Distance Education and e-learning in the South African Military[1]

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INTRODUCTION

When writing about contemporary South African military issues, scholars face some difficulty.

Firstly, very little, if any, scholarly research emanating from within the military is being published in South Africa or elsewhere at present. On the surface it appears as if the military in general do not engage the community at large on a more intellectual level. What is more, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), like the broader public sector in South Africa, seems to have gone into a mode of self-protection. Very much like the pre-1994 South African military, the self-protection of the SANDF manifests itself, it seems, in an overemphasis of or fixation with military security.

Secondly, media coverage of the military in South Africa is mostly of a sensational nature. Stated differently, there is not much in-depth media interest in and investigative reporting on things military in South Africa. The South African military in general has a difficult relationship with the media to the extent that the SANDF displays a type of lager mentality when interacting with the media. Certain sections of the military, the Navy in particular, seem to have a more proactive approach in dealing with the media. This is the exception, though, rather than the rule.

Lastly, since 1994, scholarly interest in the South African military has also faded with the shift in societal interest away from military security-related issues. As a result, substantiating many of the observations pertaining to contemporary South African military issues is a real problem. **The observations about the SANDF in this paper should therefore be seen as tentative and exploratory in nature.**

The purpose of this paper is to provide some higher order perspective with regards to distance education (DE) and e-Learning against the general background of Education, Training and Development in the SANDF.

The history of education in South Africa in general and in the military is complex. Like militaries the world over, the South African military is dependent on the general educational system in South Africa to provide it with quality products. And, like most other societal matters, education and its influence on the South African military has a long history.

EDUCATION IN THE PRE-1994 SOUTH AFRICAN DEFENCE FORCE AND THE INTEGRATED REVOLUTIONARY ARMIES

The history of education in the South African military is as controversial as the history of education in the country at large.[2] The immediate security situation that confronted the pre-1994 South African Defence Force (SADF) steered it away from a knowledge-based educational approach towards an emphases on training and experience. This was one of the reasons underpinning the very tactically and operationally mindedness of the SADF. An academic education in the SADF was seen as a "nice to have". Academic education was never an integral part of the career paths of the officers. The SADF, in essence, was a warfighting force with an emphasis on operational and tactical matters,[3] or, as Seegers explains, "military experience counted more than intellectual or staff ability" and "the action was in the line".[4] The SADF favoured tactical and operational training and experience and, as a result, did not develop a knowledge-driven institutional culture based on higher education.

The non-statutory forces who[5] were integrated into the SANDF were highly politicised[6] and very "streetwise".[7] Revolutionary wars and revolutionary forces by nature necessitate a political and strategic orientation. Revolutionaries do not become politically and strategically minded through military training and warfighting. World-wide and throughout history, revolutionary armies have been known for their (political) education (indoctrination some would argue). Part of the ingrained culture of the non-statutory forces had been to

2   For a more detailed discussion of the history of education in the South African military see the following article: Esterhuyse, AJ, "Professional Military Education and Training: Challenges Facing the South African Military", *Defence Studies*, Vol 6, No 3, Sep 2006, pp. 1–23.

3   Esterhuyse, AJ, "Management and Command in the SANDF: Changing Priorities", *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, Vol XXVI, No 1, May 2004, pp. 47-48.

4   Seegers, A, *The Military and the Making of South Africa*, Tauris Academic Studies, London, 1996, p. 141.

5   None of the forces that fought the apartheid state were part of a bureaucratised professional statutory armed force. They were the armed wings of political movements: *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), the armed wing of the ANC; the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA), the armed wing of the PAC and the KwaZulu Self-Protection Force (KZSPF), the armed wing of Inkatha. Since 1994, these forces are referred to as the "non-statutory forces".

6   Heinecken, L, "South Africa's Postmodern Military: Adapting to the New Strategic and Political Environment", Paper presented at the First Cranfield University International Conference on Defence Management, Cranfield University, Shrivenham, United Kingdom, 24-25 April 2003, p. 10.

