



A SHORT HISTORY OF THE GUNNERS' ASSOCIATION

At the conclusion of the 1914-1918 war (during which there was no Corps of Artillery in South Africa as such and Gunner units were organised and fought as separate entities) two loose associations of members of Gunner units were formed. These were the S.A. Heavy Artillery (SAHA) and the S.A. Field Artillery Formation (SAFA). Recruitment during the war had been largely on a regional basis and as result the Associations never amalgamated into a close national body. The 6" Howitzer Memorials and Plaques in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Pretoria and Johannesburg were cared for by local branches of the SAHA and were finally handed over to the Gunners' Association in 1945. In Johannesburg and other centres the SAFA Association erected memorial plaques, (Johannesburg in the northern foyer of the City Hall).

On appropriate dates memorial services were held at these venues. Get-togethers, such as dinners and smokers, were held periodically at the various centres. In 1934 the Corps of the SAA was officially formed for the first time, incorporating all Gunner units – field, medium, heavy, anti-tank, anti-aircraft and Coast Garrison. During the Second World War it occurred to Col. Fritz Adler and some of his colleagues that the formation of an SAA Association of all Gunners – serving, past, male and female, as is the case of the RA Association would be appropriate and that the loose Associations that existed since 1919 should be amalgamated as one. Accordingly, in 1945/1946 a meeting of prominent Gunners was held at the Rand Club.

Amongst those present were Fritz Adler, Harry Rissik, Rex Hull, Geoff Harrison, Geoff Sacke and Ian White. Stemming from this, the Association was constituted and formed. The original idea was that Branches should consist of serving and non-serving branches, i.e. that each owner unit should have its own branch and that ex-service branches should be formed in each town hence the title of the Johannesburg Branch being Johannesburg (No.1 ex-service) Branch.

Fund raising in the early days was mainly in the form of a national sweep on the July Handicap, run by Ramsay Addison and Lionel Roche of the Johannesburg Branch. The financial effort which finally put the Association firmly on its feet was the national premier of "Seven Against the Sun", coordinated by Tom Trahar, Lionel Roche and others.

MEMORIAL SERVICES

One of the earliest projects of the Association was the construction of the Gunners' Memorial at Potchefstroom. This memorial was opened by Lt Gen CL de W (Matie) du Toit, DSO, himself a Gunner, and consecrated by the late Cannon Tom Harvey (THA) on 10 May 1952. This memorial has proved a rallying



point every year since then for the annual National Commemoration Service. In Cape Town the annual memorial service of the Western Province branch was previously held at the War Memorial, Adderley Street, but because the ranks of the South African Heavy Artillery Association of 1914/1918 vintage were fast diminishing, the remaining handful of members agreed in 1969 to hand over their Gun Memorial to the Gunners' Association to enable the annual service to be held in a more appropriate setting. Accordingly, on Sunday, 6 April 1970 Col. I.B. Whyte, National President of the Gunners' Association, unveiled a new plaque on the plinth holding the World War 4.5" Howitzer and rededicated the memorial, this time to Gunners of both World Wars. The Gun previously sited at the base of the Old Town Pier and had initially been dedicated on 12 May 1926 to the memory of members of the SAHA who fell in France in 1915/18.

A memorial service is also held each year in Durban at the Gunners' Memorial at Lord's Ground.

FUND RAISING

Real Gunner fellowship was kindled by the first of many Annual Smokers that took place in 1950 in the Gun Park used by the Transvaal Horse Artillery in Auckland Park, Johannesburg. There is no doubt that these occasions did much to build the bonds between Gunners and to enroll members. These "get-togethers" grew each year and were so well supported and enjoyed that the Association even built its own portable stage and accoutrements. Almost every top professional artist of that time readily agreed to perform and make these never to be forgotten occasions.

