

# The role of black South African soldiers in the Second World War: a contested contribution

BY

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## Introduction

Approximately 76 000 black South Africans joined the Union Defence Force (UDF) during the Second World War, thus constituting one quarter of the active South African forces supporting the Allies' war effort. In addition, there were also a large number of unattested blacks (between 15000 and 22 500) as well as an unspecified number of "casual labourers" in military bases throughout the country.

The main aim of the article is to address and assess the issue of the contribution of these black men to the Allied War effort. To reach such an assessment might be easier said than done because of the difficulty of precisely defining and evaluating a "contribution". In this instance, does it mean the physical work done by the soldiers? Are the numbers who participated and also the numbers who forfeited their lives of importance and, if so, how important? Should one compare it with the contribution of other soldiers? From these questions it is already clear that there is no simple explanation for the concept "contribution". This becomes even more problematic when one tries to evaluate "contribution" against the background of the total War effort.

The aim, however, is not to try and find an answer to all the above-mentioned questions. The focus is more limited. A factual exposition will be given of the activities in which the black South African soldiers were involved. Then the

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policies and perceptions of the government and military authorities will be highlighted. Specific attention will be given to ways in which they advanced or restricted the soldiers' contribution by looking at policies regarding: the status of black soldiers with specific reference to the arming of black soldiers; the nature of their work; the effectiveness of manpower utilisation but also an appreciation and recognition of their participation. Finally, the views of the soldiers themselves on their role will receive attention, focusing on their status as well as feelings of disillusionment but also entitlement. With this information at hand an attempt at an evaluation of their contribution will be made. Lastly, the concept "contribute" will be approached from the angle of the War.

An important aspect to keep in mind throughout is, of course, how the specific South African circumstances as well as the exigencies of the War determined the nature of their participation.

## **A Activities of black soldiers**

Although the Native Military Corps (NMC) started as a small organisation only concentrating on providing guards, War circumstances quickly necessitated a rapid increase. As the War progressed and expanded the need for more manpower became imperative. Consequently, black labour assumed an increasingly important auxiliary role, relieving white troops for other, especially combatant, roles.

The vast majority of black non-combatants served as labourers performing unskilled duties. This was very much in keeping with the traditional South African labour pattern, restricting black people to unskilled and semi-skilled work such as hospital orderlies, batmen, "hygiene staff" (a euphemism for toilet diggers), loaders, stablemen, waiters, scullions, stretcher-bearers, pioneers, cleaners and aeroplane refuellers. Semi-skilled men and tradesmen were employed as motor transport drivers, mechanics, cooks, clerks, typists, telephone operators, interpreters, bootmakers and repairers, tailors, medical and artillery aids, builders and bricklayers, carpenters and painters.<sup>1</sup>

### **1 Duties in South Africa**

Initially, the most important duty assigned to the soldiers was guarding vital

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Military Information Bureau, Pretoria. Archives of the Adjutant-General (AG) (3) 154/X/1012 Box 104, Director of Air Personnel and Organisation to OC's NMC Wings (South), 31/12/1945; archives of the Native Military Corps (NMC NAS) 3/20/1C A 4 Box 31, E.T. Stubbs to AG, 10/2/1941 and AG (3) 154/51/658/0 Box 224, memorandum on NEAS, 29/3/1941. Aspects of these duties will be discussed below.

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military installations such as aerodromes and strategic points in South Africa like the dynamite and chemical factories at Klipfontein as well as certain borders. For example, in March 1943, to prevent leakage of shipping information, the Government declared a narrow strip of the Eastern and Northern Transvaal bordering Mozambique, a prohibited area and NMC guards were posted all along the border. They also supplemented white guards at prisoner of war camps and were especially assigned to do night duty. This decision was justified by a typically colonial remark, namely that at nightfall

the aboriginal ear and eye is probably more acute than the European.<sup>2</sup>

Because of an increase in crime in Cape Town and Johannesburg, a company of 275 NMC soldiers was seconded to and placed under the command of the South African Police as special constables to carry out patrol duty from 20h30 to 04h30 daily in these cities. According to reports a remarkable decrease in crime occurred in the areas that they patrolled.<sup>3</sup> No's 13 and 14 "Q" Maintenance Company were utilised in carting maize in the Bethlehem and Klerksdorp districts respectively to relieve the transport and labour shortage problems whilst members of the NMC were also made available to assist the maize and wheat farmers in reaping their crops.<sup>4</sup> They furthermore excelled themselves when they were called upon to fight fires threatening property and lives.<sup>5</sup> In January 1944 the black workers employed at the power stations controlled by the Victoria Falls and Transvaal Power Company went on strike. About 500 members of the NMC were called in to render assistance. Of course, it is not unusual for soldiers to do these jobs but they were not directly linked to the War effort.<sup>6</sup>

NMC soldiers were also employed in certain emergency situations, which came about due to the War. They rescued survivors and recovered bodies from air crashes and from wrecked or torpedoed ships. In addition, they made a

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2. Transvaal and Central Archives Depot, Pretoria. Archives of the Secretary for Native Affairs (NTS) Box 9115 File 68/363, DNEAS (Director of Non-European Army Services) to Secretary for Native Affairs (SNA), 20/8/1943.

Non-European Army Services (NEAS) Paper Clippings, *Umeteli Wa Bantu*, 21/4/1945; AG (3) 154/X/1041 Box 110, DNEAS to Secretary for Defence, 29/8/1944 and Military Information Bureau, Pretoria. Archives of the Director of Non-European Army Services (DNEAS NAS) 3/21 Box 13, draft article to be distributed to newspapers titled "First Class soldier police men. Fine work of NMC seconded to SA Police Force", 10/4/1945.

