



SOUTH AFRICAN LEGION

(CAPE TOWN BRANCH)
PBO 93000796

Cape Town Branch News October 2019

Welcome new members

Welcome to B Booyens, K Brown, P Graff, B Riddle, M Scholtz, B Taylor, A Viljoen, D Wood, I Hele P Reyper and A Vorster.

We look forward to getting to know you and your involvement in the affairs of the branch.

Annual General Meeting

A well-attended AGM was held at Rosedale on Thursday 10 October with the following committee in place for the next year:

Ray Nasset	Chairman
Robbie Roberts	Vice Chairman
Johan Johnson	Honorary treasurer
Peter Muirhead	Ceremonial and discipline
William Millar	Maintenance
Pierre Fourie	PR and Fundraising
Peter Napier	Welfare
Tim Reilly	Rosedale representative
Steve Leibbrandt	Rosedale service centre representative
Claudio Chiste	Co-opted, Fundraising

Point of interest

The year 1939 was the end of a long and difficult war over the soul of Cape Point, and the start of a long and difficult war over the soul of Europe.

On one side of the dispute at Cape Point was a Johannesburg-based property developer who wanted to buy the largest farm in the area and turn it into a luxury resort. They were opposed by a group of concerned environmentalists and Cape

Point residents, who wanted the government to buy the land and declare it a national reserve.

The good guys won. In 1939, the Cape Divisional Council did buy the land with the intention of declaring it a reserve. But in the same year Hitler invaded Poland, sparking the start of World War II.

So in the end the land did not fall into the hands of the greedy property developers; but it did not immediately go to the environmentalists either. In 1939 Cape Point fell into the hands of the South African military.

The strategic importance of Cape Point is fairly obvious. Before the Suez Canal was built (in 1869), any ship taking the shortest distance between the West and the East would need to pass this tip of the African continent. But even after the Suez Canal was built, the importance of Cape Point did not diminish. The canal was a vulnerable and limited maritime passage to the East. Especially in times of war.

Early history – Manhandling cannons

Cape Point's earliest use by the Dutch East India Company was as a signal point. Ships sailing into Table Bay from the East were heralded by the firing of a series of canons. The first of these was at a lookout point on Kanonkop, so named because an old Dutch canon was discovered there in the years preceding the second World War.

One of the more remarkable signalmen in Cape Point, stationed somewhere on the west coast of the reserve in the 1800s, was said to inhabit his humble lookout in the company of his fertile wife and their nine children. "This must have been the job in the Cape with the best views but the most boring remit," mused Cape Point documentarian, Michael Fraser. "No wonder he had so many children."

During the First World War, the Cape Mounted Rifles were stationed at Cape Point, primarily to guard the newly built second lighthouse. In the years between the World Wars, the promontory was used as a training facility by temporary camps that were erected along the banks of the Klaasjagers River, which marks the northern boundary of the Reserve.

An old photograph captioned "Manhandling a field-gun through the fynbos. SA Permanent Garrison Artillery, Cape of Good Hope, 1928" shows two rows of 15 men dressed in smart, pale uniforms and wearing stiff-peaked army hats. They are dragging an enormous, polished canon over the sandstone and scrub of the Reserve. Each row of men is pulling a rope attached to the wheel of the cannon. It is backbreaking work. Needless to say, the men are not smiling for the camera.

WWII – Code Name: Blue Gums

"Fortunately," writes Commander W.M. Bisset of the South African Navy, the second World War proved to be "a great anti-climax because South Africa was spared an attack on her coastal cities and towns by enemy warships and aircraft."

After much of the newly proclaimed Cape Point Reserve was cordoned off from the public for exclusive military use, six FOPs (forward observation posts) were built on the promontory.

Their codenames were: Cobra (at Slangkop), Bosch (at Olifantsbosch), Vasco (at Cape Point), Diaz (overlooking the False Bay on the Point), Crow (at Scala) and Blue Gums (between Miller's Point and Smitswinkel Bay). These were all built and operational by 1942.

The radar stations built into clandestine nooks of the Cape Point cliff face were operated by the Special Signal Services the 61st Coastal Defence Corps – said to be composed almost entirely of women. Their exact location was top secret. Had their existence and location been discovered, enemy bombers would have made sure that the promontory would not have been the same size and shape as it is today.

There are also unconfirmed anecdotes about one man who would join the fishermen in False Bay with a rod and tackle that had been rigged to create an antenna with which he would signal coded messages of military activity to enemy ships.