On 24 September 1964 the Association staged a national film premiere of "Seven Against the Sun". It was this multiple film premier venture that made many financial projects possible and set the Gunners' Association on its road to success. It was a remarkable effort because on that evening no fewer than eight major cinemas in eight major centres, presented this film simultaneously. The SABC gave the Association full coverage on a National hook-up describing the pageantry and arrival of Mayoral parties and dignitaries in all centres. In Johannesburg a Battery of the Transvaal Horse Artillery paraded with their guns in front of the Colosseum Theatre in Commissioner Street, but were not permitted to fire the intended salute as dignitaries arrived, for fear of breaking hundreds of windows! In Cape Town, the Cape Field Artillery's P (Amsterdam) Battery and their guns were on parade outside the Colosseum whilst sentries at the main doors and foyer entrances provided a military atmosphere. Pageantry took place in all the other centres. Four centres were completely 'sold out' including the 2 235 seats in the Johannesburg Colosseum alone. The Association netted a not inconsiderable sum which was wisely invested and created the base of today's investment and income portfolio.



HOMES FOR VETERANS AND SENIOR CITIZENS

The Association was the prime mover in establishing a retirement complex for veterans and senior citizens in Johannesburg. In 1973 GEM Homes, Roosevelt Park, was completed and became a very happy home for military veteran pensioners. The construction of this home was a combined effort between Gunners, Engineers and Moths, hence the name "GEM". In 1977 much thought was given to the building of a second home for veteran pensioners and a meeting was called by Gunner Skip Papert to discuss this venture. The meeting was attended by Gunners Cochran, Prevost, Papert, Taylor and Goodwin and it was decided to locate the new home in Pretoria. The initiators of the idea applied to the General Smuts War Veterans' Foundation (now the General Smuts Foundation) for a donation of ground near the "Big House" which was the dwelling of the late General Smuts. The committee of the Foundation very generously responded with a donation of 5 morgen of land for the project. It was then decided to appoint a committee comprising of Gunners, Sappers, serving members of the SADF, members of the General Smuts War Veterans' Foundation and the Moths to oversee the project. Regrettably the Moths had to withdraw as they were in the process of building a home themselves. Stage I of Gem Village, Irene, was completed. The Home has subsequently been expanded to house 120 pensioners. The opening ceremony took place on 17 October 1985 and the village was opened by Mr. A.J. Vlok, the Deputy Minister of Defence.

ARTILLERY CLUB HOUSE

In 1978 shortly after the Army Battle School (now Combat Training Centre) opened near Lohatlha, the idea of building permanent messing and canteen facilities for Gunner units was born and fund raising amongst Citizen Force (now Reserve Force) Gunner units commenced in 1979, after a design drawn by Sgt. MacPherson of the THA had been accepted by the original committee. Due to the enormity of the project, the Gunners' Association soon became involved and shortly thereafter a committee consisting of serving Gunners and members of the Board of Trustees of the Gunners' Association was accordingly established under the chairmanship of Gunner Andersen with a view to building the "Artillery Club House" at the Army Battle School. Initial quotes from private enterprise indicated that the cost of construction would be in the region of R250 000. Suffice to say by the use of Gunner ingenuity and by exploiting the contacts available to the Association and the Citizen Force units, the building was successfully completed in 1984 at a cost of R90 000. This Club House, which is used by Officers, NCOs and men was opened by the Chief of the SADF, General Constand Viljoen SSA SOE SM, on 11 September 1984. The Club House was by far the largest such project in which the Association had been involved. It had previously assisted with the provision of facilities for National Service Gunners at the artillery training areas in Potchefstroom and the Anti-Aircraft Defence School in Cape Town.



SUPPORT FOR TRAINING UNITS

The Association presents special awards each year to the best officer and best NCO at the passing out parades of Military Skills Development System Gunners at both the School of Artillery, Potchefstroom, and the Air Defence Artillery School.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Three members of the Gunners' Association, Peter (Butch) Mathias, Skip Papert and Wynter Prevost have been awarded the Star of South Africa for their efforts in fulfilling the Association's aims.

THE FUTURE

A turning point in the history of the Association occurred at its 20th Triennial Congress held at the Museum of Military History in May 1985. At the meeting, the objectives of the Association was reformed in order to comply with present day needs.

The mission statement of the Association declares *"It is the mission of The Gunners' Association to promote fellowship and camaraderie amongst Gunners, (field or anti-aircraft, serving or retired), to promote Gunner traditions and to provide welfare and educational support to Gunners and their families."*