4. NTS Box 2095 File 222/280, DNEAS to SNA, 8/6/1943.

5. NEAS Paper Clippings, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 9/1/1943 and NMC NAS 3/21 A 3 Box 14, Commendation of NMC soldier, titled "Valiant action during fire", accompanying letter DNEAS to European and Non-European papers, 22/2/1945.

6. University of Cape Town Libraries. Africana and Special Collection Department, A.B. Xuma Papers ABX 440125, Private Secretary Minister of Native Affairs to A.B. Xuma, 25/11/1944.

significant contribution in salvaging flotsam from lost vessels.<sup>7</sup> No. 16 "Q" Maintenance Company, amidst extreme climatic conditions and severe dust storms, was used to lift salt at Swakopmund, Namibia, during the acute salt shortage in South Africa. They lifted close to 21 000 tons of salt and covered a grand total mileage of 705 240 in the process.<sup>8</sup> NMC transport drivers were also attached to the Land and Exploration Company in the heart of malaria plagued Zululand to extract and cart rubber in order to help relieve the shortage of rubber.<sup>9</sup>

The labour of the black soldiers were furthermore utilised in erecting fences, in road construction and in erecting new buildings and aerodromes or extending existing ones for military purposes. In this way, according to the authorities, construction work was carried out far more cheaply than would have been the case if it had to be done by the Public Works Department.<sup>10</sup>

Another avenue in which the soldiers were employed was that of entertainment. Two concert parties were formed and trained. Although discipline in the parties sometimes failed, favourable reports on their lively and entertaining performances, their versatility and their popularity were submitted.

NMC members were also involved in the technical side of entertainment. They assisted in operating the mobile film vans, which toured the country to visit various NMC units.<sup>11</sup> These entertainment facilities were one way of combating the boredom, which inevitably set in amongst some of the soldiers who performed monotonous duties.

## **2 Duties outside South Africa**

The first NMC troops arrived in East Africa to join the 5th Infantry Brigade as early as November 1940. There, as in North Africa, the Middle East, Madagascar, and eventually Italy, they were employed in various non-combatant

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7. R. HALLACK, "Record of the Non-European Army Services, 1939-1945" (Unpublished typescript report, undated), p. 53
  8. DNEAS NAS 3/1/10/A Box 2, DNEAS to Deputy Adjutant-General, (DAG) (O), 31/8/1944 and Hallack, "Records of the NEAS", p. 45.
  9. R. HALLACK, "Records of the NEAS", p. 53.
  10. NTS Box 9324 File 81/378, Report of a visit of SNA to Caprivi Zipfel, 11/9/1941; Military Information Bureau, Pretoria. Narratives and Reports Units and Formations Group (Narep Unfo) 21, p. 13926, Records of Activities of 183 Works Coy. NMC (V) SAEC in South Africa and DNEAS NAS 3/36/4 Box 24, Report on general duties performed by sixty NE details at the Simmerpan Station, 24/1/1944.
  11. AG 168/3/3/3 Box 19, Memorandum for DAG (P) on functions and methods of operation of DNEAS mobile units, 2/9/1943.

skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled work. Generally they served as drivers helping to maintain the lines of communication and delivering essential food and ammunition supplies to the front line or other outposts; some served as mechanics servicing motor trucks as well as aeroplanes; others maintained supportive functions such as cooks, clerks, typists, telephone operators and especially stretcher-bearers and medical orderlies. Many were also employed on more menial duties of which burying the dead, road and aerodrome construction, repairs and trench digging were the most important.

The demands made upon these men were sometimes exhausting in the extreme. Not only were there instances where they had to complete construction works within a very short time necessitating long, uninterrupted work for days and nights but sometimes they also had to contend with severe dust storms and exceptionally high temperatures.<sup>12</sup>

## **2.1 Construction of railway line**

Perhaps the most outstanding, lasting and unique contribution of NMC troops outside South Africa was ironically, not fighting, but hard manual labour done by the 61st Tunnelling Company, Mines Engineering Brigade, South African Engineering Corps. There was a distinct possibility that the Germans might invade Turkey in order to attack the Allies in the Middle East. Turkey could not be assisted effectively unless supplies and men could reach her quickly overland from the Egyptian base. A good railway connection was the solution. The railway line running north from Egypt to Palestine stopped at Acre, just north of Haifa and the one from Turkey southwards came no further than Tripoli. To utilise the line effectively the 160 kilometres gap had to be closed. In November 1941 an urgent appeal was made to the South African Government for a special mining company to be established. Its purpose would be to assist in the construction of a railway tunnel through the mountains in Syria for this important railway line. The total number of labourers required for the work was 715 of whom 420 were required to be trained mine workers as it was assumed that they knew the most about underground work. By arrangement with the Transvaal Chamber of Mines and the Native Recruiting Corporation these were drawn from the five main mining groups as volunteers for one year's service. The remainder of the labour force was drawn from the NMC as an attached labour company with a total strength of 313 men. These included motor transport drivers and medical and hygiene personnel.

It was hard work, which was aggravated by the cold Syrian winter and high

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12. R. HALLACK, "Records of the NEAS", pp. 47-50.

winds. Two tunnels had to be excavated but they distinguished themselves in completing the work in seven months, well ahead of schedule. The unit was then requested to construct a second railway tunnel. Just before this tunnel was completed the particular NMC troops were returned to South Africa in keeping with their contract period of one year.

