

SWIFTER THAN EAGLES

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN AIR FORCE 1912–1982

South African pioneers in the air

Since time immemorial, nation has waged war upon nation, both by land and by sea, yet it is only during this century that the air has evolved into a major theatre of war. Riding on the flood tide of a technology stimulated by two World Wars and the ever present need to remain prepared for the eventuality of an armed conflict, military aviation has, in a few short years, developed from relatively primitive beginnings into a highly effective and sophisticated weapon indispensable to a modern defence force. To a greater extent, he who controls the skies also controls the rest of the battlefield.

Military leaders in South Africa were quick to realise the advantages offered by using airborne craft in conjunction with terrestrial units. As early as 1885 the British forces made use of balloons for observation purposes during an expedition into Bechuanaland, a tactic which they again employed during the South African War of 1899–1902.

By 1912 engine-driven heavier-than-air aircraft were no longer strangers to South African skies. On the 28th December 1909, Frenchman Albert Kimmerring took off from East London in his Voisin biplane. During 1911 John West made several impressive flights in a Gnome-powered aeroplane he himself had built at Brandfort. However, it was the African Aviation Syndicate that really captivated the public's imagination. Formed in 1911, to promote the practice and science of aviation in South Africa, the syndicate arrived in Cape Town with a Bleriot monoplane in which they proceeded to give a series of impressive demonstration flights, much to the delight of the general public and to the intense interest of officers of the Union Defence Force. It is therefore not surprising that the Defence Act of 1912 made provision for the establishment of a South African Aviation Corps under the section of the Act relating to the Citizen Force.



Lt Gen A.M. Muller, SD, Chief of the Air Force since 1 December 1979

It was against this background that Gen J.C. Smuts gave Brigadier-General Christiaan Beyers specific instructions to obtain as many details as possible for a guide in establishing a military aviation school in South Africa on a small and economic scale during his 1912 visit to Switzerland, France, Germany and England where he was to observe military manoeuvres and pay an extensive visit to the British Army's new aviation school at Upavon on Salisbury Plain. In Europe Beyers set about his task with gusto. Not only did he observe the performances of military aviators from the ground, but he also became the first South African General to fly in an aeroplane when he took the opportunity of going aloft in a Rumpler-Taube monoplane in a flight that afforded him the opportunity of testing for himself the extent to which airborne observation was feasible. On his return to Cape Town he reported: 'I am firmly convinced that flying is destined to play a very important part in military

operations in future and that it is impossible for any country to build up a completely successful system of defence without taking due account of this new arm of military science. ... Aerial Scouting should prove a great saving in horses and men.'

The South African Government wasted no time in following up on the Beyers report. A flying school was duly commissioned and on 10 May 1913 an advertisement appeared in the Government Gazette inviting prospective pilots to apply for training as 'Officer-aviators' and setting out the regulations under which they would serve. Applicants were required to be single, under the age of 35, enjoying eyesight 'perfect at short and long distances without the aid of glasses' and 'thoroughly proficient in driving, controlling and performing ordinary running repairs to a motor car or motor cycle driven by internal combustion engines.'

In return for exposing themselves to the hazards and rigours of flying training, successful candidates would not be paid a salary in the true sense of the word, but instead they would receive a subsistence allowance of 17s 6d a day plus a further 5s a day flying pay. It was made very clear that this would be the pupils' sole

remuneration and that the Government would in no way regard itself as being responsible for any personal injuries or accidents that might befall the hapless student under tuition.

Despite these conditions literally hundreds of applications from would-be aviators poured into the Union Defence Force's offices from every corner of South Africa. Of these, only ten were finally selected. They were:

J. Clisdal, G.S. Creed, E.C. Emmett, Hopkins, Solomon, B.H. Turner, M. van Coller, K.R. van der Spuy, G.P. Wallace and M.S. Williams.

These candidates were instructed to report to Alexanderfontein, some six miles east of Kimberley, where the Paterson Aviation Syndicate Ltd had established a flying school in conjunction with De Beers after the premature demise of the African Aviation Syndicate. Here, under the watchful eye of Compton Paterson and his fellow flying instructor E.W. Cheeseman, the ten were to receive their initial flying training on a Paterson Biplane no 36, powered by a 50 horse power Gnome engine. This aircraft had in fact been developed by Paterson himself to include some of the better features of the Henri Farman, Canadian and Grahame-White biplanes.



A. Henri Farman biplane

In accordance with the Government contract Paterson was to be paid £150 for each student who successfully completed this course and who was awarded his Fédération Aéronautique Internationale Aviators Certificate.

Flying was a hazardous business and even though £150 may have appeared to be some sort of a king's ransom in the early 1900's, Paterson really had to work to earn it. Despite every attempt to make tuition as safe as possible – flying was limited to the early mornings and late afternoons when the air was calm, and abandoned completely if the wind was too strong – accidents were bound to happen. The students had barely learned to rig and fly the Paterson when, with her designer at the controls, she went into an uncontrollable dive and crashed about half a mile from the airfield's hangar and was almost completely wrecked. Fortunately Paterson and his student K.R. van der Spuy escaped unhurt.

This accident did not, however, dampen the enthusiasm of the would-be aviators for their new-found profession, and under Paterson's watchful eye they simply built a new aeroplane out of the wreckage of their original trainer and continued flying with the student pressed hard against the back of his instructor so that his hands and feet could reach the controls. The new 'phoenix' was, however, short-lived. Once again succumbing to a side slip the aircraft crashed, fatally injuring the instructor. Undaunted, Paterson purchased a third biplane from one of his civilian pupils by the name of Carpenter and was thus able to complete his contract.

