

From <http://www.rhodesia.nl/sadfhist.htm>.

World War II (1939-1945)

The outbreak of war in September 1939 found South Africa with a very small and ill-equipped Defence Force. Permanent Force strength stood at just 352 officers and 5,033 other ranks.

Other administrative changes in 1937 included plans for the further extension and improvement of the ranks, while the ACF comprised only 918 officers and 12,572 other ranks.

Once the decision to enter the war had been taken, the first priority was to make arrangements for a greatly expanded UDF needed to sustain South Africa's war effort.

In September 1939 ACF units were authorized to accept volunteers (in addition to those in the age group 17 to 21) for the duration of the war. In February 1940 the ACF was reorganized on a totally voluntary basis as a result of strong opposition from a section of the nation that did not favour the Union's participation in the war. Soldiers willing to serve anywhere in Africa took the Africa Oath and were issued with a strip of orange cloth (the orange flash) which was worn at the outer aspect of the shoulder strap.

Despite an initial shortage of equipment, the recruitment campaign for the reorganized ACF proceeded very satisfactorily, and within a short period three divisions had been established. These included 1 SA Division under Maj Gen G.E. Brink, comprising 1, 2 and 5 Brigades; 2 SA Division consisting of 3, 4 and 6 Brigades under Maj Gen I.P. de Villiers, and 3 SA Division comprising the reserve brigades and commanded by Maj Gen M. Botha.

The 1st SA Division was destined to serve in East and North Africa while 2 SA Division would operate in North Africa. The 3rd SA Division was stationed in the Union.

A large number of other combat and support corps and units were also formed including the SA Tank Corps, the SA Veterinary Corps and mounted units.

The first major campaign of the South African forces during the Second World War took place in East Africa. Italian forces had overrun British Somaliland by the middle of 1940, and were advancing southwards into Kenya. The UDF's 1 SA Division was accordingly despatched to East Africa to assist the British forces under Lt Gen Alan Cunningham along a 800 mile front against the advancing Italians.

The 1st SA Division's 1 SA Brigade, which under Brig Gen D.H. Pienaar arrived in Kenya in June 1940, achieved the first South African victory of the war by defeating the Italian forces at El Wak on 16 December 1940.

In January 1941, 1 SA Division (without 1 SA Brigade, which had been attached to 12 African Division) was ordered to advance to the Abyssinian frontier, with the object of outflanking the Italian positions on the MegaMoyale escarpment. British Somaliland, while the Divisional HQ and 5 SA Brigade were despatched to Egypt. The 2nd SA Brigade proceeded to advance towards Abyssinia against relatively light opposition before it too was ordered to Egypt.

In the meantime 1 SA Brigade, along with the rest of 12 African and 11 African Divisions, in February 1941 made a dash for the Juba River and the port of Kismayu. The attack soon turned into a triumphant advance on Addis Ababa itself and, following the collapse of enemy resistance along the Juba River front the combined British and South African forces broke through to Mogadishu and Harar. Addis Ababa was captured on 5 April 1941. The Division's advance met with little resistance and Mega fell to the South African forces on 18 February, with 1,000 prisoners taken. The Division's victory prompted Gen Cunningham to deploy 2 SA Brigade into Italian resistance was finally broken after further operations in which 1 SA Brigade played a leading role. On 19 May 1941 the Duke of Aosta, Viceroy of Italian East Africa, surrendered with 5,000 men, the remnant of the Italian forces in Eritrea. At this point 1 SA Brigade was rested prior to transfer to Egypt.

Italian forces in the lakes region south of the capital and in the Gondar region still refused to capitulate, however. A South African contingent, consisting of 1 Natal Mounted Rifles, 1 Field Force Battalion and various South African artillery, light tank, and support units participated in operations against the Italians with rare distinction. At the end of November the last Italian forces in East Africa laid down their arms.

Although the UDF combat units had performed admirably throughout the campaign in East Africa, the various South African support units also contributed to the final victory. The sterling efforts of the engineer, road construction, motor transport, and medical units in supporting the combat units over vast distances in inhospitable terrain and an equally unpleasant climate, deserve special mention.

The UDF now transferred its attention to the North African theatre, where it was planned to deploy two full divisions in support of the British forces which at this stage were confronted with Rommel's Afrika Korps.

