

# Military Customs and Traditions/*Militêre Gewoontes en Tradisies*

## Origins of the retreat ceremony

While the Retreat Ceremony itself is one of the few uniquely South African military traditions, it derives from the old British military custom of 'beating the Retreat' (by drum) which originated in the sixteenth century. In its original form the custom has been variously interpreted as a signal to literally 'retreat' at the end of a day's fighting, or as a means of summoning those soldiers required to stand the night's watch. By the eighteenth century, however, a contemporary British Treatise On Military Discipline explicitly defined the practice thus:

'Half an hour before the Gates are to be shut, which is generally at the Setting of the Sun ... the Drummers of the Post-Guards are to go upon the Ramparts and beat a Retreat to give notice to those without that the Gates are to be shut ... As soon as the Drummers have finished the Retreat, which they should do in less than a quarter of an hour, the officers must order the Barriers and Gates to be shut.'

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the original purpose of the practice had been lost in the changed military circumstances, but nevertheless most British regiments continued to sound the Retreat by drum and bugle once or twice a week at sunset to symbolize the end of the day's activities. Some British regiments had by this stage adopted the practice of standing to attention while Retreat was being beaten, while in all cases where it was sounded the Guard turned out on the slope.

The old British custom of beating the Retreat at sunset was taken a step further by the Union Defence Force when the Special Service Battalion adopted it as the basis of a formal ceremonial parade at Command Headquarters on Roberts Heights on Friday evenings during the latter half of the nineteen-thirties. The SSB made the significant innovation of linking the sounding of Retreat to the saluting and lowering of the National Flag. The ceremony as devised by the SSB was altogether impressive, including countermarching bands, a Guard of Honour performing the general salute, and (later) the parading of

the Unit colours. So much so, that large crowds used to flock to Command HQ on Friday evenings to watch the stirring spectacle. Usually the Chief of the General Staff or the Officer Commanding Command would take the salute.

The Retreat Ceremony appears to have been performed by the SSB for the first time on Friday 13 July, 1934. By 19 October of the same year, the ceremony had already gained such a reputation that the Governor-General and Minister of Defence were invited to attend the ceremony.



*The SSB performing a Retreat Ceremony*

As was to be expected with an improvised ceremony, there were several variations of the ceremony at first, but by early 1935 the details of the participation by the Guard of Honour in the ceremony had been formalized, and on 11 December 1937 'Die Stem' was standardized as the music to be played during the general salute at Retreat Ceremonies at Roberts Heights and in OFS Command. On occasion permission was given for both the Union Jack and the National Flag to be used during the ceremony, but by the Second World War the National Flag alone was used. Indeed by 1940 the Retreat Ceremony had been adopted by the whole of the UDF and this fact was formally recognised by the inclusion of the ceremony in the Manual of Infantry Training of that year.



*Retreat Ceremony performed by the SA Military College in honour of genl J.A.C. Carrasco (Portugal)*

The Retreat Ceremony was performed regularly whenever SA units were concentrated during the War – perhaps most impressively during the anniversaries of the 6th SA Division in Italy. The ceremony was also performed on occasion by 2 Squadron SAAF in Korea.

The basic form of the ceremony today remains little altered from the original ceremony as devised by the SSB. Special permission has been granted for the ceremony to be performed without a Guard of Honour at functions in the State President's garden. A proposal in 1969 that the slow march be abolished from the ceremony on the grounds that it was too difficult for ACF and NS personnel was rejected by the CG, SADF. The slow march, after all, is one of the most impressive aspects of the ceremony. An unpopular innovation was introduced in 1971 when the Ceremonial Manual of that year contained a provision stating categorically that Colours were no longer to be paraded at Retreat Ceremonies. Many CF units protested at this decision, claiming that retreat Ceremonies were one of the rare occasions during which their Colours could be displayed. The matter was referred to CSADF, who reversed the decision on Colours. This afforded units like the Natal Carbineers the opportunity of continuing to display their colours at the Retreat Ceremony usually performed by them on

the opening day of the Agricultural Show in Pietermaritzburg.

The Retreat Ceremony is presently one of the most popular ceremonies in the SADF – appropriately enough, because it has its roots and origins buried firmly in South African military tradition. It is a fine example of how a military ceremony improvised by one unit can become part of firmly established ceremonial tradition with the passage of time.

