

# Pieter Snyman, Springbok-soldier 1940-43

A brief summary by Leon Bezuidenhout, March 2008



## Earliest years

Peter Johannes Jacobus (Pieter) Snyman was born in Zeerust on April 6, 1919. As 18 month-old, he survived the dreaded child-paralysing meningitis. His family moved from Zeerust to Johannesburg during the Great Depression when his father's company collapsed, like many others. Pieter was an athletic and active child who participated in every possible sport. He thrived on action and was highly competitive.

As a 20 year-old in September 1939, he and some friends were cavorting at Heidelberg kloof when a car sped down the dirt road, sounding the horn. The passengers yelled: "It's war! War!" South Africa was plunged into the Second World War. As politics were not a topic of conversation in Pieter's house, he wasn't overly concerned about the cause for the war. He saw adventure. But war would irreversibly change his life. An adventure-seeker, he would later admit that there was nothing glamorous about war. "Nothing good" came from it – only disillusionment.

## Soldier and the Crusade in Abyssinia

On April 17, 1940, Pieter Snyman walked through the gates of Sonderwater Training Base, east of Pretoria, where the infantry received training. His first choice was to be an Air force pilot, but his mother was adamant that her son stayed on solid ground, and promptly destroyed the application forms. After basic training, Pieter was sent to the *South African Irish Regiment* – true army irony: a "Boerseun" from Zeerust among the Irish!



*Pieter, the driver – always ready for action.*

In November 1940, he departed in the 5<sup>th</sup> SA Infantry with the Lang Steven Castle to Kenya – the frontline. *Abyssinia*. Disembarking in Mombasa, they proceeded to Gil-Gil, their new base. From there they travelled through the dry areas of North Kenya, through the Masebeth Jungle to the mountainous Abyssinia.

In front of them the Italian forces were lying in wait. Their first clash was short, but fierce. Before even firing a single shot, the young Snyman witnessed the wounded and dead being brought in by armoured vehicles. Blood trickled over the armoured steel. The blood of South Africa's best.

"I realised very quickly that bullets flew both ways. In the midst of the battle, surrounded by the wounded on armoured vehicles, their life-blood pouring into the sand, I grasped: Danger looms over me. This is war – and I, I want to LIVE". All illusion fled.

Some hours later, the Italians were crushed.

*El Gumu*. A selected group of soldiers moved stealthily in the dark night to advance the Allied frontier. But in the gloom, there was another force active besides the South Africans. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the two groups ran into each other. Pieter had an anti-tank gun and blasted the leading Italian troop-bearer. The African night exploded into a burst of light and cacophonous noise. In the ensuing chaos, the Italians retreated. The dead and wounded were scattered everywhere.

War hardens and numbs a man. "A corpse is no longer a dead person, but merely an object one can strip of valuables".

At Mega, the South Africans fought for three days in the most gruelling conditions. The terrain was churned into a muddy mess by constant rain, inaccessible for vehicles. The support line was left behind. But the South Africans persevered with machine gun and bayonet, breaking through to take the Italian strongholds. Later that evening, the Italians capitulated. Addis Abeba beckoned.

On their way, the South Africans swept through the countryside, rounding up thousands of prisoners of war – often engaging in brief, intense skirmishes. The battle for Addis Abeba was nothing more than a token of resistance which was soon snuffed out. Though, before the soldiers could indulge in the pleasures of the city, they were pulled out. They had reached their goal – to break the control of the Italians. The conflict would last at low level for another six months, but the 5<sup>th</sup> SA Brigade was needed elsewhere.

## **Egypt and Libya**

Where were they to go now? Maybe home? But the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade was to board ships which turned north – through the Suez Canal to Suez. A troop train transported them to Alexandria, right into the line of fire. That same night, bombs rained down on them as the German and Italian bombers emptied their cache. A baptism by fire in Egypt. The Axis air raids were to continue for months. At Mersa Matruh they would live underground like rats for four months, in order to survive the air raids.

Pieter Snyman had been at war for a year. But the worst was yet to come.

For months, the South Africans were stationed at Mersa Matruh. SA First Division Commander Genl George Brink insisted that the troops be prepared properly before they swung into action. The British General in Command concurred, and the South African boys received thorough training.



