

## Book Review: Jan Smuts's Boys: The Wartime Experiences of the Men of the 2nd South African Infantry Division, 1940-1945<sup>12</sup>

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When I came across Dr. Scherman's book, I had already finished my PhD-studies at Eszterházy Károly Catholic University in Eger, Hungary. I was learning history as a major at that time in the Doctoral School of History. I remember that in one of the courses, we were talking about narration and oral history. That is where I first learned about the new methods in historical thinking and research which are in short called New World History. In contrast to the previous historical research, when the academics examined the life of a leader, top politician, war heroes, the events of a battle and the like, in this new school of historical thought, the direct primary sources of simple, ordinary participants of the wartime experiences were interpreted and thus a totally new perspective of historical view was invented. I was delighted to see in the Prologue of the work that the author used this kind of method to describe the story and the wartime events of the 2nd South African Infantry Division (from now on 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div.) in the Second World War (xii-xiii.), because this way the modern historical thinking was used and thus the new patterns of historic research was given a chance. In my opinion, if these techniques got more space in scientific research and in the historian's work, academic thinking in this field would improve by far. However, I took the book into my hand with true pleasure and read it that way. I was not disappointed.

The first chapter of the work concerns the preliminary preparations of the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div.. After describing how the South African army got into the fight after the war declaration of Mussolini against France and Great Britain on 10 June 1940, it becomes obvious that the country had no chance but to participate in the upcoming long war. As the person responsible for the leadership of the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. (Colonel I.P. de Williers) is revealed, we get to know that the army was assembled and started to train in areas that would resemble the possible target area where they would be deployed. The 2<sup>nd</sup> S. A. Inf. Div. had two sessions of training: one in Transvaal and the other later, in Western Transvaal, the town of Mafeking. In these rounds of fight practice, the leaders of the Division sought to get the soldiers used to the circumstances that awaited them at the scene of the future battles. Since the zone where they were going was

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approximately in Egypt or somewhere near that country, they started training for desert warfare and maneuver (22.). As we get to know, finally 22851 men were to be deployed in Egypt soon.

Following the timeline, the second chapter focuses on the habituation of the desert environment in Egypt and the training and preliminary measures taken by the Divisions of the South African contingent. Along the examination of other Divisions, 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. is also described. According to the book, the South African soldiers arrived at the scene after one year of thorough practice, and they were prepared to take part in the war preparations among the Saharan desert terrain. The southerners weren't used to the new culture and the people in the North African country; thus, they used slurs on them like 'Gyppos'. Not long after, the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. was ready to take part in the desert exercises: they learnt gun maintenance in the sandy area, direction by the sun, desert warfare and so on (36.). We also learn that along the training and heavy practices in the desert, the soldiers had some time for relieving themselves: they could go on vacation for a short time. They used their time well and went to Cairo and Alexandria to see the Sphinx and the pyramids and other monuments as well.

After this, the third chapter discusses the first wartime experiences of the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. at the Egyptian-Libyan frontier. By December 1941, the Allied forces – which the South African Divisions joined – entered Tobruk, a Libyan town, and took possession of it. However, with the advent of the Allied forces, some coastal towns in Libya were still on the hands of the Axis forces. Most of this chapter concerns the Battle of Bardia, a small garrison, in which the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. took part. Along with the description of the battle, we learn the heroism of the South African soldiers, and by getting to know their stories from their diaries, accounts and so on, we get to know their real wartime experience which provide us with valuable historic material and overview on the battle events. This is a turning point in the book: the account of soldiers from primary sources. I can't emphasize enough the relevance of this material, as it provides the readers with rare insight into the events of the war and the life of the soldiers within. After the Night Assault, on 02 January 1942, the Axis forces and their leader, Arthur Schmitt surrendered (69.). The problem was nevertheless that the "Desert Fox" (Erwin Rommel) set eyes on Tobruk as well...

The fourth chapter goes on to narrate the events of the Battle for Gazala, a fortification near Tobruk and with the Battle for Tobruk itself. By 28 March 1942, the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. entered Tobruk and took their positions inside the fortification. The Germans and Italians attacked on 26 May 1942, via the Unternehmen Venezia (Operation Venice). This campaign was planned by the Axis forces to capture Tobruk, which was a vital point for Rommel as well (72.). The first attacks of the German and Italian forces were successful; they broke forth between the Allied soldiers and artillery deployed there. After severe battle, and along an attempt of counterattack from the South Africans, the Axis forces were unstoppable, and soon, by 21 June 1942 the attacks were so heavy from them that the Allied soldiers had no other choice, but to surrender. The battle was fierce and the South African soldiers took part in it with furious anger

and heroness but at the end, their efforts were vain because the German and Italian tank forces were so strong that their guns and artillery was unable to stop them. This way, the Axis forces could enter the fortification of Tobruk and severe consequences followed. The wartime experiences of ordinary soldiers are vividly described in their diaries and letters included as citations in the book, and this gives a lively picture of the soldiers' experiences during the fight. I can only praise the thorough use of primary sources in the book again.

The fifth chapter tells us about the events after the Battle of Tobruk. Firstly, the soldiers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. didn't know what will happen. They had no news of the events around them. Finally, when they heard the situation, all of them did what they could do: they set their weapons on fire and waited. Not long after, the enemy arrived and took them as Prisoners of War (POWs from now on). They were transferred to the Italians, who started to organize them. As we got to learn, they didn't like them very much, as they couldn't systemize the prison camps well, and the circumstances were dire. Lot of the soldiers tried to escape from the captivity, which was not easy given the circumstances (110.). Here as well, the book uses primary sources of the soldiers to describe their lively stories about how they managed to escape from their captors. Finally, we learn that the Italians put them on ships and sailed them to Europe (Italy) to POW camps.