Fresh from the campaign in East Africa, 1 SA Division had been deployed at Mersa Matruh in Egypt. Arriving directly from the Union towards the end of June, 2 SA Division was deployed to El Alamein.

During the British 8th Army's offensive against the German forces in Libya, in an effort to relieve the beleaguered Tobruk garrison, 1 SA Division was ordered to advance past Sidi Rezegh towards Tobruk in support of the British 7th Armoured Division.

After initial successes the 8th Army's attack broke down and, after fierce fighting, 5 SA Infantry Brigade was overrun and annihilated by Rommel's armoured forces at Sidi Rezegh. Although this was a severe blow, the Brigade's gunners destroyed 72 enemy tanks. The 1st SA Brigade, too, became involved in heavy fighting in the Sidi Rezegh area over the period 28 November - 1 December 1941.

The 2nd SA Division had, in the meantime, been attached to 13 Corps and its brigades played a dominant role in the capture of Bardia, Sollum and Halfaya. These battles cost the South Africans approximately 500 casualties, but they took a total of 14 000 German and Italian prisoners.

Sustained attacks by the 8th Army eventually forced the enemy to retreat from the Gazala Line, and contact was re-established with Tobruk. The two South African divisions were now deployed in an endeavour to reinforce the 8th Army's defensive positions in Libya against an expected German counter-offensive. The 1st SA Division was deployed along the Gazala Line while 2 SA Division (minus 3 SA Infantry Brigade) was despatched to Tobruk to take over the harbour town's fortress. In May Rommel launched his counter-offensive, decisively defeating the British tank forces in the area of Knightsbridge, El Adem and Bir Hacheim, and driving the 8th Army into headlong retreat back towards the Egyptian frontier. The 1st SA Division managed to reach the Egyptian frontier without serious loss. But Tobruk was cut off and on 21 June the fortress garrison under Maj Gen Klopper was forced to surrender. Altogether 10,722 South Africans were taken prisoner, which meant in effect that 2 SA Division had ceased to exist.

Rommel wasted little time in capitalizing on his success at Tobruk, driving straight for Alexandria and capturing Mersa Matruh. The 8th Army, however, rallied and by September Rommel's offensive had broken down. This enabled the Allied forces to launch a major offensive and on the night of 3 October 1942 the final and decisive battle of El Alamein commenced with an artillery barrage which lasted several hours. South African artillery units alone fired 62 000 rounds of 25-pounder ammunition during the night. The massive artillery barrage cleared the way for an infantry and armoured assault on the German positions around El Alamein, with 1 SA Division one of the four attacking divisions.

The 8th Army's El Alamein offensive succeeded beyond expectations and by the beginning of November Rommel's forces were in headlong retreat. Tobruk was recaptured and by the end of November the German forces had been cleared from Libya.

With its services no longer required in North Africa, 1 SA Division returned to the Union at the beginning of 1943. The price of victory had been high, however. Total South African casualties in North Africa were 23,625, including 14,242 POWs and 2,104 soldiers killed in action.

South African forces also took part in the British invasion of Madagascar in 1942, which was designed to forestall the possibility of a Japanese assault upon this strategically located island.

The 7th SA Infantry Brigade under Brig G.T. Senescall landed at the naval base of Diego Suarez on the northern tip of the island on 25 June 1942. The brigade moved into camp at Sakaramy and prepared defensive positions. In September the South African brigade took part in a large-scale operation aimed at capturing the southern half of the island from its Vichy French occupants. Although little opposition was encountered, topographical and climatic conditions were arduous and malaria casualties high.

The Vichy Governor surrendered on 2 November 1942 and the South African troops returned to the Union on 7 December 1942, having sustained a total of only 18 casualties during the campaign.

The last major theatre of operations in which South Africans were involved during the war was the Allied campaign to reconquer Italy. On 1 February 1943 the first-ever SA Armoured Division - the 6 SA Armoured Division - was formed in the Union under the command of Maj Gen W.H. Evered-Poole. The division had been specifically formed to take part in the Allied invasion of Italy.

After a few weeks of intensive preparation at Zonderwater, the Division moved to Hay Paddock near Pietermaritzburg in early April to wait for a convoy north. On 18 and 19 April 1943, the Division set sail for Egypt, where it was to undergo training in preparation for the Italian campaign.