## **2.2 Construction of tunnels**

However, this was not the end of the services of the 61st Tunnelling Company in the Middle East. Volunteers were asked to construct a series of irrigation tunnels involving approximately five kilometres of tunnelling. The previous year 600 000 tons of shipping had to be used to bring cereals into the Middle East area, much of which could have been grown in the area itself if there was water available. This scheme would therefore remedy the situation. It would irrigate some 8 000 acres along the coastal strip between Tyre and Saida on which food could be grown thereby saving shipping space. It would also be of great political significance by winning the favour of the Lebanese Government. Within four months the construction work was completed and the miners and soldiers received high recognition for the work done.<sup>13</sup>

## **2.3 Maintaining lines of communication**

The Middle East, even after the Axis forces had been driven out of Africa, remained of vital strategic importance both for the prosecution of the war in the Pacific as well as for supporting the advance of the Allied Forces in Italy. Moreover, it was the main arsenal, workshop, rest, training and reinforcement centre of all the Allied Forces operating in the Mediterranean area. Vast quantities of war material, troops and foodstuffs had to be guarded and transported by motor transport to units in the area and to the ports for shipping to Italy, Greece and the Pacific. To this enormous task of maintaining lines of communication in an area stretching from the Nile Delta for 1 600 kilometres North East to the Turkish border and for nearly 3 000 kilometres west to Tripoli and beyond, the 7th NMC and Cape Corps Motor Transport Companies in particular also contributed their fair share.

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13. The description in these two sections were compiled from the following sources: Narep Unfo 21, pp. 13782, 13797, 13803 and 13816; NMC NAS 3/21 A 7 Box 12, Article titled "The Native soldiers of the Mines Engineering Brigade"; DNEAS NAS 2/21 Box 13, Memorandum titled "Outstanding Engineering feats. 61 Tunnelling Company's Achievements in Syria. Splendid work by one of the finest contingents of NMC"; Hallack, "Record of the NEAS", pp. 45 and 162 and S. HORWITZ, "The Non-European War Record in South Africa" in E. HELLMAN and L. ABRAHAMS (eds), *Handbook of Race Relations in South Africa*, p. 543.

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It was especially the contribution made by motor transport drivers that gained the most attention and, eventually, recognition. By April 1942 there was a very urgent need for motor transport drivers. This urgency was all the more noted after the fall of Tobruk in June 1942. It was therefore decided to train NMC members for ten specially formed motor transport companies. Another reason for this move was that morale and discipline was at its lowest ebb at this stage. The training of some of these men as motor transport drivers was seen as a way to boost morale and instil discipline.<sup>14</sup> It was therefore not strange that, when the idea of establishing these motor transport companies was first mooted, there was indeed some doubts whether they would be effective.

Initially the standard of driving of these trainees left much to be desired. It was even thought that the doubts about this endeavour would be realised. Soon, however, various reports began to testify that the motor transport drivers acquitted themselves splendidly. They achieved this in sometimes very hazardous and unfamiliar circumstances. For one, they had to adapt to driving on the right hand side of the road and on many occasions on very bad, congested and sometimes non-existent roads made even more difficult and dangerous by demolitions, mines and booby traps. In addition they had to cope with unfavourable weather conditions and driving for long hours. Amidst the shellfire and confusion encountered during attacks and withdrawals, they continued driving seemingly unperturbed. Thus they succeeded in maintaining vital supply lines and, as ambulance drivers, in evacuating the wounded.<sup>15</sup>

In the middle of 1942 the world's attention was momentarily switched from Europe and the Middle East to Madagascar. After the loss of Singapore the British naval forces in the Indian Ocean had their forward bases in Sri Lanka (Ceylon). The importance of Mombassa as an additional port for patrolling the Indian Ocean should Sri Lanka be overrun was now greatly increased. To the south of this ocean route and dominating the Mozambique Channel, through which the British convoys to East Africa and the Middle East were constantly passing, lay the Vichy-controlled island of Madagascar with the natural harbour of Diego Suarez at its northern tip. There were signs that the Japanese might occupy Diego Suarez if they chose and even that some measure of co-operation between Japanese submarine commanders and the French in Madagascar had already taken place.

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14. Narep Unfo 12, pp. 11109-1111.

15. NTS Box 9115 File 68/363, Lt. Col. C.L. Parkin, OC 2nd Anti Tank Regiment SAA to GOA UDF Admin. H.Q. MEF, 17/8/1942; Military Information Bureau, Pretoria. Gen. F.H. Theron Collection Box 38, Personal letter no. 3, 2/6/1943; Military Information Bureau, Pretoria. Union War Histories (UWH) Box 252, I:10, Memorandum titled "NE Ambulance Drivers", 10/6/1942 and Military Information Bureau, Pretoria. Gen. G.E. Brink Collection Box 53 1 SA Division Operation Report, Cyrenaica, 18/11/1941-2/12/1941.

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After attempts at negotiations had failed, the British Government deemed it necessary to send in a force to occupy Diego Suarez. This action was partly a preventive measure and partly to obtain the control and use of the port for naval and air patrols. The 7th South African Infantry Brigade which was amongst the Allied Forces sent out to complete the operation included black drivers, stretcher-bearers, cooks and medical orderlies. In addition the black soldiers in No. 1 Pack Transport Company of the South African Veterinary Corps carried out transport work with horses whilst those in No. 1 Docks Operating Company, SA Engineering Company, loaded and off-loaded military cargo and operated the winches on the ships and cranes.