### **Gevegsonderskeidings**

'n Gevegsonderskeiding is 'n toekenning aan 'n eenheid, gedeelte van 'n eenheid of skip ter erkenning van die aandeel daarvan in 'n veldtog, geveg of operasie, aksie of skermutseling en waarop vorige huidige en toekomstige lede van sodanige eenheid trots kan wees.

Soos dit die geval met vaandels was, het Suid-Afrika die gebruik om gevegsonderskeidings aan eenhede toe te ken van die Engelse oorneem.

Die eerste onderskeidingsteken in die Britse leër wat aan 'n eenheid vir uitstaande diens in 'n

gevegsituasie toegeken was, was in die vorm van 'n kenteken wat op die vaandel voortaan gedra kon word. Dit was die 'Leeu van Nassau' wat deur koning Wilhelm III aan die 18th Foot (The Royal Irish) vir diens in die geveg van Namur in 1695 toegeken is.

Op 19 Desember 1768 word die 15th Light Dragons deur 'n Koninklike Bevelskrif toegelaat om die onderskeiding EMSDORF in geskrewe vorm op hul vaandel te vertoon. In 1784 is vier regimente toegelaat om die onderskeiding Gibraltar op hul vaandel aan te bring as erkenning vir hul aandeel in die beleg daarvan gedurende die periode 1779–1783. Hierdie toekennings was die voorlopers van vele ander wat sporadies toegeken is tot en met 1882 toe dit noodsaaklik geword het om reëls vir die toekenning van onderskeidings neer te lê. Hierdie reëls was baie vaag en het in werklikheid eens na die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899–1902) behoorlik uitgekristaliseer.

Die toekenning van onderskeidings aan Koloniale eenhede in Suid-Afrika vir die periode voor 1912 is volgens die neergelegde Britse reëls toegeken in dié opsig dat 'n eenheid by die 'War Office' om 'n onderskeiding aansoek gedoen het. Laasgenoemde het die ondersoek en 'n voorlegging aan die Koning gemaak waarna die onderskeiding in die London Gazette gepubliseer is.

Na Uniewording het dit spoedig geblyk dat 'n eie Unie-Verdedigingsmagonderskeidingskomitee nodig is. Op 1 November 1924 is so 'n komitee daargestel. Eenhede sou voortaan dus hul eise aan hierdie komitee voorlê wat dan op hul beurt weer die nodige magtiging vanaf die War office verkry.

Hierdie toedrag het bly voortbestaan tot die aan-

stelling van die eerste suiwer Suid-Afrikaanse gevegsonderskeidingskomitee in 1956. Hierdie komitee het duidelike reëls en regulasies vir die toekenning van gevegsonderskeidings aan eenhede neergelê. Hiervolgens sou alle infanterie-, pantser- en pantserkarregimente sowel as alle SA Lugmageskaders en SA Vloot skepe wat nog in kommissie is, op gevegsonderskeidings aanspraak kan maak.

Hierdie reëls dien vandag nog as basis vir die toekenning van gevegsonderskeidings hoewel verskeie veranderinge aangebring is om aan te pas by die veranderde omstandighede. Die belangrikste hiervan was die toekenning van gevegsgebiedsonderskeidings (theatre honours) aan eenhede anders as die tradisionele infanterie-, pantser, en pantserkarregimente. Hiervolgens kan enige eenheid van die SA Weermag in beginsel aanspraak maak op gevegsonderskeidings/gevegsgebiedsonderskeidings hoewel dit in die praktyk vir sekere eenhede bykans onmoontlik is om sodanige onderskeidings te verwerf aangesien hulle aktief en op 'n lofwaardige wyse aan 'n geveg moes deelgeneem het.

By die SA Leër en die SA Lugmag moet onderskeidings op eenheidsvaandels geblasoeneer word. By die SA Vloot moet onderskeidings tov skepe in die vorm van plakette op die kwartdek vertoon word terwyl onderskeidings tov ander vlooteenhede ook in die vorm van plakette op 'n prominente plek vertoon word.

Onderskeidings word aan eenhede vir diens toegeken en dit is dus van die uiterste belang dat hulle hul waarde moet bly behou. Gevegsonderskeidings/gevegsgebiedsonderskeidings word dus net aan 'n eenheid toegeken indien sodanige eenheid dit werklik verdien.