*Pieter (right) with an unknown soldier*

Genl Alan Cunningham, Commander in Chief of the successful Abyssinian Crusade, was transferred to the newly formed 8<sup>th</sup> Army. In London, Churchill was becoming impatient. The time for action had arrived.

Between Libya and the Middle East oil fields, Egypt was looming. Against them was pitted Field Marshal Erwin “Desert Fox” Rommel (Commander in Chief of the German Africa Corps). He had to clear Egypt of enemies to ensure that the Axis powers had access to their indispensable source of oil. The Allied Operation Crusader had to prevent them.

In front of the Allied forces in Libya, the African Corps of Rommel lay in wait. Tough men with a brilliant soldier leading them. The African Corps had to be obliterated, but against the fearless and defiant Germans, that was easier said than done.

The Allied forces had to traverse a border of barbed wire separating Egypt and Libya, in order to reach a strategic harbour at Tobruk which had for some time been under pressure from Rommel. Cunningham plotted to break through the barbed wire and

landmine frontier to force the Germans and their henchmen, the Italians, to a decisive battle. The site for the final showdown would be El Quasc.

Amid all the strategic plotting, Pieter Snyman was an infantry soldier who fought for survival.

On November 21, 1941, the offensive was set in motion. Pieter Snyman was yet again one of the chosen pioneers. Ahead of him and others was an impenetrable barbed wire barrier of 8 metres. Another 8m of rolled barbed wire, and yet another ensnaring 8m of wire were stretched out. Under the wire, for hundreds of kilometres, landmines were concealed.

Reconnaissance pioneers were issued with huge, thick gloves and steel cutters in order to cut through the steel, so the rest of the force could proceed – almost like the Israelites through the Red Sea.

Pieter: “We were lying on our backs equipped with huge leather gloves, sweating while cutting through the tough steel. The sound of steel on steel in the night sounded like eerie music – a relentless prelude to a fear-evoking rhapsody of bursting bombs and clattering machine guns.

In us burned a monstrous fear – dreading the maiming landmines buried around us. If a soldier put any weight on a mine, it would explode with devastating destruction, blowing a young life to pieces.”

At dawn, they broke through, and the tanks and troops could tear through the gaps. But the day had just started... Squadrons of German fighter aircraft bombed the troops. The anti-aircraft defence of 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade gave all they had.

What had started out a few months before as a brigade comprising 3 000 men, had swelled to a Brigade Battle Group. The *SA Irish Regiment* (Pieter's group), the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Transvaal Scottish and the Regiment Botha had been supplemented – with support, a field ambulance, a reconnaissance battalion, an anti-aircraft component, artillery and more.

The 5<sup>th</sup> SA Brigade Battle Group comprised of 5 700 men - 5 700 men, forming part of the British 7<sup>th</sup> Armour Division. Brothers-in-arms in the division were the 7<sup>th</sup> Armour Brigade (later known as the “*Desert Rats*”) and the 22 Guards Brigade.

Initially, the air-raid defence were ineffective, but as the day proceeded, they gained valuable experience. Troops quickly discovered it was advantageous to sit on the sides of the soft-sided vehicles. When an aircraft approached, they would dive off to gain distance from the convoys. Men would dig in as soon as possible and take cover in a trench.

By the afternoon, the gunners were more accurate, forcing the Germans to be more careful.



*Pieter's anxiously waiting family (above left)*

On arrival at Gabr Saleh they found nothing – and no-one. It is a mere mark on the map. Endless, flat terrain. Rommel didn't 'adhere' to Cunningham's plan! Now the plan had to be revised urgently. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army dug themselves in. Their line of defence was precisely as planned, but there was no enemy in sight.

To execute his initial plan, Cunningham divided his forces. Where were Rommel and the German forces? Lure them here for the clash. Cunningham would pay dearly for his strategy to split the forces. Before Operation Crusader was over, Cunningham would lose his position of command.

## **Sidi Rezegh**

The 7<sup>th</sup> Armour Division were sent to Sidi Rezegh to occupy the air strip. But this would play right into the opportunistic Rommel's hand. He launched a devastating counterattack.

The nearest support (Genl Dan Pienaar's 1ste Brigade) was more than 20km away. Alone and cut off, the Brigade became the ideal target for the Panzer Army.