No serious battles occurred, as the French resistance was very weak. The real hazards were the tropical climate and malaria. The Vichy Governor surrendered on 2 November 1942 and the South African troops returned to South Africa on 7 December 1942.<sup>16</sup>

The first members of the NMC arrived in Italy in September 1943. Their numbers quickly increased so that, by the winter of 1944, there were over 2 000 black South African soldiers in Italy. Most of them were attached to the South African Air Force Squadrons and worked as batmen, cooks, waiters, drivers, fire fighters and crash crews.<sup>17</sup>

Generally speaking, it appears that these soldiers, although relatively small in number, made a substantial contribution to the successful conclusion of the Italian campaign. Shortly after the end of the war in Europe, instructions were issued that they return to the Middle East. They were to be replaced by Italian labour.<sup>18</sup>

## **B Evaluation of their activities**

### **1 Policies and views of the authorities**

#### **1.1 The status of black soldiers with specific reference to the arming of black soldiers**

An important question the authorities asked themselves was whether a black

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16. Narep Madagascar Vol. I, pp. 1598 and 1601, Vol. II, p. 1667; UWH Box 300 B I:45, Memorandum by E.K. Jones titled "South African Non-Europeans in the 'Second Front'," 8/1/1943 and National Film Archive, Pretoria, African Mirror, 174.

17. J.C. Knoetze, "Historical Survey of the Non-European Army Services outside the Union of South Africa" (Unpublished typescript report, 15/8/1945), p. 13. The main basis of the Squadron was in the Foggia plains.

18. Military Information Bureau, Pretoria. Archives of the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) (War) 32/5, Extract from Staff Conference no. 137, 22/5/1945.



member of the NMC should be regarded as a "soldier" which would entitle him to the provisions of the Citizen Force Regulations. By February 1941 it was clear that this would not be the case; he would therefore be excluded from regulations pertaining to white soldiers.<sup>19</sup> This policy made the status of black soldiers extremely ambiguous. Whilst the Government did not want to treat them as labourers - therefore the formation of the NMC rather than a labour battalion - it did not regard them as soldiers in the fullest sense of the word as well. Tacitly the colour bar thus prevailed and black volunteers were relegated to the menial jobs in the army. While the NMC was thus nominally not a labour corps, the duties which these men eventually had to perform in some respects contradicted this claim.

Although it was argued that all the activities of the black soldiers, however menial, ultimately contributed to the war effort, certain duties assigned to them could have been performed by anyone at any time and was not of essential importance to the war effort. They can therefore not strictly be regarded as military duties, which could only be carried out by soldiers. Here one could, for example, refer to batmen, "hygiene staff", loaders and waiters.

This dichotomy is perhaps best illustrated when one considers the issue of the arming of black soldiers. There is an important assumption that the very essence of being a soldier is to carry and use firearms. A soldier who is not armed is as incomplete as a bird without wings. Being unarmed was the dismal fate of black South African soldiers throughout the war. South Africa's laws prohibited blacks from carrying firearms. From the start of the NMC it was clear that this prohibition would not be relaxed. In June 1940 the Prime Minister, J.C. Smuts, categorically stated:

In order to forestall misrepresentation and prevent possible misunderstanding, it is to be clearly understood that natives will not... be equipped with arms of precision.<sup>20</sup>

For the Government it was very important that this instruction should be strictly adhered to.<sup>21</sup> Numerous explanations and justifications why these men could not be armed with firearms but only with assegais and knobkerries were given, inter alia that the assegai was the traditional weapon of black people and a symbol of

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19. DNEAS NAS 3/5/6 Box 6 DNEAS to DAG Training Area Commandant, Welgedacht, 10/2/1941.

20. Transvaal and Central Archives Depot, Pretoria. J.C. Smuts Papers A 1 Vol. 132 no. 73, Draft Government Statement, 26/6/1940.

NMC NAS 3/28/15 A 5 Box 56, DNEAS to OC Natal Command, 14/5/1941 and NTS Box 9126 File 68/363/21, E.T. Stubbs to SNA, 29/9/1941 and A.B. Xuma Papers ABX 411113b, H. Rogers for SNA to Rev. J.A. Calata, Secretary-General ANC Cradock, 13/11/1941.

war<sup>22</sup> and that modern warfare not only required armed soldiers but also a large number of men in supportive capacities.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the justifications, the decision not to arm them with firearms remained a political one, which was motivated by white opposition. A clear distinction was therefore drawn on racial lines between combatant and non-combatant soldiers. This sometimes made a mockery of the South African war effort. For example, when in danger, the black soldiers would be supported and protected by white soldiers who were, of course, fully armed. The ridiculousness of this arrangement was realised in the thick of war. The initial aim of utilising black soldiers was to release whites for combatant duties; but now whites had to be used to protect black drivers and their vehicles because they were not allowed to carry firearms.<sup>24</sup> This defeated the whole purpose of the exercise.

This policy also impinged seriously on their status as soldiers.<sup>25</sup> It was an insult - the assegai being described as 'a pitiful badge of inferiority'. What is however important is the fact that it completely ruled out the possibility of black soldiers taking a more active part in the war. This illustrates that these soldiers were not regarded as soldiers in the fullest sense of the word and, equally significant, that, by subscribing to this policy, the authorities directly limited their chances and the possibility of making a larger contribution. Their inferior status was again highlighted after the war when provision for old and ailing ex-servicemen were withheld, as these men were not considered as having been soldiers on active service.<sup>26</sup> This was a far cry from the laudatory comments made by some commentators after the war.

## 1.2 Nature of work

Linking up to this, though more specifically, the fact that black soldiers were not armed also hampered the way the guards could do their work properly. Most of them were utterly unfamiliar with the assegais with which they were equipped and which they regarded with contempt. The fact that they were not effectively

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22. National Film Archive, FA 302, "Die storie van die Suid-Afrikaanse Militêre Naturelle Korps", commentary, undated.
  23. NTS Box 9127 File 68/363/19, Recruiting address by W.A. Seymour, Matatiele, accompanying letter Magistrate Matatiele to Chief Magistrate Umtata, 22/9/1942.
  24. Gen. G.E. Brink Collection Box 47, Memorandum on matters affecting the 1st South African Division, accompanying letter, G.E. Brink to Force, 23/1/1941.
  25. NTS Box 9126 File 68/363/21, J.M.L. Fulford to DNEAS, 9/6/1942.
  26. The Library, University of the Witwatersrand. Historical and Literary Papers Division, A 1338 H.A. Gray Papers, H.A. Gray, Typescript, "History of the Governor-General's National War Fund, 1976, p. 28.

