

RESEARCHING SOUTH AFRICAN PRISONERS-OF-WAR EXPERIENCE DURING WORLD WAR II: HISTORIOGRAPHY, ARCHIVES AND ORAL TESTIMONY

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Abstract

Recently a study was undertaken to narrate and analyse the World War II experience of South African prisoners-of-war (POWs). One of the aims of the study was to provide a voice to the POWs whose stories had gone largely unobserved by local and international historians. The objective of this article is to describe the research method. The reasons for the extensive reliance on oral interviews are explained by providing an overview of the historiography and by describing the nature of the archival material. Additionally, specific analytical aspects concerning oral history, such as memory, retrospective knowledge, dual evaluation and intergenerational communication, are considered, as well as the manner in which rapport was established between the researcher and the participants. To show how the oral and the written word influence the way in which historical events – and the participants in those events – may be interpreted by present-day researchers, the way in which POW memoirs were used in conjunction with oral testimony in this study is also described.

Keywords: Prisoner-of-war; World War II; oral testimony; memoirs; historiography; Union Defence Force; Tobruk; Sidi Rezegh.

Slutelwoorde: Krygsgevangene; Tweede Wêreldoorlog; mondelinge getuienis; memoires; historiografie; Unie-verdedigingsmag; Tobroek; Sidi Rezegh.

1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2012, a study on South African prisoner-of-war (POW) experience during World War II was completed.² For the most part, the study relied on oral testimonies of twelve former POWs. Although the number of research participants was not representative of the total number of South African POWs during the war, the study nevertheless provided some insight into the experiences of those who were captured during the war. To supplement the oral sources, published and unpublished memoirs of former POWs were also used. In addition to these first-hand sources, archival documents were consulted. These were mostly from

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2 The study resulted in a PhD thesis entitled *South African Prisoner-of-War experience during and after World War II: 1939–c.1950*.

the Military Archives Depot in Pretoria (DOD). Lastly, published scholarly work by South African and international scholars were used to contextualise the South African POW experience. The aim of this article is to describe the research process that was followed for the study, with a specific focus on the oral interviews and the use of memoirs.

To place the research process in context, the article firstly provides background information on the wartime events that led to the capture of the veterans who participated in the research. This is followed by a brief overview of the captives' subsequent experiences in POW camps in North Africa, Italian and German-occupied territories during the war. A discussion on POW historiography and archival sources are included to explain the rationale for the research topic, and to illustrate why oral interviews and memoirs were used as the main source of information for the study. The focus of the article then shifts to the strategies and procedures that were followed during the interview process and highlights aspects concerning memory, retrospective knowledge, dual evaluation and intergenerational communication that were encountered during the interview process. Lastly, the article looks at POW memoirs, and how these texts were used in conjunction with the information gained from the oral testimonies.

2. SOUTH AFRICAN POWS DURING WORLD WAR II

Of the twelve former POWs who were interviewed, eleven were captured during the fall of Tobruk in June 1942. The twelfth research participant was captured the previous year at the Battle of Sidi Rezegh. Tobruk and Sidi Rezegh were, without a doubt, two of the most serious military setbacks for the Union Defence Force (UDF). However, before these battles took place, ideological differences in South Africa caused its share of conflict as the country was divided regarding its participation in the war. Many Afrikaners supported the Prime Minister, JBM Hertzog, who advocated a neutral stance in the war. On the other hand, JC Smuts believed that South Africa should support the Allied cause.³ Following a narrow victory by Smuts in parliament, Hertzog resigned and South Africa entered the war with Smuts as the new Prime Minister.⁴

At first, volunteers in the UDF were active in the East African colonies of Italy where they were victorious in all the battles. Following the surrender of the Italian colonies in 1941, the South African divisions found themselves on their way to Egypt where they soon became active in the more arduous battles against the German *Afrika*

3 BM du Toit, "The far right in current South African politics", *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 29(4), 1991, p. 632.

4 A Stewart, "The British Government and the South African neutrality crisis 1938-39", *English Historical Review* CXXIII(503), 2008, p. 967.

Korps.⁵ The Battle of Sidi Rezegh in November 1941 resulted in the loss of the entire 5th South African Infantry Brigade, with 224 killed, 379 wounded and 3000 captured.⁶ The following year, a military disaster of far worse proportions befell the 2nd South African Division when Major General HB Klopper, the commander of the Tobruk Garrison, controversially ordered a surrender and caused 33 000 Commonwealth soldiers, 10 722 of whom were South African, to be taken prisoner.⁷

In both cases, the men were captured by German forces but were handed over to the Italians, as Libya was an Italian colony at the time. Initially the POWs were kept in temporary camps in the desert, but were soon transported by cargo ships to Italy where they stayed until the Armistice in September 1943. While many managed to escape following Mussolini's fall, most were recaptured by German forces and transported further north to German POW camps, as was the case with David and Paul Brokensha and Jack Mortlock, all of whom were apprehended just over a week after leaving their Italian POW camps.⁸ Although amiable relationships developed in many cases between South African POWs and their captors, many prisoners also suffered extreme hardships, especially in areas such as Oldenburg and Upper Silesia where they were put to work in coal mines.⁹

Ironically, the end of the war brought about even greater suffering among the POWs before they could experience freedom. The long marches at the end of the war placed immense strain on the already weak POWs, but they were nevertheless forced to walk many miles as Germany desperately tried to control its captives while the Allies closed the gap between the eastern and western fronts.¹⁰ Nevertheless, those POWs who survived these gruelling marches joined up with Allied forces and soon found themselves in Britain, from where they were transported back to the Union.

3. HISTORIOGRAPHY

Both scholarly and popular publications on South Africa's role in World War II are very narrow. Since the completion of the study in question, several articles have been published, but before this specific study was undertaken, the historiographical

5 G Bentz, "From El Wak to Sidi Rezegh: the Union Defence Force's first experience of battle in East and North Africa, 1940-1941", *Scientia Militaria* 40(3), 2012, pp. 181-186.