***Crusader-tank passes a German panzer on fire***

On Sunday, November 23, the Germans launched their counterattack. They sent in the Stukas (bomber aircraft) which would dive down with chilling accuracy, pelting the South African with bombs – then the German tanks and panzer would follow suit.

“As the day proceeded, the attacks became more inhumane. The shrill sound of shrapnel, whistling mortars, the blinding glow of tracer ammunition, which defied all resistance, the coughing staccato of machineguns, the earth-shattering blasts of the 25-pounders, and the most spine-chilling sound of all – the screaming Stuka aircraft which dived with flaming bullets and bombs down on us...all these converged in a macabre, nerve-wrecking cacophony.”

“Our ears were deafened, each brain becoming a mere machine driven mercilessly. But still the German steel tanks advanced. We were shooting determinately. Countless German soldiers fell over their guns, rolling off their tanks – broken and maimed”.

But the Germans were too effective. They neutralised the South African armour. It became a fight between infantry against tank – without much of a chance of survival. Blood flowed, ammunition was depleted, and everywhere were bodies and wounded... Calls for help were ignored. White flags fluttered everywhere.

Pieter Snyman and others had to decide on a course of action. Too few officers remained to steer them into any direction. Either you fight, or surrender, spending the rest of the war as a prisoner. For the young, aggressive Pieter Snyman, there was just one choice – escape at all costs.



***The Germans destroying our support vehicles at Sidi Rezegh***

Fortunately, darkness was driving away the day as three silhouettes stealthily made their way among the wrecked vehicles, looking for one in working condition - Pieter Snyman, his friend, George Pitchford, and an unknown Brown driver. Surprisingly, they did find a truck which fired up. The driver jumped in, while the other two hung on, standing on the running boards next to the doors. They had barely started moving, when a British Crusader tank appeared out of the blue – and indicated to them to follow.

The enemy zoomed in to the single tank and its one-vehicle entourage. All hell burst loose in the strong dusk as the Germans zeroed in on the moving target. The evening exploded into a million stars as the Crusader attempted to clear a path with its machineguns.

Out of the blue the fleeing soldiers ran into a dark wall, a wall of advancing German panzer. In their haste to escape, they swung out to the left, losing contact with the Crusader. Moments later, the truck hit a hole and Pieter lost his grip on the door, ploughing on his hip into the desert. As the truck sped onwards, Pitchford suddenly realised his friend was missing. Through the blasts of fire, he ran back to get Pieter. Seconds later, they were going full speed ahead. The truck swung right – only to find the Crusader directly in front of them.

The Crusader acted as decoy, in order to give them a fighting chance to escape. Both vehicles reached the surrounding hills – and relative safety.

On reaching the range of hills surrounding Sidi Rezegh, the men looked back. Pieter recalled, "It looked like an inferno. The remains of large tanks and cannons lay like broken skeletons against the back-drop of flames."

Sidi Rezegh – the burial-place of Sheikh Sidi Rezegh – had almost become theirs, too. This site would forever be engraved in their minds.



***The battlefield of Sidi Rezegh, 530 Allied tanks lost, 100 German tanks destroyed.***

Of the 5700 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade soldiers engaged in this battle, only 2306 survived.

Pieter and his companions fled the scene and ended up with General Dan Pienaar's 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade twenty kilometers from there. But the Germans almost immediately attacked again. Another life or death battle ensued.

On 25 November 1941, two days after Sidi Rezegh, they had to beat off fifty German tanks. Success was theirs, but by now they were so tired and stressed out that the rest of the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade was sent to Mersah Matruh.



***Pieter at Mersa Matruh***

Here the survivors of the SA Irish were converted to an artillery unit. This formation continued until the sixties. After their training as gunners they were sent to Suez to assist in unloading cannons and tanks in the harbour. Continual German attacks forced them to live like underground rats.

At Suez Pieter had another close call. One night he and two of his friends were leaving a canteen when German bombers attacked. In an instant one of the little company – a sergeant-major – was ripped in two, and the other one received a gaping head-wound. Pieter found himself virtually unscathed and ran back to the canteen to render support. The place where they had been sitting minutes before looked like a sieve, with blood and human tissue lining the walls. Inside death reigned supreme. He turned away. There was nothing he could do.

