of Abyssinia from the south, and the capture of Mega, while No 1 Squadron was attached to the Air Force serving with the Sudan Forces under Maj Genl Platt, which advanced, from Kassala, through Keren, to the Eritrean coast. Between August, 1940 and April, 1941, No 1 Squadron destroyed 46 enemy aircraft in the air, and large numbers in ground strafing attacks. The joint effort of the RAF and SAAF Squadrons was such that No 1 Squadron was able to maintain standing Patrols over Keren during the battle in March, 1941 without interference.

After the fall of Addis Ababa in April, four SAAF squadrons were transferred to Egypt, but Nos 3, 15 and 41 continued with the East Africa Force until the surrender of General Gazzera on 3rd July, 1941, and Nos 3 and 41 took part in the campaign which ended in the fall of Gondar on the 27th November.

No 60 (Photographic) Squadron served in Kenya during the campaign. During the East African campaigns SAAF units flew over 5000 sorties, destroyed 71 enemy aircraft in combat, and at least an equal number on the ground, for the loss of 79 men killed and 5 missing.

3. **Middle East.** Nos 1 and 24 Squadrons arrived in Egypt during April, 1941, and in May, No 24 (equipped with Marylands) operated in support of the evacuation of Crete. South African squad-

rons took part in the unsuccessful attempt to relieve Tobruk in May, and Nos 12 and 24 in disruption of an enemy armoured reconnaissance in September.

For the "Crusader" operation which began in November, Squadrons 12, 21, and 24 (flying Bostons), now formed into No 3 South African Wing, together with Nos 1, 2 and 4 Fighter and No 60 Photographic Squadron, were incorporated in the Desert Air Force, a formation with which the SAAF was associated until the end of the war in Europe.

During 1941 SAAF squadrons in Middle East made 5727 sorties and destroyed 102 enemy aircraft.

Only Nos 1 and 4 Squadrons were concerned in the retreat of the Eighth Army from Benghazi to Gazala in February, 1942 but in March, eight SAAF squadrons were engaged. The German attack on the Gazala line in May, and the subsequent retreat of the Eighth Army, provided activity which was both onerous and spectacular. On the 3rd June, No 5 Squadron destroyed 10 enemy aircraft, while No 24 had flown 800 sorties and dropped 600 tons of bombs by the 30th June. On 3rd July, while the army stood at Alamein, No 3 Wing flew 145 sorties and No 1 Fighter Squadron destroyed a complete formation of 15 enemy aircraft – the famous "Stuka party".

In all 2344 sorties were flown in July and 39 enemy aircraft destroyed.



SAAF Hurricane. The Vokes air filter, installed to combat the sandy atmosphere can be seen below the propeller.

During the lull in August, No 15 Squadron (Bisleys) engaged in successful straffing, and No 7 (Hurricanes) in anti-tank work. At the turn of the month the SAAF Squadrons were heavily engaged in repelling the last German offensive. On 2nd September, No 24 Squadron made 69 sorties – the second highest total of the war. No 5 distinguished itself amongst the fighters.

Eleven SAAF squadrons (No 7 Wing had just been formed) took part in the offensive before the last battle of Alamein. Between 19 October, and 5th November, No 3 Wing flew 1 053 and the fighters 1 948 sorties. No 15 Squadron gave valuable indirect support by helping to sink a vital Axis tanker off Tobruk.

The pursuit was taken up by No 40 (the Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron) and the fighters. The work of the maintenance organisation naturally increased with the line of communication.

During 1942, the SAAF in Middle East flew 19 304 sorties, and destroyed all aircraft.

In January 1943, three squadrons were re-equipped, No 5 with Kittyhawks, No 40 with Spitfires, and the Photographic Squadron (60) received its first Mosquitos. No 7 Wing was reformed as a purely SAAF function, with Nos 2, 4 and 5 Squadrons, and operated intensively from the 22nd February. No 3 Wing returned to operations in Tropolitania in January.

The attack on the Mareth Line in March brought great activity to all squadrons. Fighter bombers of No 7 Wing caused considerable destruction, and No 1 Squadron shot down twelve fighters, including the first Focke Wulf 190 seen in the Western Desert. The light bombers operated continuously from the 11th March until the end of the campaign, and both SAAF Wings took part in the great aerial attack in support of the New Zealanders at El Hamma on the 26th March. On the 6th April No 1 Squadron established the SAAF record of 71 sorties. Later in the month the fighters destroyed 40 enemy aircraft in two great air battles over Cape Bon. On the 12th May, No 21 Squadron took part in the final raid of the African campaign.