7   Interview with senior SA Army general at the Military Academy, 7 Dec 2004.

resist, defy, test, protest and challenge official authority.[8] This kind of ethos is diametrically the opposite of the traditional disciplined regimentalised military culture found in armed forces the world over. Non-statutory force members were trained and (in some cases) educated in various places in the world.[9] This, at least, provided them with a broader worldview than most of their colleagues from the SADF. There is reason though to question the tactical warfighting training and experience of the majority of the non-statutory force members who were integrated into the SANDF.[10]

Cawthra argues it will be more correct to talk about the absorption of these guerrilla forces into the bureaucratised South African military than to talk about the integration of the different forces into one statutory armed force. These forces had problems accommodating themselves in a conventional (bureaucratised) armed force.[11] There were in reality a very high level of continuity between the SANDF and the SADF. As a consequence, the tradition of education as a "nice to have" was carried over to the SANDF. One analyst pointed out that the SANDF, like the SADF, does not commission officers. Rather, it trains "… functionaries, uniformed civil servants".[12] Education is still not an integral part of the career of an officer in terms of being institutionalised and thus a requirement to become an officer or for promotion to higher rank.

CURRENT EDUCATIONAL "CHALLENGES" IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY[13]

It is impossible to outline all the challenges facing ETD in the SANDF at present. As a consequence, the paper focuses on three very obvious problems:

1. Suitably qualified and experienced directing staff.

There is little doubt that the directing staff at most ETD institutions work extremely hard. At the same time, one is often left with the impression that the work of the directing staff at most ETD institutions is – in the words of Foster – more consumptive than productive.[14] Such an approach often leaves little more in its wake than additional work for others. In addition, there is no doubt that at the War and Defence Colleges, the work pace of the directing staff is more in line with the training culture of the military than the educational culture that is required to install a higher order holistic and cognitive understanding of policy, war and strategy that falls within the ambit of these "educational" institutions. There are a number of reasons underpinning this particular problem. The most obvious is the general lack of (civilian) academic faculties that has become the rule at such institutions the world over. Of particular interest is the absence of post-graduate academic qualifications amongst the directing staff. Together with a shortage of any military experience of note in the South African military at present, these institutions face a certain amount of institutional paralysis – a willingness to educate and train, but an inability to do so.

2. The lack of meritocracy

Educational institutions, in general, are discriminatory by nature. The principle that not everybody has the aptitude for higher education and training is generally accepted by universities and other institutions of higher learning. In very much the same way, militaries accept a triangular and hierarchical system of command. In reality, this implies that not all officers have the aptitude for high command and that not all officers should be accepted, as a rule, at the most senior military courses. Militaries normally have a system in place whereby the most competent of their officers are accepted for attendance of the more senior academic programmes and, consequently, promotion to high command and staff positions. Militaries normally apply the principle of "up or out". Yet, it is difficult to find the traces of such a merit-based system in the SANDF. It is politically very incorrect to point out that, because of historical reasons, a lot of dead wood is drifting to the top of the SANDF at present.

8   Heinecken, L, op. cit., p. 10.
9   Twenty-three nations hosted non-statutory force training, from nearby Lesotho to the Soviet Union and Cuba. See Higgs, JA, op. cit., p. 48. Vladimir Shubin's recently published book provides an extensive overview of the Soviet military involvement in South Africa and, in particular, Soviet support to the liberation movements. See Shubin, V, *The Hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa*, Pluto Press, London, 2008.
10   A senior officer from one of the armed forces of the former Warsaw Pact pointed out that Warsaw Pact countries very often did not have a clear understanding of what kind of military training to give to the cadres from Africa. The result, he explained, was that they concentrated in most cases on the political indoctrination of these forces. Conversation with Maj Gen (ret.) Dr Mihail E. Ionescu, Director of the Romanian Institute for Political Studies and Defence and Military History, Madrid, Spain, 24 August 2005.
11   Cawthra, G, "Security Governance in South Africa", *African Security Review*, Vol 14, No 3, 2005, p. 98.
12   Engelbrecht, L, "SANDF at 10: An Assessment", *African Armed Forces Journal*, February 2004, pp. 9-10.
13   It is interesting to note how militaries, and the South African military in particular, conceal their real problems by describing it as "challenges"! The title of this section is in line with this special form of political correctness. The "challenges" should therefore be understood as problems.
14   Foster, GD, "Research, Writing, and the Mind of the Strategist", *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No 11, Spring 1996, p. 115.

