

FORUM

'IS THE ARMY LITERATE?'

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Consider how many of even our officers rarely bother to do more than glance at the professional journals and select articles that are made available to them.

Consider how our military journals have to struggle for lack of material and support.

Consider how rarely an item in one of our journals draws comment or criticism much less provokes a further, counter or supporting article.

One could be forgiven for receiving the impression that our army is illiterate.

This is an extremely serious problem: a profession that neither reads nor writes cannot but stagnate and an army suffering from mental stagnation is well on the way to losing its next war. The whole value of individual professional military writing lies, after all, therein that it allows and encourages the formulation, exchange, development and dissemination of new ideas and concepts. This stimulation and furtherance of military intellectual activity is essential to the continued effectiveness of an army. It can only be achieved through the open forum of professional military journals and, not least, their letter pages. It cannot be achieved by means of mechanical official writing, the letters, memos, reports, handbooks and manuals that abound in every army.

Why do our officers not write? Are they all too stupid or too lazy or too ill-informed, or simply not sufficiently professional in their outlook? Surely not. Whatever the primary reasons, there are identifiable contributing factors which it should be possible to overcome: The problem of security considerations, the paucity of suitable local military journals and the lack of incentive.

Our current tendency to classify virtually everything of any professional interest concerning the SADF severely limits the value of what can be written for the open journals. While there are several restricted journals available, there is as often as not not one suited to the nature or subject of the item to be placed. Additionally, these journals are infrequent and irregular in appearance, short of funds and therefore limited in style

and quality of presentation and, by their very nature, not readily available to many citizen force personnel or interested civilians. Thus the value of these journals is also rather limited. The short-term solution is to re-organise and expand the system of restricted journals as will be discussed below.

In the longer term we should reconsider our system of security classification. At present we are, arguably, overenthusiastic in this regard. Specifically the restricted category appears to be rather overused. Certainly there is a need for tight security, we cannot be as open as an army fully at peace and not faced with an arms embargo. But do we really believe that the Soviets — and through them any intending attackers — do not know which units make up our various brigades or how many squadrons of each, how many tanks make up one of our tank regiments or our theory of the motorised infantry battalion in the defensive? It is quite likely that a Soviet intelligence officer specialising in African affairs could at short notice give a more accurate breakdown of the SADF than our average citizen force officer, perhaps more accurate than some permanent force officers. Are we not devaluing the entire classification system by overapplication of the various categories — quite apart from hampering the spread of information and ideas within the SADF? Should we not rather concentrate our security effort on keeping secret items that it is really worthwhile spending effort on — and that it is really feasible to keep to ourselves? That our current rather restrictive approach to security is in any case not taken particularly seriously is eloquently demonstrated by the virtual absence of serious physical security measures within the SADF. A more realistic approach to the question of security would not merely ease the situation as regards serious professional military writing, but should also increase the measure of security actually achieved.

Turning to the question of the available local military journals we find:

Paratus — now essentially a house journal although some serious items are run,

- recent issues in particular showing an improvement in this regard.
- Militaria* — no longer purely historical but unfortunately only quarterly.
- Branch Journals* — various such as *Infantry Forum*; very valuable but suffering from the problems outlined above.
- Newspapers* — also house journals in makeup; several localised ones in addition to *Uniform*; vary in content and style within the house journal framework.
- Armed Forces* — the only independent military journal in the RSA, sadly lacking local military contributors.

All of these suffer from a lack of material of a professional nature and all but some of the branch journals have the further problem of security restrictions severely limiting their choice of material.

Nevertheless the situation is not as bad as it appears at first sight: the necessary vehicles are there, it is basically a matter of adapting and enlarging on what we have. For instance, the house journal role could go to a *Uniform/Paratus* supplement combination. *Paratus* itself could then become a SADF-wide low/middle level professional journal, running shorter articles of general military interest. Items such as thumbnail biographies of foreign military personalities, news items of military significance, notes and comments on military developments in Africa or otherwise of relevance, book reviews and reprints and/or paraphrases of interesting and relevant items from other journals could become regular features. *Militaria* should remain much as it is, handling chiefly longer and more theoretical items — thus filling the middle/high level slot. It should however appear at least bimonthly in order to facilitate the continuation of a train of thought.

Within the army itself, the name *Commando* could be resuscitated for an army-wide restricted journal similar in approach to the reconstituted *Paratus* outlined above but focussed on army-specific matters. This would be backed by expanded restricted branch journals appearing

more frequently and regularly than is now the case and also rather better financed. These too should appear at least bimonthly. Should lack of material initially render this impractical, a combined journal or a series of supplements to the new *Commando* would be a useful interim solution. Here to, the value of reprints from other journals should not be overlooked and these could go some way towards balancing an initial shortage of contributions. The various training and operational bulletins could advantageously be incorporated into these various journals.

Armed Forces would ideally continue in its current form as the essential independent element — not least offering a forum for the more iconoclastic contributors. It would, of course, remain an open journal. Thus we would have a system of military journals offering facilities for every form of professional military writing, created basically out of the existing journals. A further possibility might lie in an irregular — it being unlikely that there would be sufficient material to warrant regular publication — restricted top-level policy publication. All of these journals should be made readily available to all military personnel and, where possible, to interested civilians.

Finally we come to the question of incentive. Here a variety of measures could be employed in order to improve the situation and several will be outlined. Firstly and most simply, payment for published contributions would go a little way towards solving the problem. However, not all of the envisaged journals could afford to pay at reasonable or even interesting rates, particularly in the case of longer and more deeply researched articles. A further possibility would be to require participants in certain courses to prepare relevant contributions for one or another of the journals as a part of the course, the best then being published. Alternatively, it could be made normal practice to publish the best or most relevant papers produced during courses without these having been specifically written for publication. In any event, all such papers of any merit at all should be made available to any member of the SADF interested in the particular subject. Ideally, they should be automatically circulated at formation/command level for interest and/or referral as appropriate.

Lastly, we might do well to adopt a system employed by, for instance, the US journal *Armor*. The authors of published articles receive a

certificate acknowledging their contribution from the Armor Association as well as a letter of commendation from the Commandant (OC) of the Armour School. Items not warranting such recognition are not published. Should a system of this nature be introduced, such letters could be placed on the contributor's personal file. Here they would become a factor to be taken into account for assignment and promotion purposes.

A combination of these and other possible measures should go some considerable way towards rendering serious professional military writing both an attractive and a feasible proposition. Simultaneously, by presenting an interesting and relevant body of professional military writing, reading should also be encouraged. This in its turn would — it is to be hoped — tend to stimulate further writing, initially in the form of reactions to published items. Before closing, it must be stressed that it is essential that any reasonable criticism — preferably but not necessarily constructive — should not only be allowed, but must be encouraged. Also, such criticism should be followed up and/or reacted to. Only in this way will a truly useful body of military intellectual activity grow to maturity.