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armed made it almost impossible to impress them with the serious nature of guard duties. Moreover, the guards, not being properly armed and often being unable to speak either English or Afrikaans, were frequently treated with contempt by whites who tried to bluff their way past them and often succeeded.<sup>27</sup>

To avoid clashes and even contact between black guards and whites at all costs the guards were further handicapped in their duties by strict instructions. If they were approached offensively by any unauthorised whites, they should only warn, but not resist by using their assegais or by a display of force. They could only retreat ignominiously, call their white orderly officer and remain in the background in the event of trouble.<sup>28</sup> It is fairly safe to say that these factors which to some degree humiliated the black soldiers, contributed to their being indolent about their work.

When the issue whether the South African black soldiers should serve outside South Africa was broached, serious reservations about the wisdom of such a move were raised. Fears, mostly based on prejudices, were expressed that the soldiers would be highly susceptible to tropical diseases, like malaria. If these soldiers should develop malaria, many of them would also become carriers thereby creating the possibility of spreading the disease even to endemic proportions on their return to South Africa. However, probably the most important consideration was that it would be very difficult to exercise control over a large number of black soldiers in an area vastly different to South Africa. The possible anticipated trouble would be clashes between the local population and South African blacks arising from disputes over women.<sup>29</sup> But, of course, although not explicitly mentioned, the authorities were also afraid that the black soldiers would become acquainted with the different social structures in these foreign countries in which the absence of any colour bar would be the most obvious observation. The perception was held that, on their return to South Africa they might demand similar political and social changes. Thus by June 1940 definite instructions were issued that no black soldiers were to be sent out of South Africa.<sup>30</sup> It is clear that these instructions directly limited the black soldiers' contribution.

However, again the exigencies of the war decided otherwise. White soldiers of the UDF serving in non-combatant capacities outside South Africa were called upon to take up combatant duties. Consequently, there was no alternative but to

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27. NMC NAS 3/1/14 A 2 Box 37, Statement of present position of the Quaggapoort detachment, 4th Bn. NMC by Maj. E. von Puttkamer, 5/5/1941.

28. NMC NAS 3/40 A 6 Box 44, Visiting officer NEAS to DNEAS, 24/5/1943.

29. CGS 32/10 Vol. I, Director General Medical Services (DGMS) to CGS, 15/6/1940.

30. CGS (War) 32/10, QuarterMaster General (QMG) to various sections, 14/6/1940.

fill the subsequent vacancies with black soldiers, thus inadvertently increasing the black soldiers' contribution to the Allied war effort.

When the question of the invasion of Europe arose, there were again divergent views whether the black soldiers should be employed in this operation or not. The officers who had commanded these men in North Africa were in favour of their participation and emphasised that these soldiers would be indispensable for the invasion. As discussed above, they have already shown their mettle and ability to contribute to the war effort. On the other hand, people like Colonel WPF McLaren, Senior Engineer Staff Officer, vehemently opposed such a move. However, in spite of this opposition, the necessities of war again dictated policy: it was crucial that black soldiers should form part of the personnel of the invasion units, as an insufficient number of whites were available to maintain the commitments undertaken.<sup>31</sup>

As far as their work in South Africa was concerned, enforcing the colour bar and restricting them to unskilled and semi-skilled work, the authorities likewise openly limited the range of their contribution.

### **3 Effectiveness of manpower utilisation**

An important gauge, which can also be used to evaluate the contribution of black soldiers to the war effort, is to consider effective manpower utilisation. Although efforts were made to fit the black soldier into occupations for which he had been trained or for which he expressed a preference,<sup>32</sup> the actual practical implementation seems to have left much to be desired. The situation was aggravated and complicated by a number of factors. Perhaps the most important was racial and political prejudices, as K.W. Grundy has pointed out:

South Africa's peculiar racial mixture and racist structure made crucial and by and large simple manpower calculations almost impossible. Invariably, excuses could be found for reversing decisions or for following unexpected or militarily illogical courses. The variety of criteria for assignment and deployment must have baffled Allied planners and commanders as well as professional South African soldiers.<sup>33</sup>

A good example of this was the racially inspired policy to limit these men only to non-combatant roles. This, as already pointed out, caused the most

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31. Hallack, "Record of the NEAS", pp. 81 and 152 and Knoetze, "Historical Survey", pp. 9-11.

32. NMC NAS 3/21 A 1 Box 14, Memorandum titled "Non-Europeans in the Army", undated.

K.W. GRUNDY, *Soldiers without politics. Blacks in the South African Armed Forces*, p. 79.

extraordinary waste of black manpower.

Another factor also linked to racial considerations was the dilution policy whereby all non-combatant duties in every unit were assigned to men of the NMC or Cape Corps. The NMC was thus split up into small sections and guards, scullions, cooks, stretcher-bearers, clerks, hygiene personnel and drivers were attached to every "white" unit. This was in contrast to the First World War where the Cape Corps and the South African Native Labour Contingent participated as a unit throughout the war. In the Second World War, however, the role of the black soldiers was strictly seen as a supportive one; the unity of the unit could therefore be - and was - forfeited.<sup>34</sup> This policy had a major disruptive effect and, partly because the Director of Non-European Army Services (DNEAS) lost his direct control, mismanagement in the various units tended to crop up. The result was the ineffective use of manpower. By implication this hampered their chances of making a more significant contribution.