6 C Somerville, *Our war: how the British Commonwealth fought the Second World War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p. 94.

7 A Stewart, "The 'atomic' despatch: Field Marshal Auchinleck, the fall of the Tobruk Garrison and post-war Anglo-South African relations", *Scientia Militaria* 36(1), 2008, pp. 79-80.

8 Interview: David Brokensha – Karen Horn, Fish Hoek, 10 September 2010; J Mortlock, *The endless years: reminiscences of the 2nd World War* (Unpublished memoirs, 1956), p. 53.

9 Interview: Bernard Schwikkard – Karen Horn, Johannesburg, 17 March 2010.

10 IB Greeff, "South African Prisoners-of-War on the long marches 1944–1945", *Military History Journal* 8(6), 1991. Available at <<http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol086ig.html>>, accessed 9 May 2014.

contribution with regard to Union POWs was almost non-existent. Maxwell Leigh's book, *Captives courageous*, and Paul Schamberger's book, *Interlude in Switzerland*, were the only publications on the POW theme.¹¹ Leigh's book deals with the entire experience from capture to liberation, depicting life in a POW camp by looking at the day to day aspects such as living conditions, educational opportunities, theatre and sports activities, as well as the role the Red Cross played in the lives of POWs.¹² The fact that Leigh disregarded archival material or perhaps saw no need for further analysis, resulted in an uncritical approach, which neglects to consider problems with regard to historical accuracy and bias in the compilation of POW diary extracts and memoirs. For instance, the question of common experience as opposed to the individual experience of each prisoner is not considered. Similarly, issues of nationalism and identity are overlooked, both of which are central questions in this crucial period of South Africa's history.

On the other hand, *Interlude in Switzerland*, relies heavily on archival material, but the focus of the POW experience is on escape to neutral Switzerland.¹³ Although the publication gives insight and analysis into the experiences of escaped POWs, it is not a very useful source for investigating life in Axis controlled POW camps. Chapters and sections on POWs can be found in a small number of other publications, including in Joel Mervis' book, *South Africa in World War II* that was published in 1989. Overall, Mervis' approach is similar to that of Leigh as no analysis is made into any of the deeper aspects of POW experience, and the focus is rather on the general experience of daily camp routine, entertainment, sports activities and on reading matter available to the prisoners. The second chapter on POW experience is taken from the memoirs of a prisoner captured at Tobruk and liberated from Stalag IXA, and simply relates the events of the prisoner's last days in Germany.¹⁴ A few years later, in 1995, DG Friend contributed a chapter to John Keene's pictorial history of South Africa in World War II. The chapter entitled *Reluctant guests of the Third Reich* describes POW experience in very general terms and, like the publications mentioned above, it lacks in-depth analysis.¹⁵ Neither of the publications by Keene and Mervis made use of archival material nor of primary sources such as oral reminiscences from veterans. Furthermore, as the primary aim of Mervis' and Friend's work was to provide an overview of South

11 M Leigh, *Captives courageous. South African prisoners of war World War II* (Johannesburg: Ashanti, 1992), *passim*; P Schamberger, *Interlude in Switzerland: the story of the South African refugee-soldiers in the Alps during the Second World War* (Johannesburg: Maus, 2001), *passim*.

12 Leigh, *passim*.

13 Schamberger, *passim*.

14 J Mervis, *South Africa in World War II: 50 years* (Johannesburg: The Executive, 1989), *passim*.

15 J Keene, *South Africa in World War II. A pictorial history* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1995), *passim*.

Africa's participation in the war, there is no significant analysis as the rhetorical mode is largely of a narrative nature.

Because so many South Africans were captured at Tobruk in 1942, the official histories of those regiments that were active in the Desert War often contain chapters or sections on the fall of Tobruk and inevitably deal with POW experience to some degree, mostly with regard to capture. Most notable among these is *The Durban Light Infantry* that devotes 19 sections to events at Tobruk.¹⁶ Other regimental histories with sections or chapters on Tobruk are *The Rand Light Infantry* and *The history of the Transvaal Scottish*, as well as *The Umvoti Mounted Rifles, 1864–1975*.¹⁷

Internationally, publications on Allied and Axis POW experience are more readily available. Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, Barbara Hatley-Broad, Arieh J Kochavi, Simon Mackenzie and Adrian Gilbert have all published on various POW topics, the most common of which are the treatment of prisoners by their captors and aspects of the daily life of POWs such as camp entertainment and recreation.¹⁸ Narratives of escape and resistance are also popular and it is within this theme that the memoirs of officers and fighter pilots often appear. This publishing trend neglects the experience of the rank and file men who found themselves in work camps or large Stalags.¹⁹ While the thematic approach provides informative perspectives, the unique views of the different nationalities that formed part of the Allied forces are lost, as Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders and

16 AC Martin, *The Durban Light Infantry II: 1935 to 1960* (Durban: Headquarter Board of DLI, 1969), *passim*.

17 BG Simpkins, *Rand Light Infantry* (Cape Town: Timmins, 1965), *passim*; C Birkby (ed.), *The saga of the Transvaal Scottish Regiment 1932-1950* (Cape Town: Timmins, 1950), *passim*; AJ du Plessis, *The Umvoti Mounted Rifles, 1864-1975* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal Witness, 1975), *passim*.

18 See for instance B Moore and K Fedorowich. *Prisoners of war and their captors in World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), *passim*; B Moore and B Hatley-Broad (eds). *Prisoners of war; prisoners of peace: captivity, homecoming and memory in World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), *passim*; B Moore and K Fedorowich. *The British Empire and its Italian prisoners of war, 1940-1947* (London: Palgrave, 2002), *passim*; B Moore, "Unwanted guests in troubled times: German prisoners of war in the Union of South Africa, 1942-43", *The Journal of Military History* 70(1), 2006, pp. 63-90; WW Mason, *Prisoners of war. New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: official history* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1954), *passim*; AJ Kochavi, *Confronting captivity: Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), *passim*; A Gilbert, *POW Allied prisoners in Europe 1939-1945* (London: John Murray, 2007), *passim*.

