

Victory in Europe

“The mission of this Allied Force was fulfilled at 3 a.m., local time, 7 May 1945. Eisenhower.”

Telegram from General Eisenhower to the Combined Chiefs of Staff.



General Mark Clark (U.S. Army), Commander 15th Army Group presenting Major General W.H.E. Poole with the Legion of Merit.

By Major I.J. van der Waag and Noëlle van der Waag-Cowling

FIFTY YEARS AGO, ON 8 May 1945, World War II ended in Europe. The outcome was much as Adolf Hitler had predicted it would be: Western Europe was under the occupation of Anglo-Saxon troops and fell within the American sphere of influence, while Eastern Europe was occupied and dominated by the Soviets. The prewar European powers of France, Britain and Germany lay broken and a new bipolar global political system, dominated by two new superpowers - the United States and the Soviet Union - had emerged.

Surrender

After five years of bitter and arduous combat, the Allies had eventually managed a laborious advance across the prewar German frontier early in February 1945. Two months later, on 28 April, they linked up with the Russians on the Elbe. The Germans Army, surrounded on all sides and exhausted and starving, accepted unconditional surrender on

7 May. The instrument of surrender was signed by General Jodl, the German Chief of Staff, at General Dwight Eisenhower's (the Supreme Commander of the Allied forces in Europe) headquarters at Rheims in France.

The following day, Field Marshal Keitel surrendered the German forces in Eastern Europe to the outstanding Russian commander Field Marshall Zhukov and the war in Europe was over.

And so it was that South Africa's war came to an end. The last South African servicemen on overseas duty, with the exception of sailors seconded to the Royal Navy, were the members of 6 South African Armoured Division in Italy, where the German armies had in fact capitulated five days before.

When the announcement was made that the German armies had finally surrendered, 6 SA Armoured Division was somewhere in the vicinity of Milan. For the war-weary Springboks, May was to be a month of general rest and recuperation after the most intense and widespread global conflict in the history of mankind. The Springboks had endured a particularly savage and gruelling campaign in Italy which had last

for almost two years, having commenced in July 1943.

Revelry

At home, in South Africa, news of the end of the war was greeted somewhat less sedately. Large crowds gathered to celebrate Victory in Europe (VE) Day by congregating and partying in the streets of the country's towns and cities. In Adderley Street, a massive crowd of civilians and servicemen gathered to hear a radio broadcast of Winston Churchill informing the Commonwealth that the enemy had finally laid down arms. Reaction to the news was ecstatic as the dancing crowds brought traffic to a standstill...

Relief

For the South African troops on the front in Italy, the news was greeted with an immense sense of relief rather than rejoicing. The war-weary troops were given the day off to celebrate.

In Rome a church parade for members of the Womens' Auxiliary Army Service, officers and other ranks of the South African Headquarters was held on 8 May in the Villa Borghese Park to give thanks for the end of the hostilities and the Allied victory. The Permanent Force Band also attended the service and played anthems and hymns. For the next couple of days, the headquarters was manned by a skeleton staff only as the victory fever grabbed hold of even the most serious of souls at Divisional Headquarters..

