

# IN FOR A HELL OF A TIME: THE WARTIME EXPERIENCES OF TWO ORDINARY SOUTH AFRICAN SOLDIERS IN THE NORTH AFRICAN DESERT DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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## *Abstract*

*At the conclusion of most conflicts, generals and politicians put pen to paper and often, in rather immodest terms, describe their role in the struggle and how their individual contribution secured an inevitable and glorious victory. Such versions of history by these “great men” are then viewed as some of the most important personal contributions on the respective topics. This article is an attempt to bring to the fore the experiences of but two men of much lesser importance. Through an analysis of some surviving correspondence and reminiscences of relatives, the author hopes to show that the stories of the ordinary are indeed the building blocks of greater works.*

**Keywords:** World War Two; JH Harmse; GC de Waal; North Africa; personal correspondence; letters.

**Seutelwoorde:** Tweede Wêreldoorlog; JH Harmse; GC de Waal; Noord-Afrika; persoonlike korrespondensie; briewe.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

On 10 September 1939, Sir William Clarke, the British High Commissioner, remarked to two South African cabinet ministers that the British World was “in for a hell of a time”.<sup>2</sup> In hindsight, Clarke was not exaggerating, for the ripple effect of Hitler’s desire for German greatness would soon be felt throughout the British Empire. The war inflicted suffering in various ways and nobody was spared; from frightened Londoners huddled together in underground shelters to escape the Blitz, to citizens of the British dominions, some of whom were mobilised immediately in support of the crown, while others were more hesitant. With Europe tearing itself apart, it was clear that those detached geographically from a war in Europe, had no assurance of remaining untouched. It would not be long before men, coming from the Transvaal “veld” and the ever-British province of Natal, found themselves

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2 UCT Archives, BC640, HG Lawrence Papers A2.2, Diary, 10 September 1939.

sharing foxholes and shelters with British, Canadian, French and even Indian soldiers. More than 12 000 would not return, and for the lucky ones who did, their world would never be the same.

Those that took up the gauntlet of writing about the horrors experienced during this great human tragedy, were, in most cases, men of varying degrees of importance. Politicians, generals, presidents and sovereigns all felt the need to immortalise the efforts of their nation and, often in equal measure, their own. Men like Montgomery, Churchill, Liddell Hart and Guderian, the “great men” of the Second World War, as well as authors of single works or several volumes regarding their role in the conflict, all spoke of their varied contributions made in military and other fields. Most of these works covered the war in general and followed a top-down approach. Works like *Hitler’s generals*,<sup>3</sup> *Churchill’s generals*<sup>4</sup> and *Stalin’s generals*<sup>5</sup> emblazon the roles of military commanders. Hot on the heels of these “definitive” works followed biographies and autobiographies, too numerous to list, of individuals who felt they also had something to add, at a personal level, to the growing wealth of information. This focus on history’s “great men” ensured that subordinates and less notable individuals were neglected.<sup>6</sup> The rise of post-modernism and the growing importance of the role of social history brought about a change in focus regarding the Second World War. The desire to let those unheard voices of men and women, those that experienced the physical and emotional traumas of the war, be heard, gained ground. Philip Ziegler contributed to this new trend with his book *Soldiers: Fighting men’s lives, 1901-2001*.<sup>7</sup> By focussing on the lives of nine war veterans, he not only managed to resuscitate otherwise forgotten memories, but pointed out that the life of a soldier does not end when he joins the military, it merely acquires a new goal that, in many ways, can only be reached through co-operation with those that face the same tribulations.

The initial accounts of individual wartime experiences took the form of narratives by soldiers, sometimes retracing their steps through the battlefields of Europe, Africa or Asia. SE Ambrose with his *Citizen soldiers*,<sup>8</sup> which was published in 2002, attempted to recreate the atmosphere of the battlefield by drawing on the experience of veterans as well as official correspondence. This work focused mainly on Allied soldiers, particularly those involved in the European theatre, from the D-Day battles up to the end of the war in Europe. Several works on South Africa’s involvement have since been published, but these either focus on the total war

3 C Garnett (ed.), *Hitler’s generals* (New York, 2003).

4 J Keegan, *Churchill’s generals* (New York, 1991).

5 H Shukman (ed.), *Stalin’s generals* (New York, 2002).

6 J Black, *Rethinking military history* (New York, 2004).

7 P Ziegler, *Soldiers: Fighting men’s lives, 1902-2001* (Great Britain, 2002).

8 SE Ambrose, *Citizen soldiers* (New York, 2002).

effort, like *Springbok record*,<sup>9</sup> or on individual units. Few publications by South African soldiers recounting their days during the war have seen the light. These include some books by former prisoners-of-war (POW) such as *The melancholy state* by SG Wolhuter and *The Po Valley break*<sup>10</sup> by H Rose-Innes. While, in his book *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and social justice in South Africa 1939-1961*,<sup>11</sup> Neil Roos explores some social aspects, sources, in general, on how the average South African soldier felt about his wartime experience, are very limited.

In a recent, if somewhat unrelated book, *An unpopular war*<sup>12</sup> by JH Thompson, numerous former SADF soldiers were interviewed regarding their experiences during the Angolan War of 1975 to 1989. What makes this work unique, is Thompson's gathering of information from those unnamed and mostly forgotten men that bore the brunt of the fighting – the enlisted man, the “troepie”. Barry Fowler made an earlier contribution to the writing of history of “lesser men” with his book *Pro Patria*,<sup>13</sup> in which he also used interviews with military participants to tell the stories of South Africans that found themselves part of the Angolan War. It might have been easier to follow the mainstream trend and simply chronicle the events that led to the opening of hostilities and then follow the guns-and-trumpets approach by compiling yet another action-packed volume of just another war fought on maps in air-conditioned rooms by generals and publicity-eager politicians. Fowler and Thompson explored the wealth of information that the “troops in the trenches” had to offer, but they focussed on the Angolan War. Similar works on the Second World War do not exist.