19 For escape narratives see for instance PCJ Brickhill, *The great escape* (New York: Cassell, 1950), *passim*; J Anderson, *Escape in the Apennines* (Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan, 1992), *passim*; A Flederman, *And direction was given* (Cape Town: Pretext, 2005), *passim*; G Friedman, *The piano war. A true story of love and survival in World War II* (Parkview: David Philip, 2003), *passim*. For research on POWs in officers' camps see for instance SP Mackenzie, *The Colditz myth: British and Commonwealth prisoners of war in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), *passim*.

South Africans are all referred to as simply British or Commonwealth forces.²⁰ It is understandable that most researchers tend to refer simply to “Commonwealth prisoners”,²¹ or “British contingents comprised units drawn from almost every ethnic group then within the British Empire”.²² Generalisations are certainly possible because most Allied POWs had some very similar experiences during their captivity, but this approach neglects the unique aspects of each nation. While most international authors interviewed former POWs, the research was carried out invariably in other Allied countries, with only very occasional references to South African POWs.²³ Undeniably, there are many other aspects of POW experience that an author may deem as more important than nationality, especially if many nationalities involved in the war formed part of the Commonwealth, and were seen as a common political unit at the time of the war.

South Africa may have been part of this political unit, but there were divisions within the country. The political and social milieu was especially relevant and would have influenced South African war experience, as well as relations of captivity by enemy forces. When one looks more closely at South Africa’s unique war context, it becomes clear that the peculiar and complex race and class relations in the country influenced the POW experience of volunteers who came from the many different socio-economic, race and political backgrounds that divided the Union at the time.

While numerous English-speaking South Africans volunteered as a result of a sense of loyalty to the British Empire, many more Afrikaners were reluctant to do so, having grown up listening to their grandparents’ stories of British concentration camps during the South African War. Ironically, many Afrikaners did volunteer, but the majority of them did so mostly for financial reasons and not because they felt allegiance towards the British Empire or a commitment to the cause of the war.²⁴ These obvious differences between English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans regarding the Union’s role in World War II make for interesting research in the experience of POWs as they shared the same camps, regardless of the social or ideological differences between them.

20 K Fedorowich and B Moore, “Co-belligerency and prisoners of war: Britain and Italy, 1943-1945”, *The International History Review* 18(1), 1996, pp. 28–47.

21 SP MacKenzie, “The treatment of prisoners of war in World War II”, *The Journal of Modern History* 66(3), 1994, p. 491.

22 R Absalom, “The Allies: the resistance and the others in occupied Italy 1943–1945”, *The Historical Journal* 38(1), 1995, p. 112.

23 See for instance Gilbert’s work. For his research Gilbert used the memoirs of Ike Rosmarin, a South African who was captured at Tobruk in 1942.

24 AM Grundlingh, “‘The King’s Afrikaners?’ Enlistment and ethnic identity in the Union of South Africa’s Defence Force during the Second World War, 1939–45”, *Journal of African History* 40, 1999, pp. 351–365.

Following the National Party's (NP) victory in the 1948 election, and the decision to implement a policy that was based on an ideology seen as politically and ethically unacceptable to other members of the Commonwealth, South Africa's World War II historiography suffered the consequences. The country's involvement in the war went against the NPs endeavours to create a state where the Afrikaner would be in control. Nationally the official history of South Africa's participation in the war ended, while international historians seemed to avoid the country's contribution to the war because of what many regarded as an offensive political direction.²⁵

As the authorities in South Africa and the international scholarly community largely ignored South Africa's wartime efforts, one cannot expect any significant works where the focus is on South African captives. However, in at least one instance the events surrounding the South African POW experience was so extraordinary that it could not be ignored, as was the case with the events surrounding the POW escape from Stalag Luft III. Initially a book by Paul Brickhill, a former prisoner of the same prison camp, the narrative was later adapted for film and it was here that certain facts were changed to suit international audiences. The book tells the story about the mass escape attempt from Stalag Luft III under the leadership of the South African Squadron leader, Roger Bushell.²⁶ In the 1963 film, however, Bushell was portrayed as a British soldier named Bartlett, a decision of the filmmakers perhaps influenced by the "growing political crisis of white Southern Africa" following shortly after the Sharpeville shootings for which South Africa was condemned internationally.²⁷ A more recent publication by Simon Pearson, *The great escaper*, not only sets right the misconceptions created by the film, but also paints a colourful and detailed picture of Bushell's life. Throughout the book, it is clear that the author holds Bushell in very high regard but any notion of bias is done away with by the meticulous research that lends scholarly credibility to the work.²⁸

4. OTHER SOURCES

As is the case with international secondary sources, these, mainly web-based sources, focus on POW experience in general and references to South Africans are mostly incidental. The website of the National Ex-Prisoner of War Association,

25 For more on South African military historiography see D Katz, "A case of arrested development: the historiography relating to South Africa's participation in the Second World War", *Scientia Militaria* 40(3), 2012, pp. 280–317.