Between April, 1941 and May, 1943, the SAAF, with a maximum of eleven squadrons operating, flew 33 991 sorties and destroyed 342 enemy aircraft.

4. **Mediterranean Theatre.** SAAF activity in-

creased greatly with the assault in Europe. Squadrons which had formed part of the Desert Air Force carried on the pursuit through Sicily into Italy, while fresh units arrived in the Middle East, to be employed on coastal reconnaissance and local defence before going on to Italy.

At the end of May 1943, the SAAF had two Wings and sixteen Squadrons in the Middle East and North Africa, with 8 000 men (including 2 320 non-Europeans). During the first half of 1944, numbers in the Mediterranean theatre increased by 5 000, and in September 1944, the peak was reached with four wings, viz No 2 Heavy and No 3 Medium Bomber, No 7 and No 8 Fighter Bomber, with twenty seven Squadrons, viz. twelve Fighter and Fighter bomber, eight Heavy and Medium bomber, one photographic and one Tactical Reconnaissance, three GR and two Transport, forming in all about one-third of the forces under RAF operated command.

hen maintenance and supply units made up a grand total of 17 721 in the theatre, of whom 10 372 were Europeans.

5. **Central Mediterranean and Italy.** After the end of the African campaign, No 3 Wing helped to reduce Pantellaria and Lampedusa, and then concentrated on Sicily, switching to night attacks on the 4th July. No 60 Squadron photographed Sicily.

Five Squadrons took part in the 38 day Sicilian campaign. No 1 patrolled the invasion beaches and moved to Sicily on the 14th July, four days after the assault; No 40 made 22 tactical reconnaissances on D Day, and moved to Sicily on the 15th; No 3 Wing made diversionary raids on the night of the landings, and moved to Sicily in August.

Eight Squadrons concentrated in Sicily to cover the invasion of Italy; No 3 Wing took part in the preliminary "softening up"; No 40 Squadron was heavily engaged in tactical reconnaissances and naval shoots; No 1 Fighter Squadron covered the landings on the 3rd September, 1943, and Nos 2 and 4 made defensive patrols, and escorted bombers.

SAAF Squadrons supported the Eighth Army's advance, and concentrated in Foggia after its capture on the 27th September. No 7 Wing operated heavily in October, 1943, and No 5 Squadron made its first attack in support of the partisans in Yugoslavia on the 22nd October. Nos 12

and 21 Squadrons took part in the Sangro offensive on the 27th November, and concentrated on army targets during December. No 7 Wing together with No 5 Squadron operated meanwhile both in Italy and Yugoslavia.

On the 22nd January, 1944, the air arm was called for a maximum effort during the Fifth Army offensive and the Anzio landings. Nos 2, 4 and 5 Squadrons operated as fighter bombers, and No 1 gave fighter cover. Reorganisation, however, left No 21 as the only active SAAF bomber squadron. No 60 photographed widely, and once almost reached the Baltic.

During March and April, 1944, bad weather restricted operations, but for the attack on Cassino on the 12th May, No 12 Squadron with No 21 (now in Marauders) were occupied on close support target. Later, they attacked rail communications south of the Appenines in "Operation Strangle", the first attempt to hold up enemy supplies.

No 7 Wing, which received No 7 Squadron in April, was employed on armed reconnaissance, including Yugoslavia, and at Bungaluka aerodrome: on 6 April, some 30 aircraft were destroyed on the ground. During the drive on Rome (taken 4th June), it attacked enemy communications. In the air No 1 Squadron destroyed 16 aircraft during this period.

In July, 1941, SAAF squadrons were mainly employed in attacking communications – No 2 alone destroyed 43 vehicles in two weeks. In mid-July No 3 Wing was heavily engaged in attacks on Ancona. No 31 Squadron, which had arrived in June, made 87 sorties in large strategic raids. No 2 Wing and No 34 Squadron (equipped with Liberators) arrived in July.

All this time No 40 Squadron carried out extensive artillery reconnaissance, and a detachment co-operated with the Royal Navy in Corsica. No 60 Squadron, which had been meeting increased ack-ack and enemy fighters, had poor weather for photography during June, but good weather in August, and registered the first encounter with enemy jet-propelled aircraft.