Of the original 10 airmen, 6 were selected to go to England where they were to receive a year's advanced training. They were Lt Gordon Shergold Creed, Lt Edwin Cheere Emmett, Lt Basil Hobson Turner, Lt Kenneth Reid van der Spuy, T/Capt Gerard Percy Wallace and Lt Marthinus Steyn Williams.

Under Wallace's command the six South Africans reported to the RFC's Central Flying School at Upavon where, on the 25th April 1914 they started their practical and theoretical training in all facets of aviation. That they made rapid progress is evident from the fact that it took Wallace, Creed, Emmett, Turner and Van der Spuy only a few short months to win their RFC Wings, just before the advent of World War I cut short their training.

First World War

Although their logbooks indicate that the South African pilots had little more than 20 hours' flying experience each, they were considered ready for action and, after having received permission from the UDF authorities to volunteer for service with the RFC, they became members of two of the first four RFC squadrons to mobilize and head for the battle fronts of France. It was during this short tour in France that K.R. van der Spuy became instrumental in introducing aerial photography to the RFC. He also found pistols and sawn-off shotguns to be rather ineffective as a means of conducting aerial combat and arranged to have a Lewis gun suspended from the upper wing of his biplane, thus enabling his observer to deliver far more accurate and effective fire on the enemy. This innovation, too, soon became more than popular with other pilots in the RFC.

The South African pilots did not, however, spend much time in France, for as a result of a government notice released on the 29th January 1915, they were recalled to the Union in order to raise, train and equip a self-contained South African Aviation Corps in support of General Louis Botha's ground forces in his campaign aimed at neutralizing the German occupation of South West Africa.

At first the SAAC experienced some problems in obtaining the aircraft necessary for their task but by May 1915 the Corps was operational under the command of Maj Wallace, flying several all-steel Henri Farman F27's supported by two Royal Naval Air Services BE2C's complete with Navy pilots. Unfortunately, due to their wooden construction, the BE2C's proved to be totally unsuited to the harsh climatic conditions of South West Africa and were never flown operationally. Not so though the F27's. Their advent dramatically improved Botha's reconnaissance capability, enabling him to keep tabs on the German forces over hundreds of miles, and thus enabling him to regularly out-manoeuvre the enemy. In the face of this relentless air-assisted pressure, the German resistance crumbled and on the 9th July 1915 Colonel Francke and his 2 000 strong German occupying force were forced to surrender to General Botha at Otavi. The South West African Campaign had come to an end and with it the SAAC passed into history, for although it was only officially disbanded in 1921 the SAAC never again functioned as an independent unit.

The demise of the Aviation Corps did not, however, mean the end of aerial participation by South Africans in World War I. The majority of the SAAC's members volunteered for continued service and were consequently sent to England where they were mustered into No 26 (South African) Squadron, Royal Flying Corps.

After a short period of consolidation and intensive training and retraining at Netheravon on Salisbury Plain, 26 Squadron was ready to re-enter active service. Consequently they were reassigned and on a snowswept Christmas day in 1915 they embarked for East Africa.

The Operations in the Kilimandjaro area of the Kenyan Highlands to which 26 Squadron had been assigned were by no means as easy or spectacularly successful as those flown in the South West Africa Campaign. Not only were the German forces, under the command of Colonel Von Lettow Vorbeck, better prepared and far more formidable adversaries than those with which the squadron had previously had to contend, but they were also confronted by the ravages of a hostile physical environment. Despite the many long hours flown during reconnaissance and bombing missions 26 Squadron achieved only limited results, their best efforts being frustrated by the thick tropical bush which both hid an army and rendered aerial bombing ineffective. Undaunted, however, 26 Squadron continued to seek out and harass the enemy as best they could until in June 1918 they were recalled to England.

The Serengeti skies were, however, not the only theatre in which South African airmen saw service during the 1914–1918 War. By 1916 some 2 000 were either pilots or student pilots in the RFC. Many of these aviators reached the RFC as a direct result of the recruiting drives of Maj Allister Miller, a Swaziland-born aviator who, between 1916 and 1917 persuaded some 2 450 South Africans to join the RFC. 'Miller's boys' as they soon became known seemed to have been possessed by a peculiar affinity for air-to-air combat. Their unique blend of intellect, skill and determination soon won them the respect and admiration of friend and foe alike. Among them served men of the calibre of Capt Andrew Weatherby Beauchamp Procter, VC, MC, DFC, DSO; the shy and retiring Mossel Bay lad who claimed 41 victories and became the Empire's most decorated airman of World War I.

That Procter was an exceptional pilot, there can

be no doubt, but he was by no means the exception among 'Miller's Boys'. There were others, such as Capt Christoffel Johannes (Boetie) Venter, DFC & Bar, who, as a member of 29 Squadron shot down 22 enemy aircraft; Capt S.M. Kinkead who notched up 30 kills; and Sir Huge Sanders who accumulated 19 victories. Miller's highly successful recruiting drives were, however, not the only source of South African aces for the RFC. Perhaps the best-known of all South Africa's airmen, Lt Col Helperus Andrius van Ryneveld, was in fact commissioned in the infantry before he volunteered for a transfer to the RFC in July 1915.