26 Brickhill, *passim*.

27 NJ Cull, "Great escapes: 'Englishness' and the prisoner of war genre", *Film History* 14, 2002, pp. 282–295.

28 S Pearson, *The great escaper. The life and death of Roger Bushell. Love, betrayal, Big X and the great escape* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2013), *passim*.

which is a member of the British Service and Ex-Service Organisations, is useful with regard to information on camp names as it includes a full list of all POW camps in all German occupied territories. The site also includes information on the POW medal and has a collection of photographs from various POW camps, although not all the men in the photographs are identified. The site also provides a list of published and unpublished books on and by POWs, as well as links to other websites, including websites for Stalag VIIA Moosburg and Stalag VIIIIB/344 Lamsdorf, both of which are relevant as they were used as base camps for POWs entering Germany following the Italian armistice.²⁹

Included in the Stalag VIIIIB/344 website are copies of *The Clarion*, the camp newspaper that appeared on a monthly basis between January 1943 and December 1944. Also useful are the video recordings of interviews with former Lamsdorf POWs, as well as the sections on hospital facilities in the camp, which are compiled from the memoirs of one of the POW medical staff who worked in the camp hospital. The website also provides useful links to related research on POW experience, including reviews of recently published books on the topic. The website for Stalag VIIA Moosburg contains valuable primary material in the form of transcriptions of letters sent from the camp to family members. The site also contains 104 narratives from former POWs who spent time at the Moosburg camp, as well as short biographies of the two German camp commanders, Otto Burger and Hans Nepf. Most of the narratives include photographs of prisoners, while the website also includes aerial views and a map showing the layout of the camp.

5. ARCHIVAL SOURCES

The Military Archives Depot in Pretoria (DOD) is a natural starting point for archival research on POW matters. More specifically, the collection of the Adjutant General; Prisoner-of-War (AG POW and POW) deals with UDF POWs abroad as well as with German and Italian POWs in South Africa. This collection is grouped in AG POW or POW and in both groups references are found pertaining to UDF POWs in Italy and Germany and, to a lesser extent, to POWs in North Africa. These groups are the most useful with regard to finding information on living conditions in Italy as well as in Germany, as the collections hold copies of reports from both the Protecting Power and the Red Cross inspectors who inspected each camp every three to four months.³⁰ The reports describe camp conditions under headings such

29 “*The National Ex-Prisoner-of-War Association*”, <http://www.prisonerofwar.org.uk/camp_list.htm>, accessed 14 September 2011; *POW Camp VIIA Moosburg*, <<http://www.moosburg.org/info/stalag/indeng.html>>, accessed 21 September 2011; *Lamsdorf: Stalag VIIIIB 344 prisoner of war camp 1940–1945*, <<http://www.lamsdorf.com/>>, accessed 21 September 2011.

30 A Protecting Power is a neutral state which protects the interests of a belligerent state in the territory of a third belligerent state. During World War II, Switzerland acted as the Protecting

as *general conditions, interior arrangements, camp capacity, toilet facilities, food and cooking facilities, medical attention and sickness among POWs, clothing, laundry, money and pay, canteen, religious activity, recreation and exercise, mail, welfare work and complaints*. Reports on camps with satellite work or hospital camps include conditions in these camps, although the inspectors often relied on the statements from the camp leader, also known as the Man of Confidence, as it was not always possible for inspectors to visit all the work and hospital camps personally.

In total, there were 994 POW camps in German-occupied territory, although the South African authorities naturally only received copies of reports on those camps where South Africans were held. While that significantly reduced the number of reports it also creates difficulties regarding accuracy, as most POWs did not remain in the same camp throughout the war.³¹ In Italy, POWs were moved further north as the Allies approached from the south of the country, while those in work camps in Germany were moved from one camp to another and often their work camps would fall under the control of different main camps. However, the official list of South African POWs, indicates only one Italian and one German camp for each POW, most often the main camp where they were registered when first arriving in Italy or Germany.

The War Diary Collection at the Military Archives Depot in Pretoria contains diaries up to division level, while the Divisional Documents of the 2nd South African Division is useful as this entire Division surrendered in Tobruk. The Military Archives Depot also contains minutes of the Defence Authorities Committee (from 1940 to 1945) that gives insight into policy matters regarding POWs. Other useful collections for POW matters at the DOD are Chief of the General Staff (CGS) and the Secretary of Defence (DC) Collection, although references to POW matters in these collections are not as evident as in others, such as the AG POW Collection. Also at the DOD, *The Union war histories*, a collection concerning overall South African participation in the war, established by Smuts in 1940, is useful in obtaining relevant oral history evidence, journals and original photographs.³²

The Ditsong National Museum of Military History (MMH) holds substantial resources on POWs, especially POW memoirs and donations of photographs from former veterans. These are especially valuable as none of the archives hold extensive material on POW experience in North Africa. Indeed, as there is no evidence that the inspectors of the Red Cross or the Protecting Power ever visited

Power for states on both sides of the conflict. The Protecting Power sent camp inspectors to POW camps to assess to the manner in which the terms of the Geneva Convention was implemented. HS Levie, "Prisoners of war and the Protecting Power", *The American Journal of International Law* 55(2), April 1961, pp. 374, 384-386.

31 *National Ex-Prisoner of War Association POW Camp Listings*, <http://www.prisonerofwar.org.uk/camp_list.htm>, accessed 14 September 2011.

32 <http://academic.sun.ac.za/mil/mil_history/military_archives_ww2.htm>, accessed 5 November 2009.

the camps in Tobruk, Derna, Benghazi or any of the other transit camps in North Africa, it is necessary to rely on oral narratives, diaries and memoirs in order to gain knowledge of this stage of POW experience. Other soldiering records, like the *Benghazi Forum*, a camp newspaper initiated by Eric Hurst, a British POW, in November 1942, can be added to the resources.³³ Selected reproductions of the *Benghazi Forum* are available at the MMH, but the document centre at the Castle of Good Hope Military Museum in Cape Town holds all its editions, as well as its Italian successor, the *Turano Times*.