The aim of this article is to investigate the experiences of South Africans, whom served with the Middle East Forces, and use their stories, as revealed in their letters<sup>14</sup> home and other sources, as a vehicle through which to study both the trials faced and the pleasures enjoyed by ordinary South African soldiers in the field during the Second World War. This article draws on the experiences of two such men, who served with the Union Defence Force (UDF) during the Second World War, as revealed through their letters to relatives and loved ones in South Africa. Letters from home, in spite of being regarded equal to food and pay, rarely survived the changing environment that these men found themselves in as the war progressed. Consequently

9 H Klein (ed.), *Springbok record* (Johannesburg, 1946).

10 SG Wolhuter, *The melancholy state* (Cape Town – no date); H Rose-Innes, *The Po Valley break* (Pretoria, 1967).

11 N Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White servicemen and social justice in South Africa 1939-1961* (Aldershot, 2005).

12 JH Thompson, *An unpopular war* (Johannesburg, 2006).

13 B Fowler, *Pro Patria* (Halifax, 1995).

14 Letters of JH Harmse are in possession of the author, while the letters of GC de Waal are in the possession of ME Claase, Pietermaritzburg.

this study is based on a collection of letters written, in reply to those received from the Union, by two ordinary soldiers removed from their familiar surroundings and loved ones. In both cases interviews with surviving relatives provided additional information and clarification on the contents of these letters.

## 2. THE ACTORS

Several thousand South Africans participated directly in the Second World War and many more were influenced by it in numerous other ways. The South Africa Defence Act (Act 13 of 1912) restricted the UDF from deploying its soldiers outside the borders of South Africa. In accordance with this Act, all white citizens between the ages of 16 and 60 could be called up in defence of the country in times of war.<sup>15</sup> Since South Africa was not directly threatened by a foreign invader, conscription was not an option. At the outbreak of the Second World War, the UDF's permanent component was placed at 352 officers and 5033 other ranks. Most of the Permanent Force (PF) members were consigned to training posts.<sup>16</sup> The UDF was thus not capable of large scale military operations.

During the first half of the twentieth century, it was mainly the Afrikaners that formed a large white underclass with few skills, being barely literate as well as unemployed. This group was hit particularly hard by the depression and severe drought that ravaged the country between 1929 and 1933 and consequently struggled to survive in an already critical economic situation.<sup>17</sup> The changing of the Service Oath to include the words "anywhere in Africa" solved this dilemma by allowing the Smuts government to legally deploy all volunteers accordingly and provided salvation for many poor and destitute whites. It was, however, not only as a result of economic hardship that volunteers flocked to the recruitment centres during the latter half of 1939 and throughout 1940. Many English-speaking South Africans saw it as their duty to support Britain in her hour of need, and had every intention of fighting, even had the South African parliament approved the government's neutrality stance.<sup>18</sup> It is doubtful whether anyone with a rank higher than major, had an intimate knowledge of no. 174741 Johannes Hendrik Harmse or no. 105745 Gerhardus Cornelius de Waal, two everyday South African citizens. To those that would ultimately decide their fate they might very well have been just numbers, but to their families and loved-ones they were real people with dreams to be shared and ideals to be fulfilled.

15 A Wessels, "The first two years of war: The development of the Union Defence Forces (UDF), September 1939 to September 1941", *Military History Journal* 11(5), 2000, p. 165.

16 E Millen, *History of organisation and training of infantry and armour* (SANDF Archives, Pamphlet Collection), p. 1.

17 H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a people* (Cape Town, 2003), p. 353.

18 J Crwys-Williams, *A country at war, 1939-1945. The mood of a nation* (Rivonia, 1992), p. 24.

## 2.1 JH Harmse

Johannes Hendrik (Ouboet) Harmse drew his first breath on 5 September 1904 in Middelburg, Transvaal and was to be the first of 13 children, seven brothers and six sisters. He was born into a traditional “Afrikaner” family which owned two farms, both in the Transvaal – the one on which he was to spend much of his youth, Naauwpoort, in the Middelburg district, and the other at Kruisriver, near Groblersdal. Being the firstborn son, one may reason that he was groomed to fill his father’s shoes and eventually take over the farming responsibilities.<sup>19</sup> During the early-twentieth century, farming was still a laborious process, reliant on severe physical input. Toiling for extended hours in the field, while still keeping an eye on the rest of his siblings, played a major role in preparing Ouboet for the future. His formative years at the local farm school were uneventful and not thought necessary for an aspiring farmer. The Bible served as the main source of knowledge and deemed to be the only book he needed to know and understand. He, however, never heard the calling to become just another “boer” and embarked on a more “adventurous”, or perhaps profitable, career as a prison warder. Marriage in 1928 to Anna Maria Nagel was the next milestone in his life and in 1938 his first daughter was born. For eight long years from 1932 he held a steady job as a prison warder and was set to retire as just another white South African government employee.<sup>20</sup>