Van Ryneveld was by no means one of the top scoring pilots of World War I although the 5 victories that are credited to him belie his prowess as an aviator. He saw action against the Zeppelins in England. He flew at Gallipoli and against the Senussi in the Western Desert and then against the Turks in Egypt and Palestine, before returning to England in 1916 to command No 78 Home Defence Squadron, a night flying unit charged with defending England against the inroads of Germany's Gotha bombers.

But it was essentially as a leader of men that Van Ryneveld really distinguished himself. At the age of 25 he already commanded the 11th Army Wing of the 2nd Army and at 27 he was promoted to Colonel. It was therefore not surprising that General J.C. Smuts elected to detail this tall Free Stater to found South Africa's own air force.

The SAAF is born

Van Ryneveld first received his brief in 1919 during a meeting with Genl Smuts in the Savoy Hotel in London. Subsequently he was appointed as Director of Air Services to the Union Defence Forces with effect from 1 February 1920.

Despite a slight interlude during which he and Major Quinton Brand made their epic flight from England to South Africa (for which feat they were both knighted), Sir Pierre van Ryneveld lost no time in getting to grips with the establishment of an effective air force in South Africa.

It was originally intended that the air force should form part of the army. Van Ryneveld, however, would have none of it and immediately embarked on a bureaucratic struggle to ensure independent status for the SAAF, a struggle from

which he emerged the victor. From the day the first recruit was attested in June 1920 the South African Air Force formed an autonomous arm of the Union Defence Force.

Despite the spartan military budget of the post-war era, the SAAF got off to what can only be termed a flying start.

In a generous gesture the British Government donated 100 military aircraft along with adequate spares and maintenance equipment to the value of some £2 000 000 to the South Africans that set the fledgling well on its way to becoming a viable 'eagle'.

The arrival of this equipment in Pretoria in 1921 highlighted the SAAF's need for its airfield. A suitable 23½ morgen site was identified two miles east of Roberts Heights and was purchased from its owner, Mr Dale, for £10 per morgen. After having been cleared and levelled the area became the SAAF's first airfield, Zwartkop.

Real estate and machinery alone, however, can only serve as the framework of any military organization. Recruitment of manpower, however, presented no problems to the SAAF as its personnel officers were inundated by a flood of applications for appointment as members of the air force. From these Van Ryneveld was able to select the best and most experienced men available to form the nucleus of a small but elite corps well versed in every aspect essential to the management and maintenance of an aerial fighting force.

Hampered by the restrictions of a tight-fisted treasury, Van Ryneveld set about organizing the SAAF into a functional entity that could easily be expanded to several times its normal size in the eventuality of a military crisis. The single squadron with which the SAAF started in 1921 was comprised of four flights. Three of these flights were operational, each being equipped and trained for a separate combat role, such as ground support, bombing, or aerial reconnaissance, thus facilitating the easy conversion of an individual flight to squadron strength in the event of war. Likewise, the fourth or administrative flight could also be converted into a full-blown Headquarters should operational commitments dictate the necessity for such an action. At the same time a scheme was instituted to provide for the formation of a reserve of part-time flying officers from which the SAAF could draw additional pilots as the need arose.

Any air force is essentially a fighting force and as such, its prowess is traditionally measured in terms of its combat record. In this respect the SAAF did not have to wait long to prove its worth.

Since December 1921 unrest and hatred had been smouldering on the Witwatersrand as a result of unemployment and pay disputes between gold miners and the mining houses. On the 21st February 1922 unrest gave way to open rebellion and Government troops clashed with striking miners. In an attempt to bring the situation under control martial law was declared on the 10th March 1922 and the SAAF was ordered to fly reconnaissance missions over Brakpan and Benoni where the rebels were consolidating.

Unarmed, and unsuspecting of any armed opposition, a flight of DH 9's took off from Zwartkop for the East Rand. They were met by a well-directed hail of bullets. Col Van Ryneveld himself was shot down, but managed to survive the ensuing forced landing; Capt W.W. Carey Thomas was, however, not as fortunate.

The next day the SAAF returned to the area, armed and prepared. They destroyed the Benoni Trade Halls, the rebels' headquarters, with 20 pounder bombs and pressed home incessant strafing and bombing raids against rebel personnel with such tenacity that on the 15th March 1922 the miners were forced to capitulate. In all the SAAF had flown 172 operational hours at a cost of two killed and two wounded while two aircraft had been totally destroyed, but what is more important, the air force had played a decisive role in curtailing what could otherwise have developed into a long and bloody civil struggle.

The smoke had hardly cleared over the East Rand when the SAAF were dispatched to South West Africa to help subdue an uprising amongst the Bondelswarts Hottentots which had been precipitated by their refusal to pay dog-tax. Flying a mere 105 hours in support of combined Army/Police ground operations, the air force helped to crush the uprising in a matter of days, losing only one aircraft in the process, proving conclusively the military value and cost effectiveness of the use of air support in this type of warfare. Consequently the SAAF was again summoned in 1925 and 1932 to help bring down the Rehoboth and Ovamboland uprisings.

However, it was not only on the battlefield that



A Wapiti aircraft

the SAAF proved itself in those early years. As a public service her pilots flew hydrographic and meteorological flights; they assisted in the dusting of eucalyptus plantations, sprayed locust swarms and carried out innumerable mercy and flood-relief flight operations.