And somewhere in Johannesburg his mother, Sarah Snyman, had suddenly been awakened and was praying for her son.

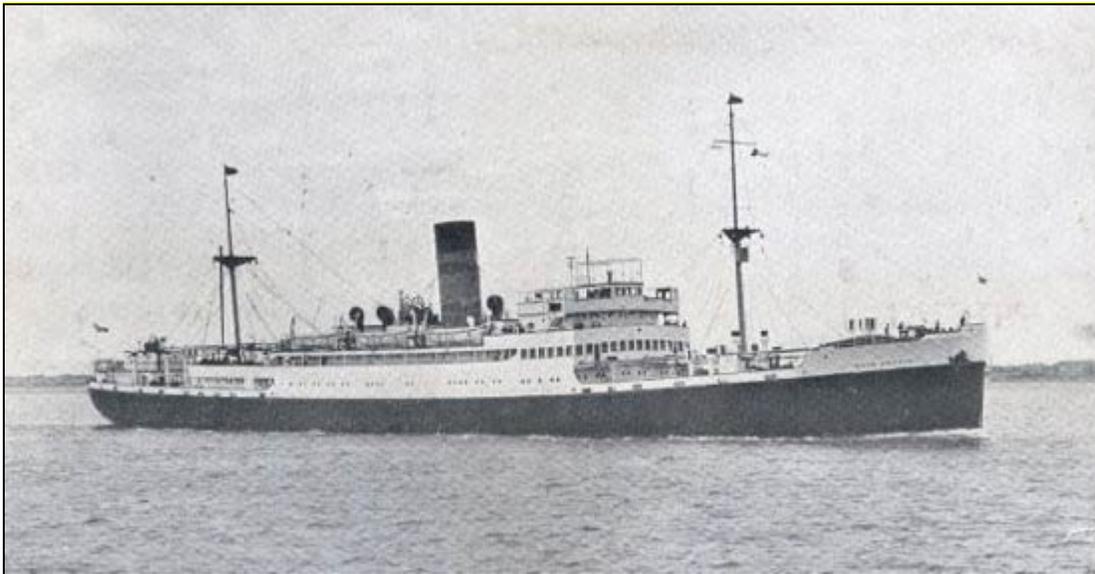
Except for a bruised side which he had come by when diving into a trench at the moment of explosion, he was unharmed.

## “Driftwood from the sea”

A few weeks later Pieter was informed that he had obtained a pass to go home. At Suez he boarded the *Nova Scotia*, a ship headed home. At Massawa, American troops disembarked and Italian prisoners of war were taken aboard.

Having little to do except tolerate the sweltering heat of the desert coast, Pieter one day decided to entertain his friends by diving from the second deck of their ship into the water below. It was when he was repeating the feat and reaching for the dangling rope at the side of the ship that he caught sight of a large shark ready to strike out at him.

He grasped at the rope and tore himself away from its jaws. He decided not to dive again that day. But his skirmishes with sharks were far from over.



***RMS Nova Scotia***

The *Nova Scotia* ploughed south for eighteen days. At night the Italian prisoners of war sang melancholy songs, which made Pieter long for home. On the rocking ship he would often think of his friends. Of the three companions from South Africa he was the only one to return home.

28 November 1942 The eighteenth day on a moody sea was a boisterous one. The *Nova Scotia* was on a zig zag course to frustrate a possible German submarine attack. The sea-surface was foamy and uneven. It was barely possible to sight a periscope.

But the German U-177 had been long in preparing for this encounter. At 9 o' clock it was waiting under the surface, barely 300 meters away. Its commander, Kapitänleutnant Robert Gysae, was watching the approaching ship. Durban was about 250 km away, and the Portuguese harbour city of Lourenço Marques (Mozambique) only 80 km. The *Nova Scotia* was heading for the jaws of death.

One moment all was quiet. And then a torpedo tore through the ship with shattering shock. This was followed by another one, and a third. Pieter had just emerged from the hold of the vessel. The sudden explosions swung him off his feet and right across the

deck, where he barely succeeded in grabbing the railings on the other side. The large hulk rolled once and then heaved to the port side. Immediate chaos reigned. Inside the ship secondary explosions followed, and voices yelled wildly. By now the deck was on fire.