**Sgt JH Harmse, Hettie (4 years), Annatjie (3 months) and his wife Anna, 1942.<sup>21</sup>**

19 Interview AE Curry, Ermelo, 7 July 2006.

20 Interview A Klaasen, Pretoria, 8 August 2006.

21 Picture in possession of A (Annatjie) Klaasen (daughter) of Pretoria.

## 2.2 GC de Waal

At the age of 28 Gerhardus (Gert) Cornelius de Waal enjoyed the fruits that life in South Africa, in 1939, had to offer. Born in the winter of 1911 in Natal on the farm Roodekop, near Ingogo station, he found himself amidst the great battlefields of the past. His father, a Boer War veteran, ensured that Gert, his two brothers and his sister, had a definite awareness of their country's past. It is also likely that they were told the story of how the very house in which they grew up was destroyed by the British during the war and rebuilt by their father at the end of hostilities. The hardships of the 1930s and the lack of any "action" were not to young Gert's liking. He dreamed of becoming an actor and was eventually employed by the International Film Agency as a showman. In order to quench his thirst for excitement and adventure he joined a traveling circus as a musician.<sup>22</sup> Those that knew him testify that he had two notable talents; one was playing the Hawaiian guitar, which he did extremely well, and the other was making substantial amounts of alcohol disappear in record time, which he did equally well. Like many young men of his time he also had his eye on a young lady and one may argue that the prospect of "domestication" may have seemed a very real possibility. His relationship with Maria van Kasterop (Babs) seemed to mirror his life at that stage and was filled with uncertainty and a lack of direction.<sup>23</sup>



**Gunner GC de Waal, 1940.<sup>24</sup>**

22 Interview ME Claase (Babs), Pietermaritzburg, 6 July 2006.

23 Interview H Walker, Pretoria, 6 July 2006.

24 Picture in possession of ME Claase (Babs) of Pietermaritzburg.

### 3. THE STAGE IS SET

The celebration of the arrival of spring usually coincides with 1 September each year; however, in 1939 few people enjoyed the sight of the first blossoms appearing in the orchards. For the next few days families were glued to their wireless sets, anxious for any news about the war in Europe as well as information regarding the Union's role in the now certain conflict.<sup>25</sup> Confusion and uncertainty became common emotions, even in South Africa. As the clouds of war drew nearer Johannes Harmse and Gert de Waal both found themselves thrust into the world of discipline and order of the UDF. Both eventually found their way to North Africa and it was not long before disillusionment and despair replaced enthusiasm and desire for adventure.

### 4. SOUTH AFRICA GOES TO WAR

South African politics was on the brink of crisis when Prime Minister Hertzog's motion of neutrality was opposed in Parliament by General JC Smuts, who favoured active participation.<sup>26</sup> Hertzog's motion was eventually defeated and on 6 September 1939 South Africa declared war on Germany. Preparation for the coming conflict began in all earnest. The South Africa Defence Act (Act 13 of 1912), however, limited active military involvement to Southern Africa, but this was eventually changed by instituting a new oath to include the rest of Africa.<sup>27</sup> All members who answered the call to arms found themselves organised into the Mobile Field Force (MFF) and began their training. Many UDF personnel were ready to defend their country's borders from a foreign invader, but could simply not agree to wage war on foreign soil. The new oath had a negative impact on the already-limited manpower of the fledgling UDF. Consequently the MFF lost 350 men overnight. The declaration of war on Britain by Italy on 11 June 1940 and the consequent declaration of war by SA on Italy meant that war had finally come to the African continent.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of the so-called "Red Oath",<sup>29</sup> the UDF began deploying troops to Kenya and then Abyssinia in July 1940 with the First South African Infantry

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25 A debate, regarding South Africa's participation, raged in cabinet in the first days of September. Prime Minister Hertzog favoured neutrality while his deputy, Smuts, was in favour of active participation.

26 N Orpen, *South African Forces World War II: Volume 1, East African and Abyssinian Campaigns* (Cape Town, 1968), pp. 1-2.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

28 RJ Bouch (ed.), *Infantry in South Africa 1652-1976* (Pretoria, 1977), p. 140.

29 South African troops that volunteered service anywhere in Africa were issued with strips of orange flannel that were worn on their shoulder straps. The term "red" might have been meant as

Brigade departing in force from Durban. With its commitments increasing, the UDF personnel recruitment intensified and men and women from every walk of life, town and country flocked to the training camps throughout the Union.<sup>30</sup>

## 5. JOINING UP

Johannes Harmse took the “Red Oath” of loyalty on 19 July 1940 at Pretoria and upon enlistment received the rank of corporal in the First Mounted Commando Brigade, stationed at Piet Retief. As a result of his previous experience as a prison warden, he was promoted to sergeant (Sgt) in November 1940 and sent on a physical training course at Voortrekkerhoogte. On his return, he was transferred to the South African Tank Corps (SATC). The promotion to sergeant allowed him to be utilised as provost sergeant for the Ninth Armoured Reconnaissance Battalion. In January 1941 he was transferred to HQ squadron on the First Mounted Division and appointed as master of detention barracks for unit defaulters and internees. The time to honour his oath arrived in December 1942 as he boarded a ship in Durban bound for Suez and war.<sup>31</sup>

Gert de Waal took the “Red Oath” for one of the strangest reasons imaginable. The circus troop he was travelling with, was entertaining the crowds of Carolina, a very small town in the Eastern Transvaal. By that time Hitler’s armies had already smashed Poland and were overrunning Belgium. It was also during this time that the mood between Gert and the one love of his life, Babs, took a turn for the worst. Gert’s ability to finish large amounts of alcohol during social events and then wooing the attending ladies with his musical skills led to a deterioration of the two lover’s relationship. Babs eventually grew tired of his shenanigans and sent Gert packing.<sup>32</sup>

Playing on the emotions caused by the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek in 1938, UDF recruiters staged “road shows” to attract potential volunteers.<sup>33</sup> These were known as “Steel commandos”<sup>34</sup> and it was hoped that Afrikaners would remember the heroic Boer Commandos that kept their enemies at bay in the past. Gert de Waal was mesmerised as the “Steel Commando” worked its magic. It was

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insult to those that joined the side of the Britain who were still viewed by many Afrikaners as the real enemy.