From an educational perspective it simply means that very often officers who do not have the aptitude for academic studies or high command end up in the educational programmes of the senior ETD programmes in the SANDF. The real problem is the overall impact of their presence in these programmes on the learning experience of the more competent learners.[15]

3. The absence of a proper academic curriculum.

The curriculums of these institutions often reflect more of a foundation in training than education. The approach is to cover as wide a spectrum as possible in the curriculums[16] – a mile wide, an inch deep, to be precise! The intensity of the programmes at these institutions is very high. Students are overburdened with an extensive amount of information. At the same time, though, very little time is spent on rigorous debate, reflection and, eventually, the internalisation of knowledge. As a result, not much learning is taking place in spite of the overload of information students are exposed to. Information is not processed into knowledge, and the focus is not on debate, reading and writing – the critical ingredients of any learning process. The only way to develop the attributes of an educated person is through reading (to gain knowledge and insight), discussing (to appreciate opposing views and subject their own to rigorous debate), investigating (to learn how to ask good questions and find defensible answers), and writing (to structure thoughts and to articulate them clearly and coherently).[17] With the exception of the Military Academy, it is difficult to identify an SANDF ETD institution where such an approach is the order of the day. The absence of a proper academic faculty, the lack of scholarly depth in the curriculum and the student body's lack of a sound academic foundation constitute the most important reasons underpinning the absence of an academic ethos at most SANDF ETD institutions.

THE USE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AND E-LEARNING IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY

Given the educational realities of the South African military, DE and e-Learning should be a very effective means for bringing education to the broad base of soldiers who do not have direct access to military educational institutions. The truth is that until now the SANDF has not used DE and e-Learning on a grand scale in the education of its cadres. One immediately wants to ask the question why DE and e-Learning has not become a central part of the educational system in the SANDF yet. A related question concerns the issue of what the SANDF should do in order to raise the profile and use of DE and e-Learning. A number of factors seem to stand out in the intention of the SANDF to use DE and e-Learning as a general way of educating, training and developing its members.

Firstly, the SANDF views DE as a means to save money, and it is true that DE is a potential money saver. As a prerequisite, though, money needs to be spent to roll-out a proper DE system before money can be saved on the ETD budget. As it is, DE in the SANDF has never received the kind of budgetary support necessary for a full roll-out of a workable DE-system. The big irony is that, working with a limited budget, the SANDF is simultaneously trying to save money on the instrument or process that is supposed to be the money saver in the ETD environment.

A second factor influencing the effectiveness of DE in the SANDF is the decentralised implementation of a proper DE system. Different ETD institutions in the SANDF have at different times tried to implement a system of DE. One of the reasons why DE does not seem to succeed or why it does not proceed beyond the point of an experimental phase in the SANDF is the lack of structural organisational support from the SANDF at large. In fact, the lack of organisational structures responsible for DE in the SANDF is inhibiting the roll-out of a well-developed DE system. Such organisational structures are critical at all levels of the organisation, especially at implementation level.[18] There is no central structure in the SANDF that is principally responsible for the development of a DE system, that budgets for the implementation thereof and that is responsible for the organisation-wide roll-out or implementation of such a system.

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15   The paper "The SANDF: Midwifes of Peace in Africa – An Evaluation of the SANDF Involvement in Peace Support Operations" read by Dr Thomas Mandrup at the SA Army Seminar 21, 26-28 February 2009, provides a more detailed exposition of the lack of a meritocratic system in the South African military.

16   A well-educated SA Army member noted that there is a tendency to overload students at training institutions without focusing on the quality of learning. Many theoretical DE assignments are short answers straight from the text books. Such assignments often do not involve effective learning. Tactical courses increasingly contain learning objectives that should be addressed in educational institutions rather training courses (civil education, etc). He noted that the SANDF "… is trying to nurse the symptoms of a poor educational system in the country and unscientific recruitment in the SANDF." (E-mail correspondence with a SA Army major, 16 February 2009.)

17   Foster, GD, op. cit., p. 111.

18   Interview with a SA Army colonel, Saldanha, 29 January 2009.

One of the results of the absence of such a centralised DE system, for example, is the lack of or an inability to learn from the experimental phases of DE in some of the ETD institutions in the SANDF. Consequently, the SANDF does not seem to build up an institutional memory concerning DE. The South African **State Information Technology Agency** (SITA) is testing a Learning Management System designed for the SANDF, which will hopefully be distributed throughout the SANDF as a stepping-stone to a broader basis for DE and e-learning.[19]