The next chapter, the sixth describes the voyages to Italy by ship to Brindisi and Naples. The soldiers were crammed in small hulls inside these ships: they had no air; their places were inconvenient. They started to riot, in consequence of which the Italians tried to alleviate their difficulties by letting them on the deck of the ships. When they arrived at the prison camps, they were tired and weary. Their "accommodation" was not the most comfortable place ever seen. We got to know that there were places where even water was not eligible and they suffered from malnutrition and illnesses. When the winter came, some of them had to be moved. After some time, thanks to the Geneva Convention of 1929, they were allowed to do work on the nearby farms and factories, which they gladly accepted (141.). The 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. became accustomed with this situation, and sooner or later they managed to cope with the circumstances. This chapter also contains various interpretations and descriptions of the events that happened to the soldiers from firsthand, thus adding to the book's already refreshing nature. Little did these soldiers know that their situation is about to change hugely with the Italian Armistice.

The following (seventh) chapter depicts the repatriation of the soldiers from Italy, at least the ones who could avoid recapture. As we come to know, on 25 July 1943 Benito Mussolini was relieved of duty by the Italian king, and thus the Italian prisons started to open, since the guards just simply walked away. The South African POWs in Italy tried to go either to the Apennines, or south to Sicily to board a ship. As the Germans in reaction to the Armistice marched in the country and tried to collect the prisoners (155.), the remaining soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. tried to evade these patrols and get successfully back home. With the leadership of Prime Minister J. C. (Jan) Smuts – that is

why these soldiers are called “Jan Smuts’s Boys” by the book in the title – the South African government tried everything to free these POWs now wandering in the area. Thus, first they arranged for Reception Camps in Italy and England and then took the prisoners after that to Egypt to Transit Camps. The lucky ones arrived at this time in a safe place and could start to relieve themselves a little bit.

The situation of the escapees is the theme of the eighth chapter, in which we get to know the story of those who escaped in Italy and got to safe zone. It is concluded, that in that time, not a lot of soldiers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. did escape successfully. Their fate was harsh, let alone in the lands of Italy and marching several hundred kms to find a safe space for themselves and to escape the Germans who searched for them in a vengeful manner. Some of them went to the North: from there, they could reach somewhat easily Switzerland, and from there, their fate would be relieved. Some went to south, the reach Africa through Sicily. Some of them joined partisan groups, with whom they even fought against the enemy as well. These soldiers hid in mountains (189.). However, some prisoners were not that lucky: the German platoons caught them and carried them to Germany via rail. This made their escape even more difficult. The only way that they could evade the German captivity was to jump off the trains, which was not the safest way for getting away. However, as they had no other choice, some of them really tried this way of escape.

In the ninth chapter we find the narrative on the liberation of POWs from nazi Germany. There were two ways a POW could be liberated from the even harsher circumstances in the heart of the Third Reich. First one was by the Soviets who were marching on the enemy at a great pace. By 17 January 1945, they entered Warsaw and later they went to Berlin as well. The POW camps they found during their march were liberated, and a part of the prisoners thus were able to go to their homeland via Odessa by ship. The other way was to be liberated by the Westerners who came from West to the East to the Rhine River. They chose to repatriate the POWs they found. The Germans – as they heard that the enemy was closing in – made the remaining prisoners to go on a Long March: they just made them walk towards the lines of the Allied forces, where they found them and helped them. Their circumstances and living conditions were devastatingly dire: they didn’t have food; they suffered from malnutrition and several of them were injured and dying (217.). However, on 08 May 1945 nazi Germany surrendered and this made all the POWs to be freed instantly. This gave a severe organizational difficulty: finally, most of the prisoners from the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. were transported to Brighton, where after they were treated and fed, they went back to their homelands by airplanes or ships.

The last, tenth chapter is about the fate of the returning soldiers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.A. Inf. Div. In this chapter as well, there are lively stories told about the return of the POWs to South Africa, which also contributes to the great number of primary sources of the book. As we get to know, by June 1945, a great amount of South African troops arrived at their homeland, where their relatives and friends were eagerly waiting for them. They couldn’t hear direct data on the return of their loved ones, so they were waiting in the

dark. Soon, as the airplanes arrived, and the soldiers came home to their hometowns by train arranged for them, their loved ones hugged them and welcomed them listening to the wonderful or dreadful stories they had for them to tell. However, not all the soldiers hurried back home: some of them took sightseeing tours or enjoyed the countryside in England. After some time, nevertheless, they as well returned to their home via ships. The final 1200 soldiers left Britain on 26 August 1945, and they were cheerfully welcomed by their relatives as well in their hometowns (249).

As we arrive at the Epilogue of the work, it is perhaps of interest to summarize the main aspects of the book. As we discussed, the work is using the New World History methods, and by this, contributes to the historical profoundness and scientific nature of the text. The grassroot historical approach was used then, which concerns the life of the ordinary soldiers taking part in the battles and fighting in north Africa. The style of the book is eloquent, and the number of primary sources is astonishing. What strikes me really in the Epilogue, is that the author emphasizes that this was a description of a division which lost the city of Tobruk (253.). But Scherman also states that not only the winners should write the history, and the small other forces at stake should be also considered, when we establish a picture of a certain event in World history. Thus, the idea to revisit a Division in the Second World War from South Africa makes this book very valuable. Accordingly, I can only recommend the work to ordinary and academic readers as well, since its original and multi-source approach makes it worthwhile to read for anyone who is interested in the history of Africa or in the Second World War.