30 Klein, p. 18.

31 SANDF Archives, WW2 Service Records, 174741, S/Sgt JH Harmse.

32 Interview ME Claase (Babs), Pietermaritzburg, 6 July 2006.

33 A Grundlingh, “The King’s Afrikaners? Enlistment and ethnic identity in the Union of South Africa’s Defence force during the Second World War, 1939-1945”, *Journal of African History* 40, 1999, p. 355.

34 The steel commando was a recruitment train, comprising a procession of military vehicles and other weaponry. The train visited the larger towns of the platteland, where weapon demonstrations were held and the potential of the UDF displayed.



thus in Carolina that Gert decided to enlist in the UDF to spite his girlfriend. In June he reported for training at Potchefstroom and on 5 June 1940 he signed the documents binding him to an adventure he could not even start to comprehend. He was posted to the Second Field Regiment (Natal Field Artillery) to start his training as a gunner. He attended a signals course in wireless telegraphy in November and found himself attached to “A” battery. During his time in the mobilisation area in Pietermaritzburg, his relationship with Babs was still unsure, but on 22 July she wrote a letter to him declaring her friendship and willingness to continue the relationship. It was just too bad for Gert that the UDF decided to mobilise his unit for duty in North Africa on that same day.<sup>35</sup> For several months following his enlistment Gert trained non-stop with his comrades to face the enemy in the desert.

Extreme patriotism was a virtue of neither of the two men. Roos<sup>36</sup> makes the point that recruiting white troops to fight Nazism in Europe, would not yield sufficient numbers of volunteers, neither would Afrikaners enlist in great numbers in support of Britain and her empire.<sup>37</sup> In spite of being an Afrikaner in heart and soul, Johannes Harmse felt no great animosity towards the Nazi’s, but enlisting in the UDF would surely lighten the financial load that burdened him and the money earned would help to provide a sense of security for his family.<sup>38</sup> Gert de Waal’s two brothers were exact opposites; one was a passionate supporter of Smuts and his ideals, while the other felt that Britain was still the arch enemy and was not to be trusted.<sup>39</sup> For Gert there was no glory to be gained in war, nor was there any shame in remaining impartial. He was simply dissatisfied with his monotonous existence, the boredom of the circus and his girlfriend’s changing moods. Just as both men enlisted under different circumstances and for varying reasons, so too did the North African experience leave distinct impressions on both of them.

## 6. LIFE IN THE DESERT

Writing home to their families and loved ones, the two aspects about North Africa that stands out in their correspondence are the adverse weather and foreign terrain. Since their arrival in Egypt, the Springboks had to brave intense heat, as mentioned by Gert when he wrote: “Oh, Babsie, it was so hot here yesterday, the wind could set one on fire, and it is apparently now only the beginning of summer.”<sup>40</sup> Harmse,

35 SANDF Archives, WW2 Service Records, 105745, Gnr GC de Waal.

36 Cf. Roos, *op. cit.*

37 This view is echoed by A Grundling *op. cit.*, where he comments on Smuts’ dilemma regarding the lack of motivation of Afrikaners to support the Imperial cause, p. 78.

38 Interview AE Curry, Ermelo, 7 July 2006.

39 Interview D de Waal, Pretoria, 4 July 2006.

40 G de Waal – Babs, 18 April 1942. Authors translation from original text: “O ou Babsie, dit was gister hier so warm, die wind kon ’n mens aan die brand waai en dis nog maar die begin van die somer.”

on his part complained about the cold days they had to endure and told his parents that “the desert life is a bitter life. Especially now. Because it is winter now. Oh, it is very cold some days.”<sup>41</sup> Apart from the heat and cold, there were also flies in the millions, howling winds and accompanying dust storms as well as the occasional downpour.<sup>42</sup>

The censors in the various field post offices, receiving letters from South African troops, ensured that no sensitive information was divulged and the troops learned quickly that it was better to stick to the guidelines than to have their letters to family or loved-ones cut up or blacked out. Consequently, the information received from the front was limited to assurances of personal well-being and hints about physical condition and geographic location. The flies and mosquitoes, heat by day and extreme cold by night were some of the “allowed” topics to write home about.<sup>43</sup> In their first letters from the front, both sergeant Harmse and gunner De Waal entertained their readers with the strangeness and unfamiliarity of their new home. Gert de Waal declared that all the sand and dangers of the desert made him think so much more of his beloved Babs.<sup>44</sup> To Sgt Harmse the worst part of desert life was the weather. In one of his first letters to his parents following his arrival in Egypt in January 1943, he used seven precious lines to tell them three times of how cold it was.<sup>45</sup> This view was echoed by Gert de Waal, already in October 1941, when he declared that the days were starting to become ever colder but that the nights were particularly bad.<sup>46</sup>