A third factor that inhibits the implementation of a DE-system in the SANDF is the lack of specialised DE knowledge. People in uniform are normally well-developed as "managers of violence", to use the Huntingtonian phrase[20], and not as DE and e-Learning specialists. Successful implementation of a DE system requires personnel with special expertise, i.e. people who are well qualified in the educational field in general and who have specialised in DE. Any DE-based university, such as UNISA, is proof of the need to build these special knowledge and skills. This specifically relates to the implementation of the necessary logistical and communication systems. An educational institution cannot expect its lecturing or directing staff to take care of the logistical and communication requirements that underpin a successful DE system as well. As many a lecturer will testify, time is a scarce commodity. How much of their time will remain available for research and community service if lecturers also become responsible for the logistical and other interactions with DE candidates at the Military Academy in particular? The real question is whether the SANDF has appointed the necessary personnel and created the necessary structures at those ETD institutions expected to provide DE. Inertia in the SANDF and, more specifically, a total lack of knowledgeable personnel to implement DE and who understand the benefits of such a system is most probably the most important reason underpinning the inability to implement a DE system of education in the SANDF.[21]

A fourth factor inhibiting the roll-out of a proper DE system is the aversion of the SANDF to technology, or to rephrase, the SANDF's reluctance to become web-connected. The use of a paper-based system for DE is without doubt a possibility. My colleagues at the Military Academy, where we have a combination of a paper and electronic-based DE system, will however agree that the ability to communicate with students via e-mail is the most basic technological requirement for successful DE. It would even be more critical, I believe, in the use of a DE system for training purposes. In many instances at the Military Academy at present, it is easier to communicate with colleagues on the other side of the world than with your own students in the SANDF. One has some appreciation and sympathy for the concerns about operational security in the SANDF if it becomes web-connected. At the same time, though, for any organisation not to be web-connected in the present age is a scary thought. Certainly, there should be a system – such as WebCT – that could facilitate e-based DE without endangering organisational or operational security.

The necessary IT infrastructure and support is not broadly available to facilitate DE or, even more, e-learning. The support systems for IT in the SANDF in general are inflexible, time-consuming and reactive. Some Army students have to travel to other units to submit DE assignments.[22] Computers in the SANDF are not allowed to be connected to both internal networks and the internet. This limits the utility of existing IT infrastructure for broader e-learning. As a minimum, one could argue that the SANDF should consider decentralising the management of certain IT and software in the SANDF, investing in a larger IT infrastructure to facilitate broader access to the internet which will also improve capabilities for computer-based simulation and training, and provide good-quality and user-friendly internet security and anti-virus software to the SANDF as a whole with automatic online updates.[23] Armed forces the world over make use of internet services. What underpins the SANDF's reluctance to afford its members access to computer and web-based services?

A fifth factor affecting the roll-out of DE in the South African military concerns the socio-economic makeup of the student body. In spite of the high emphasis on student-based education at most higher education institutions in South Africa at present, many teachers and lecturers will testify to the growing need for more contact time between students and lecturers. This is, at least, what some of my colleagues at the School for Security and Africa Studies and I experience on a daily basis. There is no need to dwell on the reasons underpinning this phenomenon. However, the problems in our present school system most probably are a definite factor to consider. Underlying this debate, is the general question of whether we have a student body in the SANDF that is conducive for the successful implementation of a DE system. This question has many dimensions of which some may be (politically) controversial. As academics, we have a responsibility to place these issues on the table for debate in spite of their controversy. Consider, for example, the number of enlisted members in the SANDF who are not IT literate. IT is a threat to them.[24] Or, consider the number of SANDF members of junior rank who have access, specifically after hours, to a web-connected computer.

19   E-mail correspondence with a SA Army major, 16 February 2009.
20   Huntington, SP, The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1957, p. 11.
21   E-mail correspondence with a senior SA Army colonel, 18 February 2008.
22   E-mail correspondence with a SA Army major, 16 February 2009.
23   Ibid.
24   E-mail correspondence with a senior SA Army colonel, 18 February 2008.

A sixth factor affecting the proper roll-out of a DE system in the SANDF at present is the organisational attitude of the SANDF towards ETD in general. One needs to have empathy with commanders at all levels in the SANDF who have personnel staffed in posts and whom they then cannot employ because these personnel are busy with some form of ETD. At the same time, though, one needs to ask the question whether the SANDF has policies in place, which allow DE students time for ETD whilst they are at their home units. All people who have studied on a part-time basis will testify of the personal sacrifices part-time studies require. Much more is necessary than in the case of full-time studies. This issue has two sides. There is on the one hand the question of the willingness of DE candidates to persevere in order to be successful. On the other hand, though, there is the question of organisational support and the issue of whether the organisation is willing to create the environment – in terms of time, for example – that will facilitate successful pursuance of DE studies. At present, members busy with DE courses have to negotiate with their commanders about the time they can spend on formal DE during working hours. There is no overarching policy to facilitate DE.[25] The money saved by not attending residential learning opportunities must be critically compared against the cost of working time lost during participation in DE. The more senior the learner, the more significant this effect. "Cost" must further be considered in terms of the reduced contribution of the learners to the operational readiness of the unit where they are working.[26]