Before the 8th Army's assault on the Gothic Line on the 26th August, 1944, the air arm attacked enemy communications: No 3 Wing shuttle-bombed Pesaro for five days, Nos 2 and 7 Wings gave close support, and No 1 Squadron bombed for the first time.

No 2 Wing suffered heavy losses between 14th and 17th August, in trying to drop supplies to the Polish Home Forces in Warsaw.

During August the SAAF in Italy increased greatly. Nos 16, 19 and 25 Squadrons joined the new Balkan Air Force, and No 15 the Desert Air Force.

Between the 3rd and 20th September the Desert Air Force supported the 8th Army's advance up to the Adriatic. No 3 Wing and No 15 Squadron attacked strong points at Rimmi and harassed the retreating enemy. During the month No 3 Wing completed its 20 000th sortie and dropped its 20 000th ton of bombs. No 7 Wing achieved an average of 19 direct hits per 100 bombs; No 16 and 19 Squadron attacked shipping in Yugoslavia and Greece with rockets, while 25 Squadron also attacked Balkan harbours and shipping. No 2 Wing made further flights to Warsaw, and gave support at Timmion on the 18th/19th September, 1944.

No 8 Wing, containing Nos 3 and 11 SAAF Squadrons, began to operate during the month.

Bad weather restricted operations in Italy from October to December, 1944, and No 3 Wing was bogged down, but the fighters were able to operate. Meanwhile a major attack was made on German lines of withdrawal from Greece. Nos 16, 19 and 25 Squadrons, No 7 Wing, No 5 Squadron (now in Mustangs), No 15 Squadron and even No 2 Wing operated by day and night.

During the Greek rising in December, No 2 Wing carried reinforcements, and a detachment of No 40 Squadron carried out tactical reconnaissances and offensive patrols.

As the weather improved in 1945, the air assault increased, culminating in the final drive in April. Bombers and fighter bombers were engaged in the operation known as "Blockade" – the isolation of the enemy from the Reich, and on 6 March, the latter destroyed 152, and damaged 397, out of 800 railway trucks at Conegliano. No 3 Wing and No 15 Squadron, using radio bombing for the first time, were equally successful.

The final air attack in Italy began on the 9th April, 1945, and fighter bombers of Nos 7 and 8 Wings, with No 5 Squadron, medium bombers of No 3 Wing with the Army co-operation Squadron, No 40, all played their part. Liberators of No 2 Wing and Baltimores of No 15 Squadron oper-

ated by night. No 2 Squadron made 729 sorties in April, the record monthly total of the war. On the 23rd April No 8 Wing recorded 191 sorties, an average of 48 sorties per squadron of only 10 aircraft each.

The surrender of the German armies on the 2nd May, completed a pursuit which had taken the SAAF squadrons without a break from El Alamein through Tunis and Sicily to the Alps.

6. Eastern Mediterranean (from June 1943). Five SAAF Squadrons Nos 3, 7, 15, 16 and 41, operated on shipping protection and attacks on enemy sea communications. In September, after the surrender of Italy a detachment of No 7 Squadron took part in the occupation of Cos, and defended it until the German invasion of the 3rd October. Before evacuation, the Squadron destroyed 12 enemy aircraft for a loss of 2 pilots killed, and 46 personnel missing, and was congratulated by the Chief of Air Staff.

No 15 Squadron also operated intensively over the Aegean; on the 3rd November, No 17 began operating from Palestine, and in December, No 16 withdrew to convert to Beaufighters.

During the first half of 1944, which was the intensive period of air operations in the Eastern Mediterranean, seven SAAF squadrons were engaged, Nos 15, 24 (withdrawn from Italy), 17 (began specializing on night bombing but left for North Africa in April, 16 (using rocket projectile Beaufighters) and Nos 3, 7 and 41 Fighter Squadrons. Nos 15, 16, 17 and 27 Squadrons suffered in the Aegean, but inflicted losses equal to their own.

In May No 31 Squadron operated over Crete before going to Italy; and in June Nos 15, 16, 24 and 31, played a prominent part in attacking a convoy to Crete.

During the second half of 1944, operations diminished. No 24 Squadron left for Italy in June, followed by Nos 15 and 16 in July, and No 3 in August. No 9 Squadron, on its first operation on the 20th July shot down a JU 88.