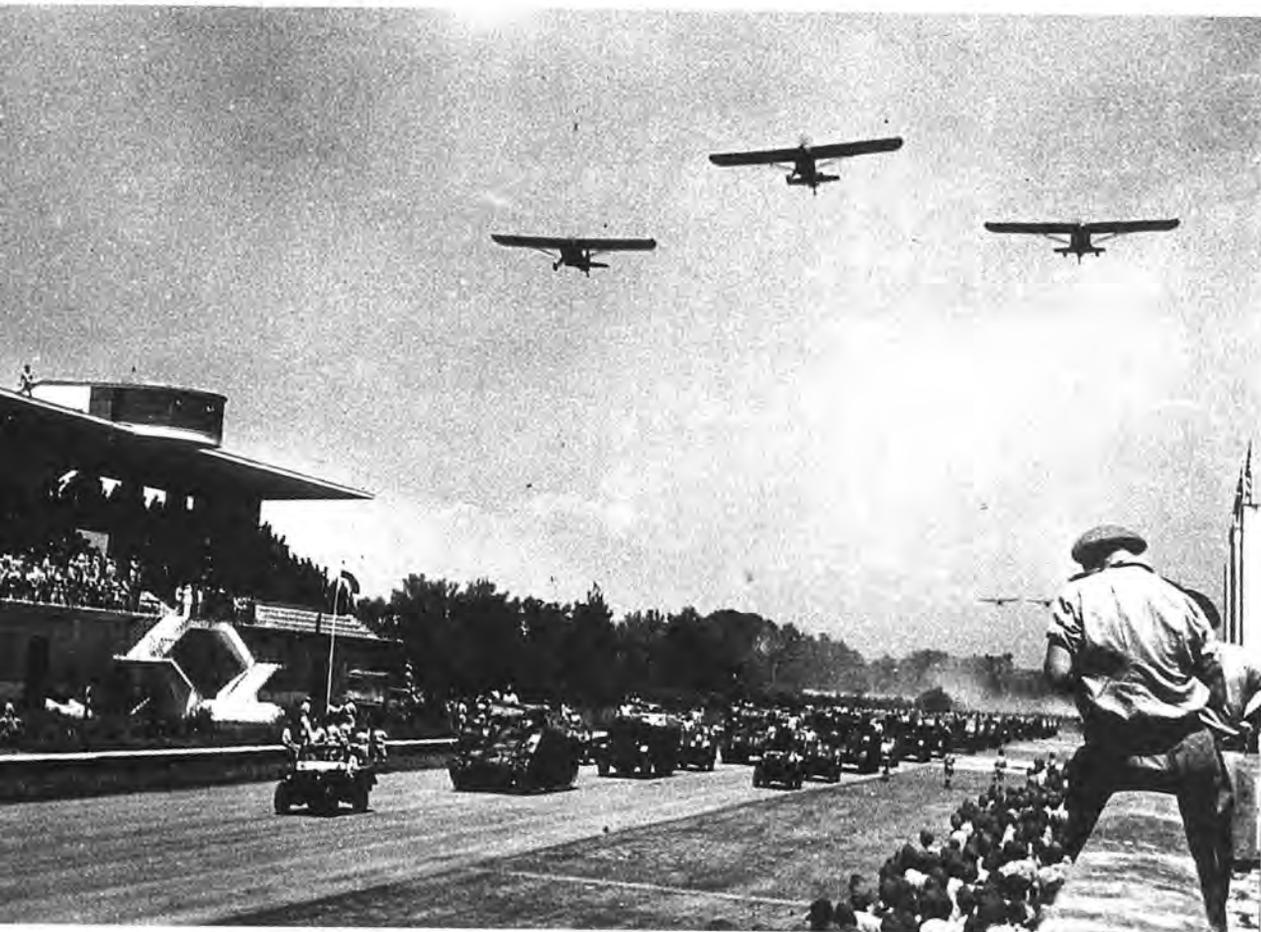
However, 6 SA Armoured Division's work in Italy was not yet complete. On 7 May, the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment in Honey tanks, carriers and half-tracked vehicles, paraded through Milan in a show of force. This was aimed specifically to discourage anarchy. During the same period several incidents of Allied soldiers being doused with petrol and set alight occurred.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty of the times, the South African troops in the theatre still managed to enjoy themselves. Sight-see-

ing trips were arranged - and the fortunate members of Prince Alfred's Guard became acquainted with Lake Como and district - cocktail parties were held for the officers, regimental parades were reviewed, and photograph sessions were held. The war was over and with relief, the men looked forward to returning home to their families.

6 Division Parade

The Sixth South African Armoured Division concentrated as a formation for the last time on 14 May for a victory parade at the Monza Motor Racing Circuit under the watchful eye of the Allied top brass. The dignitaries present included General Mark W. Clark, General L. Truscott, Lieutenant General Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, and Major General W.H.E. Poole. General Clark used the opportunity to present American medals and decorations to the officers and men of the Division. General Poole was awarded the Legion of Merit (Commander), the highest award any non-American can earn.



Parade of the 6 SA Armoured Division at Monza.