Both mentioned the Mediterranean Sea, but to them the greatest strategic value the “Italian Lake” had was to serve as a place to wash dirty laundry or rejuvenate a tired body. It is clear that in spite of being surprised by a sudden rainstorm one evening and having to sleep semi-submerged, the bonus of having a bath was worth it. This is evident in Gert’s letter to Babs: “(A)nd believe me, it really rained, many of us spent half the night in pools of water. We did not mind that much since it was an opportunity to have a bath again.”<sup>47</sup> Gunner de Waal mentioned that although the water was quite salty, it at least served the purpose of washing off the dust.<sup>48</sup> His comment on the salinity of the water makes one wonder whether he also tried to distil

41 JH Harmse – parents, 5 January 1943.

42 RJ Bouch (ed.), p. 151.

43 M Bryant, *As we were, South Africa 1939-1941* (Johannesburg, 1974), p. 51.

44 G de Waal – Maria van Kasterop (Babs), 19 October 1941.

45 JH Harmse – his parents, 23 January 1943. Letters is part of a private collection and in possession of AC Bentz.

46 G de Waal – Babs, 19 October 1941. Letters is part of a private collection and in possession of ME Claase.

47 *Ibid.*, 15 March 1942. Author’s translation from original text: “(E)n glo my dit het omtrent gereën, baie van ons het die helfte van die nag in damme water deurgebring. Ons was nogal bly, want toe kon ons weer bad.”

48 G de Waal – Babs, 26 October 1941.

it as some of his counterpart's did.<sup>49</sup> Sgt Harmse felt the need to mention the fine dust of Egypt in his second letter from the front.<sup>50</sup> He furthermore informed his parents that his clothes did not get dirty quickly and by simply giving it a thorough dust-off, one could appear respectable again. March brought warmer weather and before long both the sergeant and the gunner were complaining about the heat. Gert wrote to his Babs bemoaning the fact that it was so hot that the wind could set one alight.<sup>51</sup>

In North Africa, wind and dust combined to cause one of the most unusual occurrences to be faced by troops in the field. Sandstorms were more of a discomfort than anything else and the fine sand found its way into the mouths, noses and all other exposed parts of those not under proper cover.<sup>52</sup> Sudden downpours surprised Gert. His readers must have thought it strange to read that amidst the dryness of the desert Gert and his unit was "surprised" one evening in March by an unexpected rainstorm, the effects of which were felt by those having to spend half the night in virtually submerged slit trenches.<sup>53</sup> After the war he told his children of how he was startled by a drifting boot carried away by a sudden rush of ground-water brought on by one of those sudden rainstorms.<sup>54</sup>

It was not only the absence of grass<sup>55</sup> that made an impression on the South Africans, but the other sites of ancient Egypt that were also mentioned in various letters. Writing about his adventures in Egypt, Johannes Harmse could have imagined himself as one of the Israelites wandering through the desert. He wrote several times of the Nile that the Bible mentions. Harmse eventually found himself posted to Cairo and being away from the physical fighting he had the opportunity to take regular leave to visit the surrounding areas. One appreciates the role the Bible played in his education when he refers to Jerusalem, Galilee and Jericho as the old biblical places. The place where Abraham went to sacrifice his son made quite an impression on Johannes and he wrote to his parents that a temple had been built on that spot. Harmse was also moved by his visit to the place where Elijah was fed by ravens.<sup>56</sup> To his parents he must have sounded like a pilgrim on his way to the Holy Land when he wrote to them about the River Jordan and all the other places of old. Harmse was, however, not impressed with Cairo. Although he credits it with being quite a big city, he disapproved of the locals,<sup>57</sup> and he commented that the Egyptians

49 A Gilbert (ed.), *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Desert War 1940-1942* (London, 1992), p. 32.

50 JH Harmse – his parents, 23 January 1943.

51 G de Waal – Babs, 18 April 1942.

52 Gilbert, p. 34.

53 G de Waal – Babs, 15 March 1942.

54 Interview H Walker, Pretoria, 6 July 2006.

55 G de Waal – Babs, 26 October 1941.

56 JH Harmse – his parents, 5 January 1943.

57 This sentiment is reinforced by Wolhuter, who, in *The melancholy state*, p. 5, refers to Egypt in the following terms: "was scornful of everything, including the Gyppos, the filth and the general backwardness of the country". F Jones remarks in *The Imperial War Museum Book*, p. 77, that

were “the dirtiest nation that I ever saw in my whole life”.<sup>58</sup> What he found interesting too, was that wherever an Egyptian work party was busy with a particular task, one would find a foreman armed with a *handsjambok* to keep them motivated.<sup>59</sup> For Gert de Waal the land of the pyramids was filled with “shoe shiners” that would offer to restore dusty army footwear to its former glory for a minimal price. This service to the Commonwealth’s finest would be rounded off with a liberal application of saliva applied directly to the boot to give it that extra shine. The combination of moist footwear and dusty streets resulted in filthy boots within minutes, which in turn could be effortlessly dealt with by the next “shoe shiner” around the corner.<sup>60</sup>