The National Archives of South Africa (NASA) in Pretoria also holds considerable information on the war period, but here the researcher must search more strategically in the hope of finding relevant POW information, keeping in mind what was revealed at the DOD. The collections of the Secretary of Foreign Affairs (BTS), Director General of Demobilisation (DGD), Secretary of Home Affairs (BNS), Ambassador, London (BLO), South African Police (SAP) and the Governor General (GG) all hold some references to POW matters. To a lesser degree, the collections of the Decisions of the Executive Council (URU), Department of Labour (ARB), Secretary of Union Education (UOD), Secretary of Public Works (PWD), Controller of Auditor-General (KOG), Custodian of Enemy Property (BVE) and the Secretary of the Treasury (TES) are useful, especially for the periods directly before and after the war.³⁴

Considering the limited historiography on South African POW experience and the tendency among international scholars not to refer to individual nations within the Commonwealth, the study on South African POWs was undertaken in an attempt to fill the knowledge gap in this historical theme. In addition, the archival material did not reveal much about the actual experiences of the men while they were in the POW camps. Reports from Red Cross and Protecting Power inspectors are helpful with regard to living conditions, food and medical supplies, but it tells the reader nothing about the men's hopes and fears and about their interpersonal relationships with each other and with their enemy captors. Neither does it tell the reader how their view on war changed as they began to see how the bombing campaigns and the lack of basic foodstuffs affected the ordinary people with whom they came into contact while they were held captive. It was for these reasons that the research relied mostly on oral interviews and memoirs from former POWs.

6. ORAL TESTIMONY

According to Alistair Thompson, many historians see oral history as a way to give ordinary people a chance to investigate their own past and to construct

33 Friedman, p. 200.

34 <http://academic.sun.ac.za/mil/mil_history/military_archives_ww2.htm>, accessed 5 November 2009.

their “own history” through personal narratives.³⁵ In this section the focus falls on finding veterans, the interview process and on the analysis and interpretation of the narratives and the aspects that may influence this research method. The interviews for this study were conducted during 2010 and 2011 and included twelve participants between the ages of 86 and 97. Since then, a number of these men have passed away.

In the search for former POWs, the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTH) was approached.³⁶ In a few cases, finding one participant led to finding another as a few of them still maintain contact with each other. This in turn led to finding a few former POWs who all lived in the same camp at some point during the war, allowing for comparisons between their experiences. For instance, David Brokensha, his brother Paul and Dick Dickinson were all in Work Camp 1169, a labour camp near Dresden in Germany. From these former POWs it was possible to obtain the memoirs of Jack Mortlock who was also part of the group in that specific camp. In interpreting the oral testimonies of former POWs with regard to their experiences in the same labour camp, it was possible to compare and contrast their recollections of their experiences, which once again highlighted the difference between the general and the individual experience.

Gaining information from amateur and local historians is equally valuable as they often have information about residents in their towns that would otherwise have gone unnoticed by academic historians. Such was the case with Taffy Shearing in Mossel Bay, an amateur historian who published Dick Dickinson’s POW diary. Through this publication, it was therefore also possible to approach Dickinson for an interview on his POW experiences.

As the research method was predominantly qualitative, semi-structured interviews were used. In an effort to establish rapport and put the veterans at ease, initial questions focussed on their life stories and on events before the war, such as childhood memories and education. In most cases the interview developed into a conversation where the interviewee set the pace and, to a certain extent, the focus. However, the interviewer was able to steer the direction of the interview towards questions and themes that had been decided on before the interview. In this manner the discussions could be directed from childhood memories to the outbreak of the war and each man’s decision to volunteer for the UDF. Because the interview procedure was flexible, it allowed for a logical flow and, in this way, the participants mostly narrated their remembrances chronologically. As a result, the focus of most

35 A Thomson, “Four paradigm transformations in oral history”, *The Oral History Review* 34(1), 2007, pp. 52–53.

36 The Memorable Order of the Tin Hats (MOTH) was founded in South Africa in 1927 and its aims are to provide financial or physical assistance to war veterans. The following year the Order was also established in Britain. R Johnston, “The Memorable Order of Tin Hats”, <<http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/moth.htm>>, accessed 12 May 2014.

interviews progressed from volunteering to training and then to leaving the country and finally capture and camp experience. Following this natural order of the narrative was helpful in establishing rapport and putting the interviewees at ease, which in turn allowed participants to feel free to add their opinions on matters such as the competence of their commanders.³⁷

Other issues uppermost in their minds during capture included feelings of guilt at the time of capture and upon their return to South Africa after the war, possibilities of escape, aspects concerning other nationalities and/or races in prison camp, relationships and attitudes towards captors, comparing Italian captors to German captors, factors that influenced morale, daily routines in camps, liberation experiences, and returning to South Africa.

Once the discussion with each former POW reached its chronological end, the interview questions became more analytical and included aspects on how POWs came to terms with their POW status; how the experience influenced their ideas on national identity; and how their world view changed (if at all) following their POW experience during the war. Finally, all former POWs were asked what they regarded as unique to South African POWs. In almost all cases, former POWs answered that Union POWs were no different from other Allied POWs and that they all shared the same needs, hardships and longings.

Although not representative of the thousands of POWs, 13 veterans were approached and only one refused to even discuss the possibility of a meeting. The 12 who agreed to share their experiences all seemed very positive about participating in the research. Almost all of them expressed a sense of surprise that someone would be interested in their wartime experiences, and they all stated that it was important for the interviewer to take note of the fact that they were not heroes. It is perhaps because of this attitude that some of them almost dismissed the significance of their experience and tried to summarise the three or four years of their captivity in a few sentences. This was the case with George Tewkesbury, who gave the following abridged version of his war and POW experience:

“When war started I thought I’ll go and do my bit, and I volunteered when I was 17 telling them I was 18 as all kids do in those days and went into my mother’s regiment which was the Black Watch and I was captured at Anzio, Italia, on the 4th of February 1944. And what else can I tell you?”³⁸

Once the interviews were underway, however, the initial narratives revealed attitudes among the former POWs that negatively affected what they chose to share or not to share during interviews. In most cases these attitudes were the result both of internal (personal) and external factors experienced by the veterans following

37 BL Leech, “Asking questions: techniques for semi-structured interviews”, *Political Science & Politics* 4, December 2002, p. 666.