It was during this period that the foundations were laid for the South African military aviation industry, when the Aircraft and Artillery Depot at Roberts Heights undertook the construction of several Westland Wapiti aircraft under license.

Pilot training also received its fair share of attention and in 1932 the SAAF's first Central Flying School was founded at Zwartkop, and with it a tradition of excellence in airmanship which has become synonymous with South African pilots.

By the mid-1930's it was obvious that the Western World was sliding irrevocably toward a new global conflict. In the light of this knowledge SAAF pilot training was stepped up. In 1934 the South African Parliament approved a 5-year expansion plan for the SAAF. A year later this plan was enhanced by the Air Force Development Programme, which was designed to provide for the growth of the SAAF and the establishment of a reserve of 1 000 pilots and 1 700 artisans over a period of six years.

The acceleration of existing training programmes and the decentralisation of flying schools to Bloemfontein, Durban and Cape

Town as well as to civilian flying clubs, resulted in an increased demand for training aircraft and from 1938 onward the SAAF began to buy every possible aircraft from the British Government at a nominal price. As a result a motley collection of Tutors, Wapitis, Hartebeeste, Hawker Harts and even 3 ex-Imperial Airways DH 66 Hercules transports began to find their way into service with the SAAF.

The Second World War

Despite these feverish attempts to re-arm and train, the advent of World War II caught South Africa and the SAAF totally unprepared for the demands of a modern and sophisticated conventional war. In 1939 the ravages of a tight post-World War I military budgeting policy were still all too apparent. The SAAF comprised a total full-time strength of 160 officers, 35 officer cadets and 1 400 other ranks. Besides this most of the 104 servicable aircraft were obsolete.

True enough the Rearmament and Expansion programme of the 1930's had been designed to fill these gaps but they had been projected to meet these eventualities in 1942. Despite the fact that legislation provided for the militarization of the entire South African Airways – a move which would give the SAAF a boost of 11 Ju 52/3m's and 18 Ju-86's along with some 200 pilots, navigators and artisans – South Africa needed pilots immediately.

In an attempt to meet the new operational demand flying schools were established at Pretoria, Germiston, Bloemfontein and Baragwanath where every available light aircraft was assembled for the purpose of supplying *ab initio* air crew training.

Pilots, however, were not the only commodity in short supply. To keep the Air Force flying it was also necessary to overcome the acute shortage of maintenance personnel. To do this an influx of trained men was necessary. So it was that Training Command SAAF was established under the command of Col W.T.B. Tasker. The real training breakthrough came, however, in August 1940 with the establishment of the Joint Air Training Scheme under which RAF, SAAF and other Allied air and ground crews were trained at 38 South African-based air schools. Two operational training units were also incorporated into this scheme.

Under this scheme the SAAF began to take great strides. By September 1941 the total number of military aircraft in the Union had increased by some 1 500, giving the SAAF a strength of 1 709 aeroplanes backed by a 31 204 officers and men, 956 of whom were pilots.

Training was not the only field in which the SAAF made its presence felt. From the very outbreak of hostilities the South African Air Force assumed an operational role against the Axis forces. The SAAF's first responsibility was to provide protection for Allied shipping moving in the region of the South African coastline. Operating in conjunction with the Royal Navy the South African Airways Wing were given the responsibility of patrolling the coast, from their Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth and Walvis Bay bases.

In December 1939 the Wing drew first blood for the SAAF when a Ju 86 intercepted the German liner *Watussi*. The *Watussi*, which had broken through the blockade at Lourenco Marques, was spotted some 90 miles off Cape Point. With a combination of machine gun fire and accurate bombing of the port bow the Ju 86 was able to head the *Watussi* for Cape Town but was unable to prevent her crew from scuttling the vessel before British warships could arrive to escort her.

The coastal reconnaissance flights continued to fly their trade up and down the South African Coast for the duration of the War, flying in ex-

cess of 15 000 sorties between September 1939 and the cessation of hostilities in Europe. In all they attacked 26 submarines and were party to the interception of 17 Axis blockade runners. It was mainly due to their diligence that total loss in ships along the South African coast could be limited to 250 000 tons.

On the 7th December 1941 the Japanese entered the war with a surprise attack on Pearl Harbour, an attack which gave rise to fears of a Japanese invasion of the South African east coast. To counteract such an eventuality the Coastal Reconnaissance Flights were strengthened by the addition of 6 and 10 Squadrons, two mobile fighter units flying Mohawks.

Should the Japanese attempt an invasion, the island of Madagascar offered an ideal springboard from which to mount such an offensive. In May 1942, 36 and 37 Flights were dispatched to Madagascar to assist an Allied expeditionary force in the seizure of the island. This pre-emptive operation proved to be largely uneventful, however, and the flights suffered only 1 casualty in the course of the 401 missions flown in their engine-failure prone Beauforts.

On the landward side the South Africans were faced by a force of some 200 000 Italian soldiers, supported by 383 aircraft, who were occupying Abyssinia, Somaliland and Eritrea. Fortunately, however, Mussolini seemed somewhat loath to join the war. His indecisiveness gave the South Africans 9 months in which to prepare for the Italian East African Campaign.

In May 1940, even before the Italians officially entered the conflict, the first elements of the SAAF began to move 'up North'. One flight from No 1 Squadron, flying Gladiators, was despatched to the Sudan while the rest of the Squadron, equipped with Hurricanes and Furies, which later developed into No 2 Squadron, was sent to Kenya along with No 11 and No 12 bomber Squadrons, respectively, flying Hartbeeste and Ju 86's.