Decades later, people buying houses in Kalk Bay and Fishoek would find military equipment in dusty cellars that were attributed to spying activity. (There were enough Nazi sympathisers in South Africa at the time to lend these tales some credence – there was a strong public lobby at the time for South Africa to join the war on the side of the Germans!)

In 1947, two SA air force pilots wrote a letter to the War Stores Disposal Board in Pretoria to ask if they could access the Blue Gums FOP. The “small concrete blockhouse, woodshed, water tank and a latrine adjoining it” were overgrown with fynbos and forlorn after several years of neglect. Nonetheless, the fixer upper had great views, and the pilots promised to give it some carpentry and attention if the army allowed them to use it as a weekend fishing retreat.

Three months later the pilots received a response: no. But it was certainly worth a try.

Wolf in sheep's clothing

Perhaps the most enticing military anecdote to do with Cape Point was related by an ex-editor of the *Cape Times* newspaper, George H. Wilson, in his book *Gone Down The Years* (1947).

During the First World War, Wilson was a lance-corporal in the Cape Mounted Rifles and in the autumn of 1916 his corps was ordered to take up a position near the old lighthouse at Cape Point.

“The expedition did us all a great deal of good,” wrote Wilson, “and we enjoyed the experience, but there was great wonderment at the time as to why we should suddenly have been ordered to such a remote point, and where any German forces were likely to come from.”

Wilson was a journalist and his instincts led him to uncover the following story:

On 23 July 1916, the lighthouse keepers were startled to discover that a boat had landed on Maclear Beach. They also saw ten men making their way up the steep path from the beach to the lighthouse. The party was being led by two British officers

and the men were carrying two large, heavy boxes, which the lighthouse keepers presumed was communications equipment being carried to higher ground.

When they got to the lighthouse the British officers asked to use the phone and proceeded to speak with the Simonstown Naval Base for about 15 minutes. They then thanked the keepers and made their way back to the boat, with the men lugging the steel boxes back down the hill behind them.

The next day, the lighthouse keepers thought it would be a good idea to report the incident to a routine military patrol of Cape Point. The patrol duly logged the strange landing when they returned to Simonstown. But something was not quite right with the story, and further investigations were made.

The local authorities asked the lighthouse keepers if they noticed anything suspicious about the soldiers they had encountered. The keepers answered that, now that they'd thought about it, while the officers in British uniforms spoke fluent English, the rest of the men remained absolutely silent, even when spoken to. There was also "a suspicious looking craft in the gloom about four miles out to sea."

It gradually dawned on all involved that this suspicious craft was almost certainly not a British one. In fact, there were no British war ships in Simonstown at all during this time. (The naval base was temporarily run by Britain's WWI allies, the Japanese.)

The men who accompanied the officers dressed in British uniform did not speak English because they were actually the crew of the *SMS Wolf* – a famous German merchant raider. We know this because years later the captain of the *Wolf*, Commander Karl August Nerger, boasted that his activities in False Bay had been "greatly assisted by the searchlights of Simonstown".

The lighthouse keepers did not recognize the "suspicious vessel" as a German military ship because the *Wolf* was specifically designed to change her appearance by putting up fake funnels and masts that made her look like a merchant ship. And we can now surmise that the ship's tactic of changing her costume had also been taken up by her crew.

The heavy boxes carried by the men were probably explosives intended for the radio station at the Slangkop lighthouse. When they realized their mistake, the men rowed back to the *Wolf*. The lighthouse at Slangkop was never bombed.

We do know that the *Wolf* was a minelayer and that she sunk four ships around Cape Town in WWI (but the dates of these sinking's were in 1917 – one year after the events related here).

One thing is for sure: immediately after the incident, Lance-corporal G.W. Wilson's Cape Mounted Rifles were called to protect the lighthouse from any further *Wolf* crew in whatever clothing. And they had the time of their lives.

Author unknown

Remembrance Service

Why not join us at the annual Rosedale Remembrance Service on Sunday 10 November at 1100? Ralph Thornley will officiate and the Dukes Band (if it's still permissible to call them that) will be in attendance.

If you would like to stay for lunch, please contact the service centre office on 021 6899771 between 0900 and 1130 by Thursday 7 November. R44 for service centre members and R62 for non-members.

Payments

While EFTs into the Legion's bank account are always welcome, money is frequently received with no or an incomplete description of what it is for. Please include your initial, surname and a description such as "subs" or "donation" so that the money can be allocated correctly.