38 Interview: George Tewkesbury – Karen Horn, Cape Town, 5 March 2010. Tewkesbury immigrated to South Africa after the war.

the end of the war. Many former POWs who returned to South Africa after the war developed a habit of silence regarding their POW experiences, most probably because of guilt or shame at being captured. A case in point is David Brokensha, who was captured along with his brother and many other South Africans at Tobruk in June 1942. Brokensha explains that he felt ashamed because he was captured literally with his pants down, swimming naked in the sea after sharing a bottle of gin with his brother Paul and four others who believed they could swim to freedom following the surrender order. Brokensha's capture was therefore humiliating on many different levels: firstly because he was part of a surrendering army, secondly because they failed to escape and thirdly because he felt "embarrassed, not only at being a *handsopper*, but also because I was 'starko'".³⁹ Following his return to South Africa in 1945, Brokensha did not discuss his POW experiences until he started writing about them following the death of his brother in 1986. Brokensha thought it would be pointless to talk about what he had experienced as he believed nobody would understand the hardships POWs had lived through.

During an interview in 2010, David attempted to explain his silence by saying that he did not view his POW period as being of great importance when compared to what he afterwards achieved. Between 1945 and the writing of his memoirs in 1986, Brokensha hardly ever referred to his POW experiences:

"For most of my post-war life I have not dwelt much on my WW2 years. When I was at Rhodes University in 1945-47, one of my closest friends was [...], who had himself been a POW. Yet neither of us knew about the other's captivity for at least a year: we simply did not talk about it."⁴⁰

In a similar way, Matthys Beukes, who was also captured at Tobruk, admitted that none of the former POWs liked to talk about their experiences for years after their return to South Africa.⁴¹ In another example, Bill Hindshaw, although he said he would participate willingly, added that he did not want "any comparison or any arguments [because] what I told is a hundred percent (*sic*), one thousand percent (*sic*) true, because that's how it happened to me".⁴² The tendency among POWs and veterans to remain silent on wartime events is similar to the way in which some Holocaust survivors remain silent on "all-absorbing memories"⁴³ of traumatic events. According to Nutkiewicz's study, Holocaust survivor testimony is influenced by the survivor's interpretation of his or her experiences. At the time

39 D Brokensha, *Brokie's way: an anthropologist's story. Love and work in three continents* (Fish Hoek: Amani Press, 2007), p. 72.

40 D Brokensha, POW reunion letter to Stanley Smollan, Arthur Winter, Dick Dickinson and Harry Mortlock, August 2011.

41 Interview: Matthys Beukes – Karen Horn, Bloemfontein, 2 February 2011.

42 Interview: William Hindshaw – Karen Horn, Johannesburg, 19 March 2010.

43 M Nutkiewicz, "Shame, guilt, and anguish in holocaust survivor testimony", *The Oral History Review* 30(1), 2003, p. 2.

of the war, many survivors regarded their experiences as common, it was only afterwards that many came to realise how specific events were unique. In many cases, this realisation brought about feelings of shame and guilt. In remaining silent, however, survivors isolate themselves from the collective memory and they become embroiled in a continuous struggle to forget on the one hand, but also to memorialize on the other hand.⁴⁴ Similarly, as the POWs were captured in large numbers they did not view their experiences as unique and this, together with the other factors mentioned below, motivated them to remain silent after the war.

Another factor that may have swayed veterans to remain silent was the NP government that came into power in 1948. When the war ended in 1945, the NP focussed its attention on building and preserving Afrikaner nationalism as they tried to counteract the perceived threats of increased black urbanisation. The NP also focussed on the ideological differences between the Afrikaans and English speaking sections of the white population by using the South African War of 1899–1902 as a propaganda tool. By emphasising and justifying lingering antagonistic ideas among many Afrikaners towards black South Africans, English speakers and Britain, the Government convinced many white Afrikaners of the threats on their way of life and in this way secured an electoral victory in 1948.⁴⁵ Along with race-based discriminatory regulations, the NP also deprived veterans of their voice, as their service to the UDF or the country's role in the war was certainly not a priority of the NP.⁴⁶

Following the initial interviews, it quickly became apparent that follow-up interviews would be necessary either to confirm information or to gain more information on specific aspects. Subsequent interviews also revealed new aspects of memory in that a few of the interviewees had contacted old friends who had also been former POWs. Re-establishing friendships had the added benefit of rejuvenating memories, which in turn led to enriched second or even third interviews. A case in point was David Brokensha who started an e-mail newsletter to former POW friends,

“Since meeting my old/new POW pals, all sort of memories have surfaced, about places, mates, events which I had forgotten – or suppressed. All that now seems so long ago that I am no longer embarrassed to have been a ‘handsopper’.”⁴⁷

Similarly, in an e-mail to the author Brokensha recalled his “momentous meeting” with Dick Dickinson, reporting that their conversation “revived many long

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3, 17.

45 L. Thompson (ed.), *A history of South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 178, 184-186.

46 N Roos, “The springbok and the skunk: war veterans and the politics of whiteness in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35(3), 2009, pp. 653–659.

47 D Brokensha, POW Reunion letter, August 2011.

forgotten or perhaps suppressed memories, which I now appreciate. I am no longer hiding or denying anything that happened in WW2.”⁴⁸

Taking into account the changing attitudes among former POWs during the initial and subsequent interviews, it becomes clear that these oral reminiscences would require very careful analysis. In the first place, the events and experiences since the war influenced the way former POWs interpreted their wartime experiences. Because they were subjected to a new South African government, whose priority was the building of Afrikaner nationalism, their voice was silenced and the significance of their war contribution diminished.