Hundred of Italians were pushing against the hand-rails, afraid to jump, but at the same time blocking the way. Agitated victims ran across the deck, their scalded bodies in shock. The engines had ceased and tons of water were streaming into the vessel. Most of the life boats were in tatters. Others fell into the sea and disappeared. Pieter summed up the situation: his only hope was a safety-jacket before trying to escape.

He clambered up the side of the ship and found one. Wearing only a pair of khaki shorts and the jacket he dived from the upper deck into the restless Indian Ocean. He swam under water until his strength almost failed, and surfaced in dark, sticky oil. He found a raft constructed of wood and oil drums.

By now the ship was going under fast. Only a part of the deck, teeming with people, was visible. No-one clutching to the sinking vessel could be saved any more. In the hold of the ship people were fighting the water, attempting to find a way out. Those on deck stood frozen. They had obviously accepted the inevitable. "And then, as if it had been waiting for a sign, the sea uttered a hideous soughing sound, and when the gigantic hole in the ocean closed, large waves enveloped the struggling swimmers. Then silence.



***The last photographs of the RMS Nova Scotia. taken by the crew of the U-177.***

Pieter: "Before me was a cruel scene of human anguish. We were surrounded by the mighty ocean, its gluttonous billows battering defenceless human specks. Around us were scattered pieces of wood, doors and rafts. Fearful faces were bobbing in the waves, watching for something to hold on to. One by one they disappeared from sight.

Pieter found a long rope on the raft and hurled its end towards a group of struggling swimmers. Some were already too weak to make use of the opportunity. Once more Pieter dived into the water and started bringing men to the raft. By the time there were two South Africans and fifteen Italians on board, he was exhausted. He nevertheless grabbed an oar and without further ado declared himself captain of the vessel!

The raft was unexpectedly pushed off the hull of the U-177 which was surfacing, endeavouring to ascertain which ship had been torpedoed. There was no attack, but two Italians (German allies) were taken aboard before the submarine hastily disappeared under the waves.



***Robert Gysae, captain of the U-177.***

Loneliness once more. Men were still drowning at regular intervals. The raft had too many men aboard and everyone was partially submerged. Any one new arrival would lead to everybody's death. Some men were clutching to the sides of the raft. Others gave up quickly, throwing up their hands as if in final prayer before they sank.

Death in another form was also looming ominously. A lonely swimmer suddenly yelled wildly as he was pulled down. Bloody bubbles immediately surfaced. Sharks! The Two South Africans had been fearing this.

"In the history of the Indian Ocean there has never again been a shark attack like this one. It was as if a shoal of man-eaters had appeared from nowhere.

The appearance of the sea was gradually getting more violent, and mammoth waves were booming over the seventeen men. Night came without sleep. Cutting winds lashed out and rollers crashed unceasingly. Every now and then the wretched men changed positions. Those on the outside moved to the centre, and then back. Ever so often a five-meter shark threateningly swam near the raft.

Day came, and with it a sense of hope. But the surrounding ocean had nothing encouraging to offer. Most of the wreckage was not visible any more. Some of the nearby rafts had no men on them. And the sharks were still circling.

On the second day a rash decision was made. Cork jackets were removed and torn apart to be fashioned into a rough sail. At least the wind would steer them in some direction.

In the course of the second night weary eyes searched the sea for some sign of light. One was indeed spotted, about fifteen to twenty kilometres away. When it disappeared it seemed as if all hope followed suit. Fighting a visible enemy is difficult enough, but this was an anxious gamble with some invisible power. Emotions ran high. Seventeen desperate men without water or food.

Some men started hallucinating on account of unbearable hardship. Some babbled incoherently, others started cursing. Yet others lapsed into a coma. No wonder – their tongues were swollen, their lips cracked, their eyes pools of blood due to the oil and weather conditions.

On day three most of them had surrendered to the reality of death. Pieter was holding out and asked a redhead Italian who was still in his right mind to grab his legs and lift him up. He just wanted to take a last look across the waves. There might yet be some hope.