Nos 10 and 41 Squadrons were disbanded in November, and No 9 in January. There were no SAAF squadrons in Middle East after January 1945.

7 Western Mediterranean. After the tactical Air Force had left for Italy, the first SAAF squadron

to undertake sea reconnaissance from North Africa was No 17 (Venturas), which arrived from Middle East in 1944. It moved to Sardinia in July to take part in preparations for the invasion of Southern France, attacking harbours and shipping and dropping leaflets; crossed to Italy in September, and returned to Middle East in January 1945. In June 1944 two Ventura squadrons arrived from the Union, No 27 in North Africa, and No 22 at Gibraltar. The former moved to Malta in August and back to Africa in October, returning to the Union via Middle East in December. No 22 moved to Middle East in July 1945.

8. SAAF and the Sea Routes. From the early days of the war the SAAF continued to play an important part in the watch over the trade routes.

South Africa. Japan's entry into the war intensified the problem. Coastal command was reorganised in 1942; Nos 22, 23, 25 and 27 Squadrons, equipped with Ventura aircraft, watched for and attacked German submarines, and their presence acted as a severe deterrent. In addition they located survivors from torpedoed merchantmen and guided SAAF "crashboat" flights, which were stationed around the coast, for air/sea rescue.

In 1943 No 26 Squadron was replaced by No 29 Squadron, and in 1944 Nos 22, 25 and 27 moved to the Mediterranean. The SAAF took over the RAF Catalina squadron stationed at Durban as No 35 Squadron, and converted to Sunderlands in 1945. The three squadrons continued to patrol coastal waters until the end of the year.

West Africa. No 26 Squadron operated with Wellingtons on coastal reconnaissance from Takoradi in West Africa, from April, 1943, until it was disbanded in June, 1945.

Madagascar. During March and April 1942, the SAAF aircraft photographed the Diego Suarez area in anticipation of the British assault in May. The SAAF coastal flights (later numbered 20 and renumbered 16 Squadron) were part of the air component, which included RAF and Fleet Air Arm units, with a SAAF Officer in command.

The squadron flew 401 sorties before the armistice on 4th November, 1942, for the loss of one officer and one aircraft.

9. Transport Squadrons and Shuttle Service. In June, 1940, a shuttle service, using Valentias

and JU 52s, began flying troops between Pretoria and East Africa. In 1941, it was extended to Egypt, using Lodestars, and in 1944 using Dakotas, to Italy.

In June, 1945, the service was intensified (adding Venturas for a time) to repatriate South African troops, and a service of Sunderlands used the East Coast. The weekly schedule of four increased to over 40 aircraft each way. By the 25th January, 1945, 101 676 passengers had been carried, 38 309 since the 1st June, 1945.

The first SAAF Transport squadron in the Mediterranean (No 28) was formed in May, 1943, operating from Tripoli until June, then from Algiers. The second (No 44) was formed in March 1944, and operated from Cairo West. Both came under Transport Command RAF, and No 28 established a record for hours flown, while No 44 was commended for the standard of its navigation. The former was absorbed into the Shuttle Service in October, 1945, and the latter was disbanded in December, 1945, in Italy.

10. Joint Air Training Scheme. A scheme for air training in South Africa began as far back as 1937. It was greatly expanded after the outbreak of one war, and the United Kingdom was offered facilities for training RAF aircrew in South Africa.

The JATS virtually commenced its existence on the 1st June, 1940, when the "Memorandum on the expansion of Training Facilities in South Africa" was signed by the Chief of General Staff for the Union of South Africa, and Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham on behalf of the Air Ministry.

That scheme subsequently took the form embodied in the "Memorandum of Agreement" of the Joint Training Scheme in South Africa, taking effect from 1st August, 1940. Schools were opened at Baragwanath, Randfontein, Kimberley, East London and Port Elizabeth in September, 1940. From its commencement to the 31st December, 1945, JATS has passed out a total of 33 347 aircrew, of which 12 221 are SAAF, 20 800 RAF and 326 Allied Forces, and was at one time maintaining 36 Schools necessitating the establishment of numerous aerodromes.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN NAVAL FORCES

2. Establishment of SANF. The Seaward Defence Force, youngest of South Africa's fighting

services, was established on the 15th January, 1940, with Rear-Admiral G.W. Hallifax, RN (Rtd) as Director. Upon his death in an air crash, while on duty, he was succeeded by Captain James Dalgleish, OBE (later Commandore, CBE, rtd).