Furthermore, the DNEAS frequently received reports that the black soldiers, after they had been specially trained at considerable cost for a particular duty, were, on being attached to a white unit, regarded as ordinary labourers and not as soldiers. They were then utilised for all and sundry duties, regardless of their specialised training. The Director General of Medical Services noted, for instance

that the word hygiene had become so elastic that the hygiene section was cleaning barracks, roads and camps instead of being confined strictly to their medical work.<sup>35</sup>

In another case 32 men were on loan to the military hospital at Baragwanath from the Driefontein Depot to plant grass.<sup>36</sup> In fact it seems as if many black soldiers became "uniformed labourers".<sup>37</sup>

Clearly the view that blacks could and should do only menial jobs was still patently in vogue in certain sections of the UDF. All this happened despite the DNEAS's insistence that the NMC was not a labour corps, that its members were soldiers, subject to military discipline, rights, privileges and obligations

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34. CGS 32/18 Vol. I, AG to CGS, 16/1/1943.

35. CGS 32/3 Vol. I, Extract from Staff Conference no 72, 26/3/1943.

36. NMC NAS 3/41/13 A 2 Box 45, Visiting Officer NEAS to DNEAS, 12/5/1943.

37. D. Killingray used the term. See D. KILLINGRAY, "The Colonial Army in the Gold Coast: official policy and local response, 1890-1947" (Unpublished Ph.D, University of London, 1982), p. 49. See also the following for reports that NMC members were used as ordinary labourers: NMC NAS 3/1/7 A 3 Box 28, Statement by Cpl. B. Legudi, 12/11/1942 and NTS Box 9114 File 68/363, J.D.J Jones to D. Reitz, 4/10/1940.

and that they should not be used in other capacities than in those for which they had been trained. The DNEAS's definition of menial jobs, labourers and soldiers was, however, almost all-inclusive so that, when it came to the crunch, a "soldier" was obliged to do any job. The DNEAS drew a distinction between civilian work and military work in order to justify this point of view:

In regard... to menial duties... only a portion of the duties performed by NMC personnel can be regarded as menial in the civilian sense. In the military sense all duties within the army should be performed by soldiers and a soldier is expected to accept the smooth with the rough, and does not in the army, where the exigencies warrant it, consider any military duty unsoldierly, however unpleasant he might feel it to be in civilian life.<sup>38</sup>

He continued that in the Imperial and in the other Dominion Forces the duties performed by these men were also carried out by white soldiers and that

any European member of the UDF may be called upon to perform these duties.<sup>39</sup>

But, somehow, this was, in the South African context, just not on the cards while black people were readily available to do the menial work.

#### **4 Appreciation and recognition of blacks soldiers' contribution**

Although their status, the nature of the work performed and the sometimes ineffective use of manpower militated against a more comprehensive contribution, there is also another important perspective on this issue. The initial scepticism with regard to the employment of blacks soldiers outside South Africa and white reservations about the abilities of these men in certain quarters gave way to admiration for the work they had done.<sup>40</sup> This was true of the work performed by stretcher-bearers and motor transport drivers. Of the former who frequently went out in the front line with the advancing infantry, Captain Zietsman, Non-European Liaison Officer 1 SA Division, reported thus:

Reports coming in prove that they fought like tigers - the words of a senior officer - Natives as well as Coloureds. I myself have spoken to Europeans who owe their lives to the heroism of our Natives. The

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38. NMC NAS 3/11/4 A 2 Box 56, DNEAS to SNA, 16/4/1943.

39. Ibid.

40. NMC NAS 3/40 A 1 Box 45, Training Inspectorate report 4th Bn. NMC, 29/9/1941; Gen. F.H. Theron Collection Box 38, Liaison letter no. 55, Gen. F.H. Theron to Gen. P. van Ryneveld, 19/3/1942; NMC NAS 3/41/13 A 2 Box 45, Visiting officer NEAS to DNEAS, 25/2/1943; and Knoetze, "Historical Survey of the NEAS", p. 9.

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stretcher-bearers by all accounts were magnificent. Immediately one went down another stepped in to take his place. For one moment they were all South Africans regardless of race, colour or creed and they stood or fell together.<sup>41</sup>

To some whites it was even a surprising eye-opener. For example, the Commanding Officer of the NMC Barracks, Voortrekkerhoogte, grudgingly, commented thus on the performance of the entertainment corps:

A fine show, really well put on, from the European point of view, one might say outstanding, as one does not credit Natives as possessing much talent.<sup>42</sup>

As far as the black soldiers who fought outside South Africa were concerned, high commendations of their bravery and cool courage under bombing and machine gun fire dispelled doubts that the black soldiers would not be able to stand up to the conditions of modern warfare.<sup>43</sup> The accounts of heroic deeds performed by the black soldiers - some even risking their lives - and the list of decorations awarded to them corroborate the above-mentioned reports on their bravery and courage. Many of them indeed took pride in their work and in their being soldiers; they stoically and commendably carried out the tasks at hand and did not hesitate to act in emergencies.

General George E. Brink, OC 2nd SA Division, was one of the officers who had to review his initial reservations:

I would like to state that our initial misgivings have largely proved to be unfounded. Well trained and well led they responded beyond all hopes.<sup>44</sup>

However, these laudable accounts need more explanation. Firstly, the favourable reports submitted on the behaviour of these men cannot simply be taken at face value. These reports were usually compiled by officers who had a vested interest in the success of the NMC and who had to prove that their endeavours, for instance in training these men, were not fruitless. Moreover, it is not uncommon to relate the brave deeds of soldiers in exaggerated, and even mythical, terms - especially when it is a recommendation for an award or medal.

The most tangible recognition for their contribution occurred after the war when

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41. J.C. Smuts Papers A 1 Box 138 no. 169, Unidef to Dechief, 7/12/1941.