Furthermore, retrospective knowledge about the post-war period certainly played a role in how former POWs perceived their wartime experience. Largely, post-war experiences also determined what the former POWs chose to share during the interview and in memoirs. As the political and socio-economic landscapes changed after the war, many countries adopted liberal ideas on race, gender and class, but the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa and the decline of the Smuts government placed white veterans in a “subordinate position [...] within the colonial master class”.⁴⁹ After the war, the Smuts government introduced various aid schemes for returning soldiers, but many were disappointed and felt frustrated as their participation in the war was not recognised and in some cases was deliberately ignored.⁵⁰ The experiences of returning British POWs were very different to that of their South African allies. The British veterans were able to make use of Civil Resettlement Units (CRU) for psychological help that prepared them for their return to civilian life.⁵¹ In contrast, the UDF veterans were estranged by the government that went as far as to close “channels for promotion in the civil service to those who had volunteered”.⁵² The insults from Afrikaner nationalist supporters against veterans and the NP government’s unwillingness to acknowledge veterans’ contribution to the war most probably influenced their retrospective knowledge, especially in the writing of memoirs, all of which are characterised by a sombre and serious tone that emphasises the solitary and inward looking nature of the writing process.

48 E-mail: D Brokensha – Karen Horn, 13 January 2011.

49 N Roos, *Ordinary springboks, white servicemen and social justice in South Africa, 1939–1961* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 103.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 125. The negative attitude towards the National Party government was expressed by both Fred van Alphen Stahl, Michael de Lisle and most other POWs interviewed for this study.

51 A Allport, *Demobbed: coming home after the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 203.

52 Roos, p. 125. The negative attitude towards the National Party government was expressed by both Fred van Alphen Stahl, Michael de Lisle and most other POWs interviewed for this study.

7. MEMOIRS

At various stages following the war, Second World War veterans, among them former POWs, started producing their memoirs. Depending on the unique experiences of each former POW, some memoirs focus on camp experiences, while others wrote about their escape attempts. Many of these memoirs were never published and those that were, are now out of print. Published memoirs include *My luck still held* by Douglas Scott, Harry Rose-Innes's *The Po Valley break*, Newman and Robinson's *In the bag*, as well as Ike Rosmarin's *Inside story* and SG Wolhuter's *The melancholy state*.⁵³

Although these first-hand accounts of war and captivity are extremely valuable, issues related to historical accuracy, reliability and bias are obviously to be considered when attempting any in-depth analysis, especially as it is almost impossible to verify the information contained in these memoirs against archival or secondary academic sources. However, these accounts remain important as they narrate experiences from the point of view and perspective of those who lived through the events. In all of the memoirs mentioned above, the authors were captured either at Sidi Rezegh or at Tobruk, and most of them describe the fighting preceding their capture. None of the examples above includes memoirs of officers, making these texts useful to those who wish to study the battle experiences of rank and file men during the North African campaign.

In some cases both the written memoirs and the interview data of the same research participant were available. It is often useful to compare oral reminiscences with memoirs if taking into account the complexities regarding the analysis of oral narratives. In the case of this study, a number of the interviewees made their memoirs available to the author, making it possible to compare the same persons' written accounts with their oral accounts. For this study, the memoirs and interviews of seven veterans were available to the author.⁵⁴ However, according to Thompson, the conventions of writing often obstruct the proper expression of the actual and true past experience and, in some instances, this was certainly the case with the

53 D Scott, *My luck still held* (Cape Town: Unie Volkspers, 1946), *passim*; H Rose-Innes, *The Po Valley break* (Sandton: Valiant, 1976), *passim*; P Ogilvie and N Robinson, *In the bag* (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1975), *passim*; I Rosmarin, *Inside story* (Cape Town: WJ Flesch, 1999), *passim*; SG Wolhuter, *The melancholy state: the story of a South African prisoner-of-war* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, s.a.), *passim*.

54 The unpublished memoirs of those interviewed are: Clive Luyt, *Escape' to Monte Gennaro*; Michael de Lisle, *My twenties in the forties*; Bernard Schwikkard, *My life briefly told*; William Hindshaw, *An account of my experience as a prisoner-of-war and escapee in the Italian Alps during the Second World War*; Fred Geldenhuis, *A soldier's scrapbook*; David Brokensha, *Brokie's way*. Of these, the latter is the only published memoirs, while Dick Dickinson's diary, *From Jo'burg to Dresden*, was published in 2010. The diary includes explanatory notes by the editors, T and D Shearing.

POW memoirs.⁵⁵ To some extent, the use of overly formal language in memoirs creates a different feel to that created during the oral narrative when former POWs tend to use informal conversational language. Bernard Schwikkard, who was a medical orderly in a labour camp near Waldenburg in Upper Silesia, described the evacuation march from the camp during his interview, as well as in his memoirs. He explained that his column was joined by an American doctor and said that he, Schwikkard, decided at that moment to escape:

“[I told him] now that you have come with your whole medical outfit I’m handing over to you what little I’ve got because I’m now going to escape. So he said “you can’t do that, I’ll have you court martialled”, and I said “doctor you can have me court martialled, I’m sorry I believe I’ve done my bit, I am not qualified for this job, rightly or wrongly I am now deciding to save my own skin, they really don’t need me, you are here and you have all the tools and cheerio...”⁵⁶ (author’s emphasis)

In his memoirs, Schwikkard described the same incident as follows:

“He [American doctor] insisted that I do not leave, threatening me with court-martial if I disobeyed. I informed him that I was under no further obligation to the men as I was not an official medical orderly. I also reminded him that I was not subject to his orders. As far as I was concerned I had done my share and it was now time for him to do his. I felt that I should be allowed to exercise my right as a POW to escape.”⁵⁷ (author’s emphasis)

The tone and the more formal language in the memoirs portray the event in an almost official and military manner, which would be consistent with the former POWs military experience and his adherence to military discipline. The extract from the interview is much more informal and presents the event in a way that is more familiar to non-military readers. Both extracts describe the same event and the choice of words does not alter the meaning. However, the extract from the oral interview is more accessible and it shows more of the veteran’s unique personality, his frustrations and how he really felt about the event and about his captivity at that specific moment when he decided to put an end to it.