On the 1st August, 1942, the Seaward Defence Force and the RNVR (SA Division) were amalgamated under the designation of the South African Naval Forces, and all officers and men of the latter body serving with the RN, automatically became SANF seconded personnel.

The first task facing the new force was to acquire ships and train men as rapidly as possible to carry out the defence commitments allocated to it in South African waters. These comprised the provision of sufficient minesweepers to ensure the safety of the approaches to the principal ports, an adequate number of anti-submarine vessels to ensure a continuous patrol of the entrances to Cape Town and Durban, and the setting up of an Examination Service and a Port War Signal Station system.

Recruits came forward readily early in 1940, principally volunteers from the RNVR (SA) Division and from civil life. The only ships were a certain number of trawlers and whalers. As many of these as possible were requisitioned and converted for war at South African ports by South African labour.

In January 1940 the strength of the force was 74 officers and 358 men, having at their disposal fourteen vessels ready for sea, some armed, some not. All were later fully converted for war.

2. Minesweeping off SA Coast. The new force was soon called upon to carry out the arduous, difficult, and dangerous task of clearing an enemy minefield laid in the main shipping route off Cape Agulhas. This operation began in May, 1940, and continued at intervals for over eighteen months. The Mine Clearance Flotilla also carried out operations with units of the RN – notably the successful interception and capture of Vichy French convoy of 5 ships in November 1941, for which work the Flotilla earned high praise. Other enemy minefields off Cape Columbine, Danger Point, and in the NW approaches to Table Bay were also dealt with.

3. Mediterranean Operations. The activities of the force were not confined to South African waters. In response to an urgent Admiralty request, four South African anti-submarine vessels



SANF minesweepers at Cape Town.

left for the Mediterranean to join the Fleet. They were known as the 22nd A/S Flotilla, and arrived in Alexandria on January 11th, 1941. The position in the Mediterranean was then highly critical, and the small flotilla was almost immediately used to protect the exposed sea-route to Tobruk, a type of work quite new to the officers and men.

They tackled the task with energy and determination in the face of incessant air attack. On February 11th, 1941, HMSAS Southern Floe was lost while on patrol as the result of striking a mine. One man survived. By November, 1941, the remaining three ships had earned six DSCs, 11 DSMs, 1 CGM and five Mentions in Despatches between them.

South African ships in the Mediterranean steadily increased in number, including a replacement for the sunken Southern Floe. At its peak, the SANF was represented in the Mediterranean by four A/S vessels, eight minesweepers and our salvage vessel (HMSAS Gamtoos).

The second loss occurred on June 21st, 1942, when the minesweeper Parktown was sunk in action off Tobruk, after remaining to evacuate personnel, as the Germans entered the town. Another minesweeper, HMSAS Bever, escaped, but later struck a mine during the sweeping operations off Crete on November 30th, 1944, and was lost with all hands except seven. The fourth, and final, loss occurred on January 12, 1945, when another minesweeper, HMSAS Treern

struck a mine in the Aegean and was sunk. Only one rating was saved.

The SANF vessels played their part in all phases of the Mediterranean sea war, including the invasion of Sicily and the subsequent operations in Greek waters, the latter including much dangerous minesweeping. The salvage ship Gamtoos made a name for herself when she cleared the entrance to Tripoli and did valuable work at other ports.

4. Operations in SA Waters. In October, 1942, the enemy launched widespread submarine attacks upon the shipping routes round the Cape. Thirteen merchant ships were sunk in the first four days of the offensive. The South Atlantic Station was short of fast offensive craft, and there followed a long period of intensive activity on the part of SANF vessels. Without relaxing their patrol vigils at the entrances to South African ports, their main responsibility during the war, they were responsible for rescuing over 400 survivors from torpedoed ships while the U-boat offensive lasted. When the convoy system was introduced early in 1943 between Durban and Cape Town, SANF A/S vessels were detached to take part in this work in company with RN Auxiliary trawlers and corvettes.

5. Operating in Indian Ocean. Later in 1943 eight of the faster oil-burning SANF A/S vessels, together with their crews, were lent to the RN for escort and general A/S duties in the area Durban-Kilindini-Mauritius. These were known as the Third and Fourth Escort Groups. They were dissolved in May, 1945, and reverted to SANF operational control.