## 7. GIVE US TODAY OUR DAILY BREAD, LETTERS AND PARCELS

Just as the precious water, in some cases filtered several times over, sustains the body, so too did the letters, parcels and pictures from home strengthen the individual’s will to persevere and hang on until the arrival of the next letter. The fluidity of desert warfare meant that troops were seldom in one location for very long and one of their greatest fears was that loved-ones in the Union would get the address wrong causing their “life-giving” correspondence to fall into the wrong hands. To Sgt Harmse the importance of receiving news was emphasised by his concluding of each letter with a plea that the reader should take note of his address and write it clearly and precisely as he indicated. Equally important was the speedy receipt of mail from home. Sgt Harmse, as tactfully as possible, hinted that mail by boat was very slow and that air mail, although a bit more expensive, only took eight to nine days to reach its destination.<sup>61</sup> To gunner Gert de Waal the fact that his Babs replied favourably to his attempts at reconciliation was reason to celebrate in itself. Every letter to her, from wherever he found himself, begins with him expressing his gratitude to her for still thinking of him and taking the time to pen a few thoughts. Several of his letters has the words “write quickly” scribbled in the corner somewhere and both men promised their readers that they would have many more stories to tell when they return to civilization.<sup>62</sup>

It was also through their letters that the soldiers could let their families know of their physical well-being and emotional condition. Babs was not impressed when she learned of Gert’s enlistment back in 1940 and informed him that he was not to

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one didn’t socialise with Egyptian people at all because “they would often try to steal anything they could, whether they needed it or not”.

58 JH Harmse – his parents, 5 January 1943. Authors translation from original text: “Die vuilste nasie wat ek nog in my lewe gesien het.”

59 *Ibid.*, 5 January 1943.

60 Interview H Walker, Pretoria, 6 July 2006.

61 JH Harmse – his parents, 4 February 1943.

62 G de Waal – Babs, 26 October 1941.

write to her anymore. Suffering from stubbornness, Gert boarded the S.S. *Delwara* on 22 July 1941 *en route* to Suez, without greeting his beloved Babs. Little did he know that this was the very day that Babs mailed a letter to him in which she forgave him his earlier transgressions. Gert only received this letter (which must have been sent by boat) on 19 October 1941 and replied that, before leaving port, he met one of their mutual friends who informed him that Babs did not get engaged to someone else as she had threatened to do. He writes very romantically that he was an emotional wreck on hearing this news and poetically declares that, as the ship slipped out of the harbour and the lights of Durban faded in the distance, his thoughts were with Babs and he lamented the fact that he was too proud to say his farewells. In the same letter he cautions Babs not to let herself be intimidated by her family and to stand strong in her resolve to become his wife when the war was over.<sup>63</sup>

Throughout the first part of 1942 the correspondence between the two took a suspicious tone with Gert being accused of returning to his ways of indulging in excessive drinking and womanising. This he denied emphatically by assuring Babs that there were no such luxuries available in the desert and that because the spectre of death was ever-present the troops had to remain vigilant.<sup>64</sup> It was thus, through his letters, that Gert attempted to persuade his love to stay true to him. He knew that there was the potential threat of a fellow wooing his girlfriend because Cape Town and Durban were used as stopovers for Commonwealth troops on their way to Europe, particularly Australians. Gunner de Waal, being a soldier himself, could surely have imagined the debarking troops shouting “we want women” as they set foot on South African soil.<sup>65</sup>

Sergeant Harmse’s second child was born in October 1942. Three months later, in December, he embarked for North Africa. His main concern was, therefore, for his young family and his correspondence betrays a genuine desire to get out of the war and home to his wife and children. Reading his letters, one is moved by his sincerity and genuine longing for familiar things and faces. He begged his parents not to forget his wife and to comfort her as she was so very upset when he left. In each of his letters to his parents, Harmse admits to missing his dear wife and little children to no end. He writes that it was unbearably difficult to say goodbye to them and he fears that he might not see them again. He admits to bursting out in tears on receiving a few pictures of them sent by his wife.<sup>66</sup> One has the impression that being separated from his family did much more harm to Johannes Harmse than any action on the part of the enemy.

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63 *Ibid.*, 19 October 1941.

64 *Ibid.*, February 1942.

65 Crwys-Williams, p. 143.

66 JH Harmse – his parents, 1942–1943.

Both men must have believed that they would return to their families brimming with life experience and tales of great deeds done in the face of the enemy. Both relied on God to keep them safe and requested their families to remember them in their prayers as well.<sup>67</sup> Fate and the desert, however, had a different outcome in mind for the prison warder and guitar player from Natal.

## 8. THE DESERT TAKES ITS TOLL

On 8 June 1942, Gert de Waal was facing two serious problems, none of which included the enemy or the desert. His first concern was with a parcel from Babs which had not yet arrived.<sup>68</sup> The idea that someone else might enjoy his magazines, newspapers, something nice to chew or even a picture of Babs must have been just as unbearable as the searing heat and constant thirst. His second dilemma was the appearance of a rival back home. In one of his letters, he jokingly requests the identity of the intruder and was content to wait the two or three weeks it would take for Babs to reply with an explanation. Then fate intervened and half an hour past midnight on 17 June 1942, the Afrika Korps cut the road east of Tobruk and the investment of the Allied troops within the fortress perimeter, of which Gert was one, began. No mail or parcels would make it through. Two weeks after his letter to Babs, gunner de Waal was trudging along the main road connecting North African ports with each other, the Via Balbia, accompanied by a large number of the almost 32 000 Commonwealth troops taken prisoner with the fall of Fortress Tobruk on 21 June 1942.<sup>69</sup>

For the next three years he continued to write to Babs, but for some undeclared reason there was no reply. At one stage he admitted to himself that he unknowingly might be writing to another man's wife.<sup>70</sup> This might have been a ploy to tempt Babs to reply. Had he known that Babs was already enjoying her life in the Union with another young man, as he had instructed her,<sup>71</sup> he might not have survived the ordeal that lay ahead. As a POW he travelled north from Southern Italy to Campo 52 near Genoa and eventually ended up in a coal mine in Southern Poland.<sup>72</sup> "I only hope you won't turn against me now that I am a prisoner"<sup>73</sup> he pleaded with Babs in his first letter home as a POW.<sup>74</sup>

67 *Ibid.*, 4 February 1943, G de Waal – Babs, 18 April 1942.