At dawn on the morning of 11 June 1940, only hours after Italy had come into the war, four Ju 86's under the command of Maj Danie du Toit, took off from Eastleigh airfield near Nairobi, and, having refuelled at Bura, they pressed home an attack on the Italian transport and tanks at Moyale just inside Abyssinia. The first shots had been fired in the Italian East Africa Campaign and now the war was on with a vengeance and

the SAAF went over to flying continuous operations. At first the 40 aircraft that the SAAF had on strength were badly outnumbered by the Regia Aeronautica. However, it was not long before reinforcements began to arrive. Soon No 3 Squadron equipped with Hurricanes arrived to join in the fray as did No 40 and No 41 army co-operation squadrons flying Hawker Hartebeeste. No 1 Survey Flight (later No 60 Squadron) and the Maryland equipped No 14 squadron were also posted to East Africa to increase the SAAF's striking power.

Conditions in Italian East Africa were appalling. For the most the heat was so severe that no maintenance work could be carried out on aircraft between 10 o'clock in the morning and 4 pm. Sand reduced the lifespan of wooden propellers to as few as 12 take-offs and played havoc with engines and instruments alike. For the men, conditions were equally trying. Meals consisted of bully beef, black coffee and biscuits, while accommodation was a tarpaulin stretched between a couple of bushes. Water was limited to 1 gallon per person per day. Despite these tribulations the pilots and ground crews of the SAAF fought with verve.

It was during this campaign that Maj Bob Preller became the first SAAF pilot to win a World War II decoration. Having been shot down during a photo reconnaissance raid, Preller and his two crewmen Air Corporals E. Patterson and B. Ackerman destroyed their Fairy Battle and set out for the Allied lines on foot. After a week of suffering and privation they came across a water hole where Preller ordered the two corporals to wait for him. Alone he proceeded to look for help until he was located by a Rhodesian Air force plane. Exhausted, he was still able to guide a rescue party back to the water hole where Patterson and Ackerman were waiting. For his bravery Preller was awarded the DFC.

In November 1941 the Italian Forces in East Africa surrendered. To a great extent the story of this victory is the story of the destruction of the Italian Air Force. In smashing this aerial power the SAAF made it possible for the British and South African ground forces to move when and where they wished, unhampered by attacks from the air. In all they had flown 6 517 sorties, downed 71 aircraft and had destroyed many more on the ground together with vehicles and other installations. The cost to the SAAF had been 79 pilots and aircrew killed and 5 missing.

Mopping-up operations in East Africa were still in progress when the first of the South African air and ground forces were despatched to the Western Desert. The first to go were No 1 and No 24 Squadrons who arrived in April 1941, just in time to take part in Sir Archibald Wavell's great westward push.

In September 1941 No 3 SA Wing was formed. Initially comprising No 12 and No 24 Squadrons, the wing was later strengthened by the addition of No 21 Squadron. Equipmentwise too the wing received a boost when its squadrons swapped their original Marylands for more sophisticated bombers. 12 and 24 were re-equipped with Bostons while 21 Squadron exchanged their Marylands for Baltimores.

By the end of 1941 the SAAF representation in the Desert Air Force had been further augmented by the arrival of No 1, No 2 and No 4 fighter Squadrons, No 40 Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron and a Photo-reconnaissance squadron, No 60 Squadron.

The air war in North Africa was a far more serious affair than that fought in the skies over East Africa. The tenacious Luftwaffe and Italian Air Force were better equipped and far more determined than their dispirited counterparts in Abyssinia. The climate and general conditions too seemed to be more hostile. Sand was everywhere, reducing engine and instrument serviceability, visibility and even the palatability of food which, due to the absence of messes, often had to be eaten off one's lap in the open. Temperatures too could vary between freezing in winter and 113°F in summer.

Notwithstanding the South Africans threw their all into what often appeared to be a losing battle.

In mid-1942 Field Marshall Erwin Rommel and his Afrika Korps began to sweep irresistably eastwards, rolling the British 8th Army back before them. Close-packed along the narrow coastal road to Cairo, the Eighth Army presented the Luftwaffe with an ideal target and it was only due to the valiant attempts of the DAF that they managed to escape without being badly mauled from the skies.

In June and July 1942 the Allied forces struck back. No 12 and No 24 Squadron of No 3 SA Wing under the able leadership of Col 'Kalfie' Martin, escorted by 2 and 4 Squadrons, poured Boston load after Boston load of bombs onto the

enemy's landing grounds, totally disrupting the supply lines and checking their advancing armoured columns. Between 26 May 1942 and 27 July 1942 both Boston squadrons flew in excess of 1 000 sorties, nearly 300 of which were flown over the period 3 July – 4 July.

For No 1 (fighter) Squadron the 3rd July was also a red letter day. Led by their Commanding Officer Maj C.J. Le Messurier, 11 Hurricanes from the squadron 'jumped' a formation of 15 Ju-87B Stukas and their Messerschmitt Bf-109 escort. In the ensuing air battle No 1 shot down one Bf-109 and 13 of the Stukas without loss.

Between 31 August and 4 September 1942 Rommel staged an all-out drive for the vital Nile delta. Once again the DAF threw everything into the fray to check his advance.

Flying 334 sorties No 12 and No 24 Squadrons hurled 300 160 lbs of bombs at the enemy in an all-out effort which thwarted his advance.