Early in 1945 SANF representation in the war was widened by the dispatch of two special vessels to Eastern waters. The first to go was HMSAS Barbrake, a Boom Defence Vessel, which left Durban on 17th February, 1945, and began operating from Colombo.

The second vessel, the salvage vessel Salvator, had been manned entirely by SANF men in the Mediterranean in August, 1944, though she remained under RN ownership. After much hard and dangerous work in that area, she was transferred to the Far East on her return to SA on 17th April, 1945. Proceeding to Mauritius, Colombo, Australia and Milne Bay, she arrived in Hong Kong in September, 1945.

6. ^{1 9}₃₂₁₇₈₂₆₅₈₉₃₂ ²¹_{94 4} ⁴⁸⁵¹⁵³². The greatest development in the story of the SANF occurred well towards the end of the war, when the Union Government accepted an offer from Admiralty to acquire three of the latest frigates – the first vessels designed throughout as warships ever to fly the South African flag. The first of these, HMSAS Good Hope, was commissioned in the United Kingdom on the 9th November, 1944, and the second (HMSAS Natal) on the 1st March, 1945. Both arrived in Cape Town on the 30th June, 1945. The third, HMSAS Transvaal, arrived in Cape Town on the 28th July, 1945. HMSAS Natal had the distinction of sinking a German U-boat in United Kingdom waters on the 14th March, 1945, while on trials. The three Frigates were not able to play their full part in the hostilities against Japan, but HMSAS Natal took part in the "clearing up" operations in Burmese waters, going so far South as Singapore.

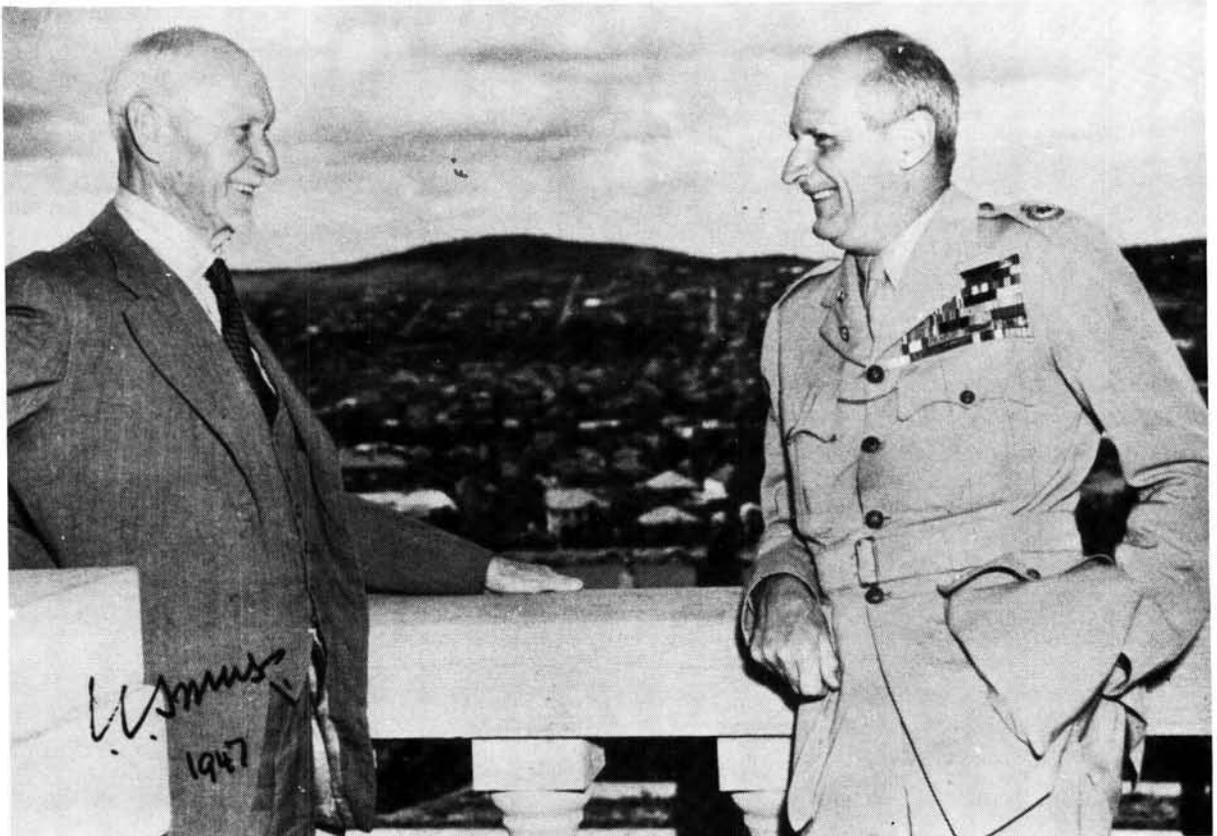
7. **Auxiliary Services.** The original functions of the SANF widened and became more varied and responsible as the war progressed. Personnel for a Controlled Mining Station were manned, and operated the only Controlled Minefield in South African waters (at Saldanha Bay).