68 G de Waal – Babs, 8 June 1942.

69 Crwys-Williams, p. 242.

70 G de Waal – Babs, 21 December 1942.

71 *Ibid.*, 1 March 1942 and 21 December 1942.

72 M Leigh, *Captives courageous: South African prisoners of war in World War II* (Cape Town, 1992), p. 188.

73 G de Waal – Babs, October 1942.

74 Babs may have decided to send Gert a "Dear John" letter, as happened to many fellow prisoners. Wives and girlfriends would sometimes admit that they were not prepared to wait longer and M Leigh provides one such example quoted in *Captives courageous: South African prisoners*

In December 1942, while gunner De Waal was fighting for the love of his life, Sgt Harmse tasted his first desert dust in Cairo. At Helwan base camp, he was reclassified as a “B3” after the normal medical inspection.<sup>75</sup> This meant that he would be utilised strictly in an administrative role, away from combat.<sup>76</sup> His tasks in Cairo and Alexandria were primarily disciplinary in nature and included checking on dress, passes and conduct as well the enforcement of out-of-bounds regulations regarding bars and brothels.<sup>77</sup> Growing up in a deeply religious family, where Johannes, his brother and father were committed members of the Reformed Church, entrenched high moral values in Sgt Harmse. He might thus have found it difficult to deal with the immorality of troops in Egypt living on “borrowed time”. He told his mother that, although some days were very hard and full of suffering, he just had to think back to the “ou Unie”,<sup>78</sup> those at home and his mother’s coffee to escape from it all. In reading his letters, one gets the impression that all was not well with the sergeant and in March 1943 he betrayed the fact that he could not cope with being away from home and indicated as much in one letter to his parents when he wrote: “I think I might have (a) nervous breakdown.”<sup>79</sup>

Promotion to staff sergeant (S/Sgt) followed a year later, but even this could not douse the fire of longing for his family that raged within Johannes Harmse. From the First Field Provost Company he was transferred from one administrative post to another and eventually ended up at the Helwan Camp Quartermaster Stores and was admitted to number five South African General Hospital at Helmieh early in March 1944. In August of the same year, he was admitted again and classified “D”<sup>80</sup> (temporarily unfit), earmarked for return to the Union. S/Sgt Harmse’s journey back home commenced on 5 October 1944 as he boarded a ship bound for Durban. On his arrival in the Union he was immediately admitted to Potchefstroom hospital until his discharge in January 1945 with a medical classification “E”<sup>81</sup>

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*of war in World War II* (Cape Town, 1992) where a girlfriend wrote to her sergeant in a camp in Germany: “Sorry, married your father. Mother!”

- 75 SANDF Archives. Organisation of Command and Staff in the Union in the event of mobilization and employment of field forces for War. Union War Histories, civil group, box 88. This classification restricted Harmse to technical and administrative duties, excluding war service, with the added prospect of requiring dental attention.
- 76 TP Finnegan, “50 Years of PULHHEEMS – The British Army’s system of medical classification”, *Annals of Academy of Medicine* 30(5), 2001, p. 1.
- 77 Anon. SACMP Corps History, <<http://home.mweb.co.za/re/redcap/1939-46.htm>>, accessed 10 September 2006.
- 78 JH Harmse – his parents, 4 February 1943.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 26 March 1943. Author’s translation from the original text: “Dit lijk of mij senuwees wil ingee.”
- 80 SANDF Archives. Organisation of Command and Staff in the Union in the event of mobilization and employment of field forces for war. Union War Histories, civil group, box 88.
- 81 SANDF Archives, WW2 Service Records: 174741, S/Sgt JH Harmse.

which labelled him as being permanently unfit for duty.<sup>82</sup> His discharge papers indicate that he suffered from epilepsy and was thus unsuited for war service.<sup>83</sup> This is disputed by his relatives, who declare that he was physically as fit as could be expected and he resumed his pre-war life as caretaker and protector for his family with normality.<sup>84</sup>

Gert de Waal was thought to have been killed in action in North Africa and then resurrected through a case of mistaken identity.<sup>85</sup> He was a “guest” of the Italian armed forces before being moved to more secure POW camps in Germany, where he laboured on coal mines in Southern Poland. He escaped from Italian custody once, but his freedom was short-lived as he was recaptured before making good his escape.<sup>86</sup> Unlike some ex-POWs, he did not like to talk about his time in the prisoner camps and the story of his “great escape” was lost to time. Several others, however, recounted their experiences in books and memoirs.<sup>87</sup> He experienced Ghurkha stealth firsthand in North Africa when looking at his boots in the morning after sentry duty, only to find that the tip of one had been cleared of Egyptian dust in an effort to distinguish a British boot (they had hardened front parts) from a German one. Failure to pass this crude test in the darkness of the desert would have resulted in a bayonet in the back.<sup>88</sup> His favourite story of life as an Italian POW was that of the suppers he attended with an Italian farmer and his family he met after his breakout from the POW camp. He used to tell stories, to those that listened, about how they indulged in the meat stew they received each night, only to one day see the skins of several cats on various hooks being suspended from the roof of the little cottage.<sup>89</sup> Talking to his children after the war he cautioned them not to take life too lightly, because he experienced situations where men with families and bright futures were killed next to him while the bullet with his name on, fortunately, never found its mark.<sup>90</sup>

Both Harmse and De Waal were eventually reunited with their families and loved ones, albeit via routes neither of them envisioned when they signed their attestation papers. S/Sgt Harmse spent more time in and out of military hospitals than in the trenches, while Gert de Waal had to wait out his war in a POW camp in Poland. There were no victory parades for these two men when they set foot on

82 SANDF Archives. Organisation of Command and Staff in the Union in the event of mobilization and employment of field forces for war. Union War Histories, civil group, box 88.