For months the Eighth Army's new commander, General Sir Bernard Montgomery, had been re-grouping his badly mauled forces for a new Allied offensive and on the 23rd October 1942 he unleashed them on the Axis forces at El Alamein. No 3 Wing was once again in the thick of things.

The outcome of Montgomery's campaign could have been dramatically changed had Axis convoys been able to supply their colleagues with the fuel and supplies they so desperately needed to parry the Allied thrust. For this reason it was imperative that Axis shipping for Tobruk be stopped at all costs. This responsibility was the lot of two flights of Bisleys of No 15 Squadron SAAF led by Maj D.W. (Pip) Pidsley, and supported by 8 torpedo-carrying Beauforts from No 39 and No 47 Squadrons RAF, and 9 RAF Beaufighters as fighter escort. On the 26th October 1942 they attacked the Axis convoy despite a heavy barrage of accurate flack. The main target was the 2 700 ton tanker *Prosperina*. Two of No 15 Squadron's Bisleys were shot down in flames before Maj Pidsley screamed in over the tanker's stern at an altitude of 20 feet scoring direct hits with three of his four 250 pound bombs and stopping the *Prosperina* in her tracks, allowing an RAF Beaufort to administer the coup de grace. Pidsley was awarded an immediate DFC. His action ensured that the entire German armoured section was left with only enough fuel for a further 3 days.

The Allied breakthrough had come at last and November 1942 saw Rommel embarking on a long and hard-fought withdrawal toward Cape Bon in Tunisia. In retreat he was constantly harried by the SAAF. But the Germans were not giving in easily. Both the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe gave an excellent account of themselves but by May 1943 even this resistance was starting to crumble and the SAAF wreaked havoc amongst the German transports and their fighter escorts trying to flee Cape Bon.

On the 3rd May 1943 the final Allied push began, backed by a continuous aerial bombardment of Axis landing sites and positions. Within a week Tunis and Bizerta had fallen. The Bostons and Baltimores of No 3 Wing were swung into action against the Germans' final escape route, the fortified island of Pantelleria. An unbroken series of raids during 8 May and 9 May 1943 neutralized the island. The writing was on the wall for the Axis forces in Africa.

On 12 May the last aerial attack of the North African campaign took to the air with the Baltimores of No 21 Squadron representing the SAAF and by 00h30 the following morning the last of the Axis forces had surrendered unconditionally.

With the war in North Africa ended, the struggle for Italy began. From the start the SAAF proved to be a major thorn in the flesh of the enemy.

No big northward push could have been staged without comprehensive intelligence with regard to enemy strong points and terrain. Consequently No 60 Photo-reconnaissance Squadron's De Havilland Mosquitoes began to criss-cross first Sicily and then the Italian mainland and even further north. Lt A.M. 'Shorty' Miller was the first to photograph the Ploesti Oilfields in Rumania, for which feat he received the American DFC, while Capt Peter Daphane brought home the first pictures of the Munich – Augsburg district of southern Germany.

The push northwards began with massive Allied air raids on enemy positions on Sicily for which No 1 Squadron did escort duty while the Bostons and Baltimores of No 3 Wing helped to bomb the German forces into submission. And when the surface invasion came on the 9th June 1943 No 40 Army Co-operation Squadron served as spotters for the Eighth Army.

By the 17th August 1943 the Allies had secured Sicily.

On 12 September 1943 a detachment of Spitfire MkV's was sent to supply fighter support for the British forces occupying the small Italian island of Cas. However, their numbers were totally inadequate for the task. The Germans reacted to the occupation of Cas by unleashing a major bomber offensive on the island as the forerunner to an all-out air and seaborne operation aimed at the recapture of Cas. No 7 Squadron struggled gamely against overwhelming odds but by 3 October 1943 it was obvious that the situation was helpless and the survivors were forced to flee the island by sea.

In the meantime preparations for an Allied invasion of Italy went ahead. The light bomber units in particular were kept extremely busy pounding the Italians' rail links to the south. As the date set for the invasion neared, No 1 Squadron began to fly offensive raids over Southern Italy claiming 150 enemy aircraft in the process. No 40 Squadron too played its role in these softening-up operations by flying tactical reconnaissance missions and spotting for the guns of *HMS Nelson* and *HMS Rodney* during a coastal bombardment.

The invasion came on 13 September 1943. Aerial operations were now geared to supporting the landing attempts of the Allied troops with the new Marauders of No 3 SA Wing helping to secure the beach heads at Salerno and Anzio.

During the course of 1944 the Allies began to withdraw RAF aircrews from the Italian theatre in order to deploy them elsewhere in Europe as part of a softening-up action before attempting a landward invasion. The task of replacing these aircrews fell to the SAAF. As part of this enforced expansion Sir Pierre Van Ryneveld immediately set about the formation of a new heavy bomber wing consisting of two Liberator Squadrons, No 31 and No 34. Furthermore he called for a further 3 fighter squadrons to be equipped with Spitfires and Kittyhawks as well as a second Dakota squadron (No 44) to help ease the load of the hard-pressed No 28 Squadron SAAF. In July 1944 the SAAF's new Liberator force, designated No 2 SA Wing, joined No 205 Group RAF and began to fly operations out of Foggia.