On arrival at Suez, the Division was transported to a camp which had been especially pitched at Khatatba, some 60 miles from Cairo. For the next twelve months 6 SA Armoured Division engaged in an exhaustive training programme designed to bring its various units to the peak of battle efficiency for the difficult task that lay ahead.

Finally, nearly a year after arriving in Egypt, the Division crossed to Italy in April 1944 and concentrated in the Altamura-Matera-Gravina area. The conditions facing the Division were very different from those that 1 and 2 SA Divisions had encountered in North Africa. It would have to operate in mountainous country ideally suited to defensive warfare, and attack positions manned by a skilful and stubborn enemy. In summer, rain and mud, and in winter snow and intense cold would impede mobile warfare, while there was little scope for turning movements. This type of war would make heavy demand on all arms, but particularly the Engineers.

The Division remained in the Matera area until late May, when it was ordered forward to the battle area around Cassino.

The 6th SA Armoured Division in fact arrived at Cassino just too late to participate in one of the biggest and most decisive battles of the Italian campaign. Since January the US 5th and British 8th Armies had been trying in vain to capture the German positions around Monte Cassino, which were frustrating the Allied advance on Rome. Monte Cassino was an imposing peak of the southern Appenines, and it dominates access to the Liri Valley, which was the only viable route through the Appenines that the Allies could follow to Rome. As it happened, just as 6 SA Armoured Division was being readied for action, the German positions at Cassino were overrun in a massive Allied offensive.

The capture of Cassino opened the way to Rome for the Allies, and the entire 6 SA Armoured Division, with 11 Armoured Brigade leading the way, was ordered forward to assist in the capture of the city. After a rapid advance against relatively light opposition, the South Africans entered Rome on 6 June 1944. The fall of Rome, however, did not by any means signify the end of the fighting in Italy. In fact the next two months were to see some of the sternest fighting of the campaign to date, as the Germans doggedly resisted an all-out Allied drive towards Florence.

Cellano, en route to Florence, was captured on 10 June after a particularly fierce battle in which the 11 SA Armoured Brigade performed heroically.

Eventually, after a long hard slog of eight weeks through Cellano, Orvieto, Chiusi, Sinalunga and finally along the Divisional Green Route through Radda, Mecatale, and across the Greve River, 6 SA Armoured Division entered Florence on 4 August in the vanguard of the Allied advance.

The capture of Florence afforded the Division a well-earned rest lasting six weeks. The respite was used to good effect with the Division's equipment and vehicles being stripped and overhauled. In the meantime

congratulatory messages were received from, among others, the C-in-C General Sir Harold Alexander and the Army Commander Lt Gen Sir Oliver Leese.

There remained much to be done, however. The Germans were still firmly entrenched along the Arno River and the formidable Gothic Line extending from the west coast of Italy across to the Adriatic. The 6th SA Armoured Division was given the task of pushing the Germans back on the Gothic Line behind Pistoia. For this part of the campaign, the armoured units were used as mobile reserves reinforcing the SA Division's 12 Motorized Brigade and 24 Guards Brigade. In fact often during the following months the armoured units were forced to adopt the role of infantry, as the German Gothic Line ran for much of its length along the northern Apennines range which was so mountainous as to be quite unsuitable for tank warfare. In addition, the onset of winter and the accompanying bad weather further restricted the use of tanks.

Nevertheless, despite these natural handicaps, 6 SA Armoured Division acquitted itself admirably throughout the grim winter as the Allied forces relentlessly rolled back the Gothic Line along the Apennines. By the end of winter, the Allied forces stood poised to make the decisive break-through along the remainder of the Gothic Line which would lead to the capture of Bologna, the crossing of the Po and the eventual collapse of German resistance in NE Italy.

In the final weeks of the war 6 SA Armoured Division was allowed to revert to its true armour role. By the beginning of May the German resistance in Italy had effectively ceased, and a last-minute dash by 6 SA Armoured Division to Milan proved unnecessary as on arrival on 2 May 1945 the South Africans were informed of the unconditional surrender of all German forces in Italy.

With the war in Europe officially over, the first units of the 6th Armoured Division began returning home towards the end of May 1945.