A last factor to consider, and one that I am pretty sure has not been debated in the SANDF at large, relates to the difference between education and training, and the extent to which DE is an appropriate tool for training. Beside the fact that, as one SA Army colonel recently explained to me, education is a side-issue for the SANDF; DE is after all precisely what it says – distance education. The mere fact that training is a group-oriented activity to developed practical skills raises questions about the suitability of DE in the military regimentalised training environment. Stated differently, DE may be very effective in those ETD institutions in the SANDF that are more educational in their orientation, such as the Military Academy and the National War and Defence Colleges. There is real doubt whether it can be effective at all at institutions that function on the tactical level and that are oriented towards the provision of skills-based development. One can imagine that it can be done; however, it will be techno-intensive. On a more positive note, though, DE will make training opportunities more accessible for reserve force members. At present, a lot of lip serve is being paid to the importance of the reserve forces. In reality, the Defence Force has allowed the disintegration of the reserve forces to a point where there is real doubt whether the SANDF has the capacity to revive the reserve force system in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

The first part of the paper outlines why neither the pre-1994 military nor the revolutionary forces fighting the South African military developed a true tradition of professional military education. The primary expertise of the SADF was rooted in its tactical and operational capabilities. It suited the strategic realities of the time and, as a result, the SADF was relatively effective in what was expected from the South African military at the time. It was, in short, effective as an offensively minded warfighting machine – well-trained and experienced. The preparation of the revolutionary forces fighting the apartheid military machine also reflected the realities that confronted these forces. In particular, it was accepted that it would be difficult to uproot the apartheid state militarily. The revolutionary forces could not expect to take the apartheid military machine head-on and came up on top. Thus, MK and most of the other revolutionary armies prepared their members in a way that is typical of revolutionary armies. The emphasis was on education – or, rather political indoctrination – as a means to mobilise the masses inside the country against the apartheid regime and not against its military might. Even the tactical training of the revolutionary cadres, if one can believe Vladimir Shubin, was orientated towards their preparation to develop, maintain and function within the underground structures. Only towards the late 1980s, when "… it was clear … that the end of the apartheid regime was imminent" did the ANC cadres started training in a more conventional fashion for the different branches of the armed forces.[27]

Although the word "integration" was used to explain the fusion of the old apartheid military with the revolutionary armies, it was rather a matter of absorption of the revolutionary forces into the existing military bureaucracy. The result was a very high level of continuity between the SADF and the SANDF. One of the features that was inherited from the SADF was an aversion to education in general and an overemphasis on training. The challenge, though, is that the environment within which the military functions has changed on all levels. For militaries in the contemporary strategic environment to be well-trained for the warfighting environment is not enough. They also need to prepare themselves for the defence management and peacekeeping environments. These environments require from soldiers, apart from warfighting skills, to be soldier-scholars and soldier-diplomats. The military in the New South Africa finds it difficult though to provide quality education to its members. In particular, the military did not succeed in developing an ETD system based on DE and e-Learning to reach the broad base of members in the SANDF.

25   E-mail correspondence with a SA Army major, 16 February 2009.
26   Interview with a SA Army colonel, Saldanha, 29 January 2009.
27   Shubin, V, op. cit., pp. 252-253.

What should be done to develop an ETD system based on DE and e-Learning? The SANDF will not be able to develop and implement DE and e-Learning as long as it remains an "over and above" assignment for the directing staff at the ETD institutions. The SANDF needs to plan and resource the implementation of DE and e-Learning in the organisation as a whole properly. Penny-pocketing the implementation of DE and e-Learning at different ETD institutions is the surest path to failure. Proper resourcing implies inter alia the appointment of personnel with the appropriate DE and e-Learning skills and knowledge, creation of the necessary structures to roll-out DE and e-Learning at organisational level and the willingness to provide both the electronic systems and the training that is needed to empower people to use these systems to their own benefit. Only if the SANDF follows such a holistic approach will DE and e-Learning grow into the powerful tool that it is for the development of people.

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