It was about at this time that the Red Army went on the offensive and rolled Hitler's forces back out of Russia, continuing their advance into Po-

land almost to the city of Warsaw. The Polish resistance, sensing that liberation was at hand, rose and attacked the German forces stationed in Warsaw thinking that by doing so they would strengthen the Allies hand. But the Russians stopped short of Warsaw and refused to supply the hard-pressed Polish partisans with badly needed arms, medical supplies and food.

So it was that in August and September 1944 that the task of supplying the Warsaw resistance movement fell to No 2 SA Wing. Night after night the Liberators of No 31 and No 34 Squadrons winged their way over 1 700 miles of some of the most heavily defended German occupied territory in Europe before streaking into Warsaw at 200 feet to drop the supplies they carried. The cost to the SAAF in men and machine was high indeed but perhaps the greatest tragedy of the 'Warsaw Concerto' was that the Polish uprising was doomed before it really started and in a few short weeks the Polish patriots were crushed by their German oppressors.

On the seaward front the SAAF was playing a more defensive role with both No 20 and No 22 Squadrons flying Wellingtons and Venturas as convoy protection.

'Kittybombers' and 'Spitbombers' too made their presence felt in the Italian campaign. After helping to check the German counter-offensive at Sangro River, they spearheaded the Allied advance from Cassino to the Gustav and Hitler lines, and went on to participate in intense air battles that preceded the capture of Florence, before teaming up with SAAF Marauders, Baltimores and Liberators in the final softening-up operations before the Allies broke through the Gothic line.

The Spring 'Victory' offensive of April 1945 saw the SAAF once again in the thick of things. During April alone the SAAF flew more than 6 526 sorties – more than in any other month of World War II, and by doing so contributed to the unconditional surrender of some 2 million Axis troops on 2 May 1945.

In six years of war the SAAF had achieved much. At the peak of the conflict, the SAAF had grown from its humble beginnings to a formidable fighting machine consisting of 35 operational Squadrons flying 33 types of aircraft and manned by 45 000 men of all ranks. In the field of training, the Joint Air Training Scheme had produced some 33 347 pilots, bomb-aimers, navi-

gators, observers and wireless operators, 12 221 of whom were South Africans. The bravery and determination of the South African airmen is probably best reflected by the statistics of decorations and medals won by members of the SAAF. These include 32 DSD's, 8 CBE's 26 OBE's, 413 DFC's, 88 AFC's, 63 MBE's, 2 MM's, 24 DFM's, 14 AFM's, 4 American DFC's and 2 Victoria Crosses (awarded to Capt Edwin Swales (posthumous) and Squadron Leader J.D. Nettleton).

In all the SAAF flew a total of 82 401 missions from the commencement of hostilities in East Africa until the final surrender of Axis forces on 2 May 1945. During the same period the SAAF lost 2 420 of its members, either killed or missing.

The cessation of hostilities did not necessarily mean the end of the SAAF's operations, for the thousands of South African servicemen and women were anxious to be repatriated. Operating a very effective shuttle service, the SAAF wasted no time in assisting thousands of their countrymen to reach South Africa. Flying Dakotas, Venturas and Sunderlands, the SAAF brought the battle-weary Springboks home.

With the war over the Union Government wasted no time in pruning the SAAF back to peace time proportions. Many of the Squadrons were disbanded and the SAAF went back to the old game of trying to train and maintain an air force on a shoe-string budget. All that remained of the once mighty war time air force was a fighter force comprised of No 1 and No 2 Squadrons flying Spitfires out of Waterkloof; 28 Squadron who with their Dakotas survived as the SAAF's transport unit; and a maritime element in the form of 35 Squadron based in Durban. As a reserve, part-time squadrons of Active Citizen Force pilots were formed and the pupil pilot scheme was re-introduced with *ab initio* training being provided by civilian flying clubs in the country's main centres.

In the years immediately following the war the SAAF was kept busy performing a wide variety of peace time tasks. Exchanging bomb loads for insecticides, SAAF Ansons, Ju 52's and S-51 helicopters were employed to good effect against the red locust plague in Tanganyika and the tsetse fly in Zululand.

The Berlin Airlift

During 1948 it became apparent that East/West relationships were becoming strained, then in September the Soviets blockaded the divided city of Berlin in an attempt to force the Western block out of West Berlin and then West Germany. As a result all supplies had to be airlifted into Berlin. This was no mean feat as the daily requirements of the two and a half million West Berliners was in the region of 1 250 tons of food and 3 500 tons of coal a day. For the task the Western powers employed some 500 cargo aircraft flying in a continuous shuttle service. The SAAF's contribution to the Berlin Airlift came in the form of 20 aircrews, who after intense training at RAF Bassingbourne, flew 1 240 mission in RAF Dakotas out of the German city of Lübeck. By 15 April 1949 when the blockade was lifted the South Africans had shifted 4 133 tons of supplies.

On May 1949, four years after the German surrender, Sir Pierre van Ryneveld retired as Chief of the General Staff.

Korean War

For some time tension in Korea had been growing between the Communist Chinese-supported North Koreans and the pro-Western South. North Korean aggression escalated to such an extent that in August 1950 the United Nations decided to intervene on the side of the South Koreans.

As a founder member of the world body, South Africa opted to support the world body and consequently dispatched No 2 Squadron to the Far East on 25 September 1950.

Having converted onto the F-SID Mustang, the 'Flying Cheetahs' were attached to the 18th Fighter Bomber Wing flying operations of K-9 and K-24 near Pyongyang.