Anti-Submarine Fixed Defences of a different type were established at Robben Island, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and Umhlanga, near Durban. These stations were manned extensively by women of the Women's Auxiliary Naval Service (SWANS).

The Degaussing Ranges at Cape Town and Durban were entirely under SANF control, and dealt with well over 4 451 ships, with a gross tonnage of 27 714 502.

8. **Seconded Personnel.** The 2 937 seconded personnel (originally RNVR) who served with the Royal Navy, formed a substantial contribution, and were represented in all theatres of the Naval War. They suffered considerable casualties, of whom 181 were killed or died on Service.

All photographs in this article, except otherwise stated, are by courtesy of the South African National Museum of Military History, Saxonwold, Johannesburg. Mr Ron Hardy (of the museum) in particular, is thanked for his assistance.



General Smuts with Field Marshal (Monty) Montgomery after the war.

Statistics

WHOLE TIME VOLUNTEERS IN THE UNION DEFENCE FORCE

	EUROPEANS							
	Males				Females			
	Land Forces	S.A. Air Force	S.A. Naval Forces	Total	SAMNS	WADC	Total	Total European Volunteers
Officers	13 558	9 138	1 436	24 132	3 710	1 236	4 946	20 078
Other Ranks	118 636	35 431	8 019	162 086		20 029	20 029	182 115
Total	132 194	44 569	9 455	186 218	3 710	21 205	24 075	211 193

NON-EUROPEANS			
Cape Corps	N.M.C.	S.A.N.F.	Total
45 015	77 230	877	123 131

* ESSENTIAL SERVICES PROTECTION CORPS				
	Europeans	Coloured	Africans	Total
Officers	68	—	—	68
Other ranks	5 861	520	2 019	8 400
Total	5 929	520	2 019	8 468

* The Essential Services Protection Corps was not strictly a military organisation, but consisted of civilians under discipline who were engaged in guard duties.

**C. CASUALTIES SUFFERED BY THE U.D.F. (AS AT 31 AUGUST 1945)
(THESE FIGURES COMPRISE LAND FORCES AND S.A. AIR FORCE CASUALTIES BUT NOT S.A. NAVAL FORCES)**

	OUTSIDE UNION								INSIDE THE UNION			
	K.	D.P.W.	Acc.K	Oth.	Wnd.	Acc.I	P.W.	Total	K.	Acc.K.	Oth.	Total
Europeans												
Officers	870	15	304	29	853	374	937	3382	25	237	118	380
Other ranks	2508	245	604	241	6383	3801	11334	25116	15	508	971	1494
C.C.	246	20	163	126	470	1038	615	2678	—	120	305	425
N.M.C.	182	101	115	97	223	665	1655	3038	—	247	594	841
Seconded												
Officers	135	—	40	4	204	36	35	454	—	—	—	—
Other ranks	143	—	14	8	4	3	7	179	—	—	—	—
SAMNS												
Officers	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other ranks	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
W.A.D.C.												
Officers	—	—	3	—	—	25	—	28	—	1	13	14
Other ranks /	—	—	—	2	—	14	—	16	—	18	46	64
TOTAL	4084	381	1243	507	8137	5956	14583	34891	40	1131	2047	3218

K Killed in Action. Died of Wounds, Presumed Dead. On 31st August, 1945, the following Prisoners of War were still unaccounted for as at 21st January, 1948:

D.P.W. Died whilst Prisoner of War.

Acc.K. Accidentally killed.

Oth Died Other Causes.

Wnd Wounded.

Acc.I Accidentally Injured (Major Injuries only).

P.O.W. Prisoner of War.

Officers	—
Other Ranks	82
C.C.	24
N.M.C.	57
Seconded Officers	—
Seconded Other Ranks	2
Total	165