83 SANDF Archives, WW2 Service Records: 174741, S/Sgt JH Harmse.

84 Interview H Walker, Pretoria, 6 July 2006.

85 Telegramme from D de Waal – his sister, 10 June 1942.

86 Interview D de Waal, Pretoria, 4 July 2006.

87 Examples are: H Rose-Innes *The Po Valley break*; SG Wolhuter, *The melancholy state*; J Rossiter, *You'll never make it. The escape diary of Pte Jack Rossiter*.

88 Interview H Walker, Pretoria, 6 July 2006.

89 Interview D de Waal, Pretoria, 4 July 2006.

90 Interview H Walker, Pretoria, 6 July 2006.



their native soil again, as the hospital ship that brought Harmse home contained many more young men broken and damaged by war. Gert de Waal, in turn, was lost in a tide of men being repatriated to their various homes at the end of the war with preference going to the men of the fighting units.<sup>91</sup>

S/Sgt Harmse had no aspirations to return to the hardships of farming and became a constable in the Department of Railways and Harbours. From North Africa he brought back tales of great heroism as a dispatch rider, carrying vital messages while under intense fire. For his bravery he received a battle wound to his leg. It was the scar of this wound, which he showed to his children on his return to the Union, that showed how close he came to death in the desert. He, however, also brought back from the desert the urge to suppress his emotions through the overindulgence in alcohol. The children that he longed for so much had to endure his consequent bouts of drunken aggression,<sup>92</sup> and when his first wife died in 1946 he must have questioned the logic of wasting time in Egypt while he could have spent more time with his family. The effects of the desert finally wore off shortly after his son's seventeenth birthday and he once again assumed the role of caregiver and father.

Gert de Waal had no problem finding employment after the war either, although he did have difficulty in keeping it. He found it hard to adhere to civilian authority and more often than not had his employment terminated for disagreeing quite intensively with his superiors.<sup>93</sup> He admitted to his brother that the time spent away from home was indeed time wasted and that he needed to get his life on track. To start his new life Gert got a job at the Government Garage in Pietermaritzburg and, in 1950, he finally settled down by marrying his beloved Babs.<sup>94</sup> Both men bore deep psychological scars from their ordeal in the North and had to deal with their respective demons in their own way. For many years after the war Gert de Waal's family forbade children from making a noise around the family home whenever he was present. The commotion of kids shouting (even in play) would cause Gert to become a nervous wreck. His nephew recalls how during severe Transvaal thunderstorms Gert hid under the kitchen table, cowering in fear.<sup>95</sup>

For the Springboks returning home from war there were no post-traumatic stress debriefings or emotional counselling. They were merely expected to resume their lives unaffected by what they saw and experienced "Up North".

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91 Interview D de Waal, Pretoria, 4 July 2006; Interview H Walker, Pretoria, 6 July 2006; SANDF Archives, WW2 Service Records: 174741, JH Harmse and 105745, GC de Waal.

92 Telephonic conversation with H Prinsloo, 25 September 2006.

93 Interview D de Waal, Pretoria, 4 July 2006.

94 Interview ME Claase (Babs), Pietermaritzburg, 6 July 2006.

95 Interview D Bentz, Pretoria, 4 July 2006.

## 9. CONCLUSION

To the troop in the trenches the flies, the dust and drunken brawls in Cairo brothels were only some of the building blocks of memories of times gone by. The loss of a promised parcel of goodies from home was just as much of a tragedy to the individual as the surrender of Tobruk was a disaster for the Allies. History is not only the domain of the intellectual, influential or political elite, but also of all those various colourful and sometimes eccentric individuals that live their lives as individual parts of the whole. Johannes Harmse had to defeat his own demons before realising that it is much more important to watch his children mature than to get involved in a distant conflict that he did not understand and that the link between families should never be severed by someone else's politics. Although never openly hostile, some friends and even relatives of Johannes Harmse sometimes referred to him as the "hans khaki" (an Afrikaner supporting the British) behind his back. This was extremely unfortunate as he chose to sign the "Red Oath" and thereby put the wellbeing of his family paramount to his own political views or personal safety. Gert de Waal had to experience the death of friends and the loss of freedom as a POW before he discovered that he had wasted his pre-war life. Fortunately for him there was still time to make amends.

In the end, the individual experiences of the guitar-playing circus entertainer from Natal and the prison warder might not have had any influence on any one else except immediate family, but it did teach them about the value of life and that time lost can never be regained. Johannes Hendrik Harmse did not retire as just another white government employee after all and lived out his golden years as factotum of a local high school, still faithfully taking care of others. Gerhardus Cornelius de Waal, after surviving the desert and POW camps in Italy and Germany, died slowly from an infection sustained by a rusty nail in his left shoe. As the memories of Ouboet Harmse and Gert de Waal, now long gone, begin to fade, one realise that they did not number among history's "Great Men", but merely tried to survive and be the "Best Men" to their families and loved ones.