42. DNEAS NAS 3/21/5 Box 15, Report of OC NMC Barracks Voortrekkerhoogte on NMC Concert Party, 26/5/1944.

43. CGS 32/5 Vol. II, Extract from Staff Conference No. 51 of 9/9/1942.

44. Gen. G.E. Brink Collection Box 52, Memorandum titled "Reinforcements", 22/1/1942.

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all full-time soldiers, including the black soldiers, received a War Medal 1939/1945 irrespective of where they served during the war.<sup>45</sup> In addition, awards were also given to black soldiers who had distinguished themselves through special acts of bravery.<sup>46</sup>

### **2 Views of the soldiers**

Some members of the NMC, being neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring, neither labourer nor soldier resented their inferior position. Even the DNEAS agreed that

It cannot be expected that these details should comport themselves as soldiers and carry out their duties willingly and contentedly unless efforts are made to treat them as soldiers and not as labourers.<sup>47</sup>

They therefore remained dissatisfied, refused to do menial duties, and disobeyed orders to clean up military camps for example, and even deserted. In addition, the fact that they had to carry out duties far removed from those they had been trained for, meant a breach of contract to them. Thus they felt perfectly justified in shirking their responsibilities.<sup>48</sup>

The fact that they were not employed in the jobs for which they had been trained was an extremely unsatisfactory situation for these soldiers. The experience of Private William Peni is a case in point. After he had completed the driver's course he was told that he would be employed as a driver. This, however, did not happen. He had to erect tents, weed the parade ground, pack stock in the quarter stores, sweep the camp and do various fatigue duties. He found the situation totally unbearable and reported the situation to the DNEAS who regarded it as serious enough to order a court of inquiry into the matter. During the court of inquiry, other black soldiers corroborated Peni's statement. Although they were trained as motor drivers, they were washing dishes, stood guard, cleaned the vehicles or performed batman's duties. The Officer Commanding explained that there were only nine vehicles in the station. It was therefore impossible to employ all twenty drivers that were sent to his unit on

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45. DNEAS NAS 3/21 Box 13, OC Native War Records to DNEAS, 10/8/1946.

46. The numbers of soldiers who thus received awards are: Distinguished conduct medal 1; King's Medal for Bravery (Silver) 1; Military Medal 16; British Empire Medal 3; Mentioned in Dispatches 21; King's Commendation 6; Commander-in-Chief's Commendation (Middle East) 3; Certificates of good service by CGS (Union) 69; (Source: NTS Box 1804 File 123/276, Survey of Native Affairs Activities for Publicity Purposes from 1946-1949, p. 36.)

47. DNEAS NAS 8/22/7 Box 35, DNEAS to OC Northern Command, 30/11/1943.

48. NMC NAS 4/41/1/3 A 7 Box 43, Visiting officer NEAS to DNEAS, 6/12/1942 and CGS (War) 32/10, Extract from Staff Conference no. 123, 18/10/1944.



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transport work. The court found that, although there was not a need for transport work at the moment, there might be in future. In the meantime the drivers were reasonably employed on general duties.<sup>49</sup> The fact that the wasting of manpower could have been prevented by not sending the drivers to this unit prematurely was, however, not mentioned.

For some of the soldiers this was not at all what they had expected. Sergeant R. Moloi who was in command of men digging trenches related how

my people kept complaining that there is no war. They were told that they are joining the war - that they are going to see the front line. We do not see the front line - we are only digging these holes for the Arabs. But I told them they have to do what they are told and then we did that. I understood that it was a good help during the war - that is why they stopped the Germans.<sup>50</sup>

This remark is significant because, on the one hand, it acknowledges that the nature of the work they were doing was indeed very menial. On the other hand, there is a clear indication, albeit from the person in charge and not the soldiers themselves, that although they were not actively involved on the battle fronts, the nature of their work nevertheless contributed to the defeat of the Germans. Somewhere in the big puzzle of the Allied war effort, digging trenches also occupied an essential place.

On the other hand, they felt that because they had participated, made sacrifices and, in their view thus made a substantial contribution, they were entitled to a new status. Many regarded themselves as heroes. To them this new status meant that the government should look after them properly after demobilisation by *inter alia* giving them special treatment,<sup>51</sup> see to it that they receive a decent pay, ensure that they would be offered jobs after the war and, as one corporal expressed it to M. Ballinger, Native Representative in Parliament:

We feel we should be treated by employers on the same basis as European soldiers.<sup>52</sup>

The Assistant Native Commissioner of Nebo confirmed this attitude when he reported that there was a

tendency to demand and expect preferential treatment by Native

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49. AG (2) 196/3857 Box 73, S.O. "A" Voortrekkerhoogte and Transvaal Command to P.J. Skead, president of the court of inquiry, 20/5/1942.

50. Interview with R. Moloi, 6/2/1986.

51. NTS Box 9116 File 68/363/2, Assistant Native Commissioner, Nebo to SNA, 15/6/1943.

52. NEAS Paper Clippings, *Umeteli Wa Bantu*, 1/8/1942.

Commissioners, in matters where it is impossible to give this, solely by virtue of their services to the country... [There is] an almost childish insistence that Native Commissioners are able to do the impossible in all circumstances for Native soldiers.<sup>53</sup>

The ex-servicemen certainly did not expect to revert to their pre-war standard of living. Therefore many were bitterly disillusioned and even rebellious when neither their expectations nor the promises materialised after the war - especially after being told how vital their part had been in defeating the enemy.<sup>54</sup> These unfulfilled promises were one of their most frequent complaints.