Conditions were deplorable and the aircraft were forced to operate in near-zero temperatures. In the face of fierce Chinese opposition, the South Africans flew raid after raid against the advancing Chinese forces but despite their most concerted efforts they were forced to withdraw to K-13 and K-10 near Chinhai.

For the next two years No 2 Squadron operated out of these bases flying long armed reconnaissance patrols and close air support missions in

support of the ground forces. The fierceness of the fighting is to some extent reflected by the statistics of that war. In the course of 10 373 missions No 2 Squadron lost 74 of its 95 Mustangs, 12 pilots were killed in action and a further 30 were posted missing.

Having converted to F-86F Sabre jets No 2 Squadron was moved to K-55 air force base from where they started to fly some 2 032 Sabre-borne ground attack operations and aerial sweeps along the Yuka and Chang-Chang rivers on 16 March 1953.

On 27 July 1953 the Korean war ended with the signing of the Armistice but not before the members of No 2 Squadron SAAF had become a legend of airmanship and bravery. Between them they had amassed 3 Legions of Merit, two Silver Stars, 50 DFC's 40 Bronze Stars, 176 Air Medals and 152 Clusters to the Air Medal. In honour of the unknown South African dead the South Korean Government made them a posthumous award of the Order of Military Merit (Taeguk) with Gold Star. But perhaps the most sincere indication of the esteem which the South Africans had earned came from the 18th Fighter-Bomber Wing, USAAF. On the 8th October 1953

a Wing Policy directive was issued which reads '... in Memory of our gallant South African comrades ... at all retreat ceremonies held by this Wing the playing of our National Anthem will be preceded by the playing of the introductory bars of the South African National Anthem ... All personnel will render the same honour to this anthem as to our own.'

As a sequel to this honour, Mr Edward T. Wales, the United States Ambassador to South Africa presented No 2 Squadron with a presidential citation on 3 August 1956. The citation read 'for extraordinary heroism in action against the armed enemy of the United Nations.'

The SAAF serves the Republic of South Africa

In the early 1960's the escalating threat to South Africa's borders caused the new Republic's Government to take steps towards re-armament. National Service was extended and needs of the Defence Force were well and truly examined to ensure that future development in this field would ready South Africa's defences for any eventuality.



Impala Aircraft of the SAAF in flight

As part of this programme the SAAF too was strengthened. New aircraft were acquired. The first Mirage IIICZ arrived in South Africa in April 1963 and was displayed to the public in July of the same year. Canberra light bombers, Hawker Siddeley Buccaneer low level strike aircraft, Alouette and Puma helicopters also joined the SAAF's arsenal in the early sixties, making the Air Force a striking power to be reckoned with. However, the writing was on the wall. Arms embargoes became imminent and it was obvious that these were probably the last aircraft that the Republic would be able to buy for some time. Replacements would have to be built locally. In 1966 the foundation was laid for a new aircraft industry in South Africa and on the 8th October 1966 the first Impala MB-326 rolled off the Atlas production line. Today Atlas provides servicing facilities for most of the SAAF's aircraft as well as producing Impala close support and trainer aircraft and Kudus and Bosbok aircraft flown by Light Aircraft Command.

During the late Sixties and early Seventies the Border War in South West Africa/Namibia began a steady escalation. Consequently the SAAF was recalled to active service mainly flying patrols and supply runs. However, the escalation continued.

In 1975 civil war broke out in Angola subsequent to withdrawal of its Portuguese administrators. Backed at first by the United States, South Africa moved into Angola in support of the pro-Western FNLA and UNITA movements, who were trying to oust the Russian-backed MPLA. On 26 March 1976, as a result of the international pressure, South African troops were withdrawn, undefeated, from the fray. Although the SAAF's role in this campaign remains shrouded in secrecy much of the Army's success and mobility must be attributed to effective air support.

Pre-emptive strikes against SWAPO bases deep into Angola have also an increase in the role of the SAAF in the bush war. The enormous successes of recent operations such as Sceptic, Protea and Daisy, have to a great extent been paved by the SAAF. Constant aerial reconnais-

sance, strike aerial bombardments, effective close air support and helicopter mobility have given the South African Army a clear-cut advantage over SWAPO. Much of the success of Operation Super in which over 200 SWAPO terrorists were killed must be attributed to the mobility of deployment afforded to the South African airborne troops by the helicopters of the SAAF.

The SAAF has suffered losses in the border war but so far all of these have been inflicted by ground fire and aircraft accidents. Although neighbouring Marxist states are in possession of jet fighter aircraft, they have so far been loathe to deploy them. The SAAF too have complied with the South African policy of non-interference with the armed forces of her neighbours for as long as they do not attack South African forces. During Operation Daisy, however, in November 1981 two Mig 21 fighters of the Angolan Air force attacked an SAAF Mirage patrol. When the aggressive intentions of the Angolan aircraft could no longer be ignored the South African pilots opened fire in self defence. One of the Migs was destroyed, and the other, seeing the fate of his colleague, broke off the engagement and fled. As South Africa is not at war with Angola the Mirages did not pursue him. This incident represented the first hostile aircraft to be shot down by SAAF pilots since the cessation of the Korean War.

Since its inception the South African Air Force has never faltered in its devotion to duty in the service of this country. In the fires of war, both at home and abroad, these knights of the air have forged a code of excellence, chivalry and courage. They are a force of men of whom South Africa can be truly proud, and today as of yesterday they are prepared to give their all in the protection of our basic rights and sovereignty.

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