By the time the interviews took place in 2010, some of the former POWs often referred to their memoirs as they were finding it difficult to recall what had happened during the war. In some cases, they seemed to repeat verbatim what they had written ten or twenty years before, almost as if they had memorised their memoirs. An example of this occurs in De Lisle’s description of how they destroyed their anti-aircraft guns just before they were taken prisoner at the fall of Tobruk. In his interview, De Lisle said:

“The thing to do is to put a shell in the muzzle of the barrel and then fire a round at it, well that just blew apart the muzzle of the barrel and didn’t destroy the breech mechanism and that was good, solid, beautiful hard steel so we had to take the breach mechanism to bits and bury it in different places.”⁵⁸

55 PR Thompson, *The voice of the past: oral history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 279.

56 Interview: Bernard Schwikkard – Karen Horn, Johannesburg, 17 March 2010.

57 BE Schwikkard, *My life briefly told* (unpublished memoirs, 1999), p. 45.

58 Interview: Michael de Lisle – Karen Horn, Cape Town, 4 June 2010.

In his memoirs, the description is very similar:

“... the breech mechanism of beautifully engineered stainless steel was undamaged, so we took it apart and buried the various pieces in different places.”⁵⁹

In some cases former POWs relied on repeating the same narratives of specific events when they were unable to recall another event, name, place or date. Clive Luyt’s interview was a good example of this as he repeated the same narrative, in slightly different versions, four times during his first interview. During his second interview, he again depended on the same narrative when he was confronted with imperfect memory. When compared to his memoirs, which relies heavily on a diary, the narrative of his decision to leave the camp after the Italian Armistice is described very differently. It creates the impression that his present-day narrative is a construction of personal memories of information regarding the Armistice, Fascists and the fall of Mussolini gained during the post-war period. During his interview, Luyt repeatedly recalled how he came to the decision to leave the Italian POW camp:

“I went to my friend, [...], tall chap, you know you sort of form friendships and what have you and I said ‘Let’s get out of here’ and we were told by our commanding officer ‘Don’t go out, you don’t know who is the fascist, who isn’t a fascist, who’s pro Mussolini or against Mussolini and you can’t go wondering around the countryside you will just end up in trouble’ and I said ‘Look I’m not worried about the fascist, I’m worried about the Germans, they fought the war in North Africa to catch guys like you and me’ and I said ‘they’re not going to let us go, give them 24 hours and we will be in a train, cattle truck, and off to Germany’ so he said ‘I think let’s get out.’ And that’s the rest of the story.”⁶⁰

At the time of Luyt’s escape, he could not have known that POWs would be transferred to Germany by train or by cattle truck; in fact, the only way he could have known about the transfer of POWs to Germany was from sources that he consulted after the war. His final reference to the same incident included:

“I said ‘give them 24 hours and they’ll be here’ and I was right, almost to 24 hours. They came up with four tanks, put one tank at each corner of the camp, on the outside of course, but with the guns and all pointing at us but by that time [...] and I were out.”⁶¹

Published memoirs include details of Italian POW camps being surrounded by Germans following the Armistice and the transport of POWs to Germany by train cattle trucks.⁶² Luyt’s memoirs describe the same incident in very simple terms as, “We are advised by our senior NCOs and officers to stay in camp, but many prisoners have already left. [...] and I decide to go off on our own.”⁶³ According to his memoirs, Luyt and his

59 M de Lisle, *Over the hills and far away. My twenties in the forties* (unpublished memoirs, s.a.), p. 19.

60 Interview: Clive Luyt – Karen Horn, Cape Town, 19 May 2010.

61 *Ibid.*

62 For descriptions of the way in which Italian POW camps were taken over by Germans, see for instance J Chambers, *For you the war is over. The story of Herbert Rhodes (Aussie) Hammond* (Cape Town: HAUM, 1967), pp. 64–66; Rosmarin, pp. 39–40; Ogilvy and Robinson, p. 79.

63 C Luyt and R Andrews, “*Escape*” to Monte Gennaro. *Survival in the mountains during WWII* (unpublished memoirs; s.a.), p. 2.

friend was nowhere near the camp by the time 24 hours had elapsed, as by then they had already reached Marcellina, almost 38 kilometres away.⁶⁴ Although Luyt's memory was obviously influenced by information gained after the war, the comparison between his interview and his memoirs nevertheless provide a relatively complete narrative of his experiences.

8. CONCLUSION

International research on POW history does not distinguish between the experiences of different nationalities; yet these secondary sources are essential in placing the South African POW experience in a scholarly framework. With regard to the UDF context, the archival collections at the DOD are very useful, as the AG (POW) Collection concerns only POW matters. However, the documents in this collection provide a largely impersonal account of matters concerning prison camps. Nevertheless, a study on POW experience would be incomplete without consulting archival material as the information in these documents may clarify, but not necessarily verify, veterans' oral testimony.

There is no doubt that primary information, especially oral reminiscences, is the most direct link to the past. Although the analysis and the interpretation of veterans' reminiscences are complex, it nevertheless provides one with insight into the uniquely personal account of each former POW. Similarly, memoirs offer a glimpse into the lived experience of World War II captives, but here, as with oral history, the style and tone of the narrative have the potential to obscure the readers' insights into the POW experiences, especially in those memoirs written by former POWs who do not have the aptitude of professional writers. While archival material and secondary sources provide information about POW experience, it is only through the words of the POWs themselves that one is able to get a real sense of what these men lived through during their captivity.

The voice of former POWs is unique among the many World War II voices. Those unheard narratives of the South African POWs are even more so when one considers the country's pre-war and post-war context. Soon after the war, these men were silenced by a government who placed Afrikaner nationalism before all else, and later they were virtually excluded from international historiography as they were seen as part of a homogenous group. Taking all the above into consideration, it is patently clear that further opportunities for research and analysis abound.

64 Marcellina, Italy to Fara Sabina, <<http://maps.google.co.za/maps>>, accessed 7 November 2011.