On a political level as well enquiries from black soldiers about their rights as voters<sup>55</sup> and about the activities and achievements of black political institutions,<sup>56</sup> support for the African National Congress and the Communist Party of South Africa<sup>57</sup> and calls for the abolition of the pass laws,<sup>58</sup> all point to a political awareness amongst a number of soldiers. Justifying their claims by emphasising their contribution, the hope was expressed that the sacrifices black soldiers had made would find reward and recognition in a new political order for South African blacks. One soldier thus wrote:

The African's greatest need after this war is not paternalism, but freedom to develop initiative and independence and thus become self-respecting. His cry will always be, 'Remember Sidi Rezegh - do not forget Tobruk!' There we suffered and died side by side for the perpetuation of the same ideals... The fight for liberty will soon be over - it would be a moral wrong if the subversive elements... should have more benefits from the Allied victory than the African who suffered and died up North... The African now wishes to see the words of ... Rhodes bear fruit: 'Equal rights for all civilised men south of the equator'.<sup>59</sup>

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53. NTS Box 9116 File 68/363/2, Assistant Native Commissioner, Nebo to SNA, 15/6/1943.
  54. Interviews with L. Monyamane, 8/4/1981 and R. Sitole, 27/4/1981. See also NTS Box 9126 File 68/363/16, Statement by N. Ntiyo, 11/7/1950 and NTS Box 9116 File 68/363/2, "Representations from Native Commissioners in regard to members of the NMC, accompanying letter, SNA to DNEAS, 7/9/1943.
  55. University of Cape Town Libraries. Africana and Special Collection Department, M. Ballinger Papers A 410 B. 2.5.54, B. Moleko to M. Ballinger, 14/6/1946.
  56. A.B. Xuma Papers ABX 430920e, G.W. Xala to A.B. Xuma, 20/9/1943.
  57. A.B. Xuma Papers ABX 420708b, G.E.J. Mhlana to A.B. Xuma, 8/7/1942.
  58. NMC NAS 3/21/D A 3 Box 16, W.W. Mdingi to "Bantu Soldiers' Friend column", *Indhlovu Tlou*, undated.
  59. NEAS Paper Clippings, *The Bantu World*, 29/5/1943.

However, this was eventually not to be. The notion that veterans should receive special treatment faded quite quickly. The black ex-volunteer sank into oblivion and, unfortunately for some of them, this process eventually also meant loss of financial assistance.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the advent of the National Party government in 1948 baulked any chance of change that might have been unleashed by the war. Black blood spent and sacrifices made in Africa and Europe were not to buy black freedom.

## **Conclusion**

Some may argue that the activities of the black soldiers were very insignificant when read in conjunction with major battles of the war; after all, most were only performing manual labour in isolated areas and their role and status was an inferior one. This seems to make their contribution very limited. What is important to understand, though, is the question why it was limited. It should be evident from the above that it can to a large extent be ascribed to the racial policies, prejudices and attitudes of the political and military authorities which, as indicated, severely curtailed the black soldiers' chances to make a larger contribution.

However, another argument could be forwarded that they indeed contributed to the War effort when one keeps in mind that it was not necessarily the nature of the work done, but how it fitted into the general broad picture of the Allied war effort, that is in the last instance significant in defining a contribution. Here one has to give them credit and acknowledge their contribution, albeit on a very small scale, in helping to keep the lines of communication open, digging many miles of trenches, loading and unloading tons of essential war materials and carrying many wounded to safety.

## **Opsomming**

### **Die rol van swart Suid-Afrikaanse soldat in die Tweede Wêreldoorlog: 'n betwiste bydrae**

Ongeveer 76 000 swart Suid-Afrikaners het gedurende die Tweede Wêreldoorlog by die Unie Verdedigingsmag aangesluit. Hulle het as arbeiders verskeie nie-vegtende gekoolde, half-gekoolde en ongekoolde

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60. NTS Box 9126 File 68/363/16, P. Seitshiro to Minister for Defence, 1/4/1948 and DNEAS NAS 3/7/13 Box 9, Chief Paymaster to AG, 23/4/1948.

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take verrig. Onder andere is hulle gebruik as wagte, bestuurders, kokke, draagbaar draers en mediese ordonnanse. Hulle het ook spoorweë en besproeiingstonnels gebou.

Daar was nooit heeltemal duidelikheid oor hul status nie. Alhoewel die owerhede hulle nie as arbeiders gesien het nie, is hulle ook nie heeltemal as soldate in die volle sin van die woord aanvaar nie. Hierdie teenstrydigheid word die beste geïllustreer deur die feit dat hulle nie wapens mag gedra het nie. Hierdie beleid, duidelik gegrond op rasse-vooroordeel, het hul status as soldate ernstig benadeel, dit het tot 'n vermorsing van mannekrag gelei en het direk hul kanse om 'n groter bydrae te maak, beperk.

Aan die ander kant het die owerhede onbewustelik die swart soldate se bydrae tot die Geallieerde oorlogspoging vergroot deur die besluit om nie-vegtende blanke soldate buite Suid-Afrika met swart soldate te vervang. Die aanvanklike skeptisisme en voorbehoude oor die vermoëns van die swartes as soldate het spoedig plek gemaak vir bewondering vir hul moed en die werk wat hulle gedoen het.

Sommige swart soldate het beledig gevoel oor hul ondergeskikte posisie en die feit dat hulle nie gebruik word waarvoor hulle opgelei is nie. Nogtans het hulle self hul bydrae as betekenisvol genoeg beskou om aanspraak op 'n nuwe status te maak. Dit sou egter nie na die oorlog realiseer nie.

Hul bydrae tot die oorlogspoging moet nie net beoordeel word op grond van die aard van die werk wat hulle gedoen het nie, maar ook hoe dit inpas in die algemene breë prentjie van die oorlogspoging van die Geallieerde magte.