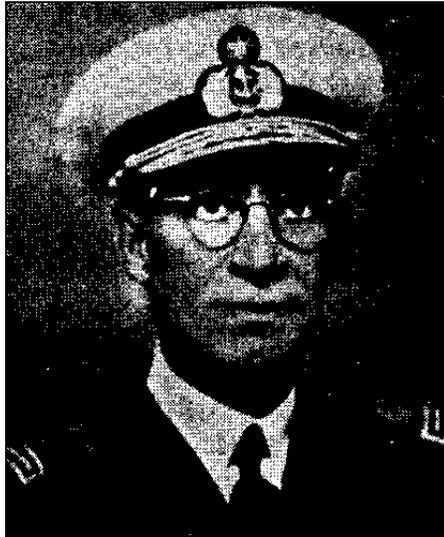
After several trials, the two eventually succeeded, and Pieter had a glimpse across the ocean. He stared in unbelief, and stared yet again. Is it at all possible? A cross? A moving cross? For some reason the words of a song learnt in his youth nestled in his mind:

*On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,  
The emblem of suffering and shame;  
And I love that old cross, where the dearest and best  
For a world of lost sinners were slain.*

The cross became clearer. The radio masts of a ship! Then, like an angel of mercy, a large vessel rocked to a standstill and ropes were thrown at them. When the crew realised that they were surrounded by sharks, a life-boat was lowered. On board they sank to the floor and was given hot coffee to drink and blankets to wrap themselves in. But the world had suddenly become a revolving disk. Sleep that everybody had been dreaming of, was gone. Soon afterwards death started taking its toll.

Captain Jose Augusto Guereiro de Brito gave quick orders, and the *Alfonso de Albuquerque* started on its way to Lourenço Marques.

Of the 1266 passengers on the Nova Scotia only 192 would arrive alive in LM. One hundred and twenty dead bodies were washed out on beaches in Durban, and these were removed early in the morning to prevent unnecessary panic.



*Jose Augusto Guereiro de Brito and his ship Alfonso de Albuquerque”*



The South Africans received a great welcome in LM, but they quickly realised that they were sure to be interned. During a party arranged for them by the South African Consul, they were secretly informed that they would have to look after themselves from that moment on.

Pieter and a friend lost no time, found two bicycles somewhere, which they rode barefoot because their feet were still badly swollen. At the railway station they were scared away by officials and eventually slept fitfully in a hut about 15 km outside LM. They started walking at daybreak, their destination the border sixty km away.

They bluffed their way through a few guarded bridges by mumbling a few words in Portuguese. They walked weary kilometres before they stopped a taxi a short distance from the border. Only then did they realize that it was a vehicle hired by the South African government to transport injured soldiers from a hospital in LM.

Swaziland. Nelspruit. Pretoria. Here the necessary formalities were taken care of. And it was time to go home! In Johannesburg a highly-strung Snyman-family were waiting in keen expectation. They had been informed that Pieter was missing, and were now fearing the worst.

And then, during the day, he reached the street where he lived, and caught sight of the old house. He just opened the door and walked in...

### **A remarkable life after all**

Pieter served until 18 July 1943 in the Army, when a board found him medically unfit for further service. The fall from the truck during his escape from Sidi Rezegh, resulted in an injured hip. He walked for the rest of his life with a limp and in later years the Army would pay for three hip replacement operations. But the young soldier had seen and experienced too much...The modern word is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. But this was the 1940's. At night he would be jerked from a restless dream, hearing the whistling of bullets and exploding bombs. His aggression levels were abnormal.

He turned to boxing and wrestling at Provincial level. "Something was forever hunting me. In the end demons were destroying me, driving me to the rubbish-dump of this world." He knew no way to cope.



***Wedding day, 5 March 1943***



***With his young family***

His life in general was growing worse, and he eventually realised that he had to find some way to change his course. His short marriage with Marie (née Holtzhausen) was almost on the rocks. The thought of losing their little baby daughter as well, aggravated matters.

He was converted miraculously and put his life into the hands of Jesus Christ. This led to his recovering from psychological harm and entering into a new life. He became a pastor in the AFM and later co-founder of their sister church, the Pentecostal Protestant Church. As a dynamic and resolute person he became a great leader in his assemblies, but especially in Klerksdorp, to which assembly he was called three times!

Pieter Snyman's remarkable life-story, titled *Dryfhout uit die See*, which was reprinted about four to five times, would lead many people to Christ. Long before his life-changing spiritual experience his sense of righteousness (though rather different at that time!) could be seen in the way he treated two Arabs during the war.

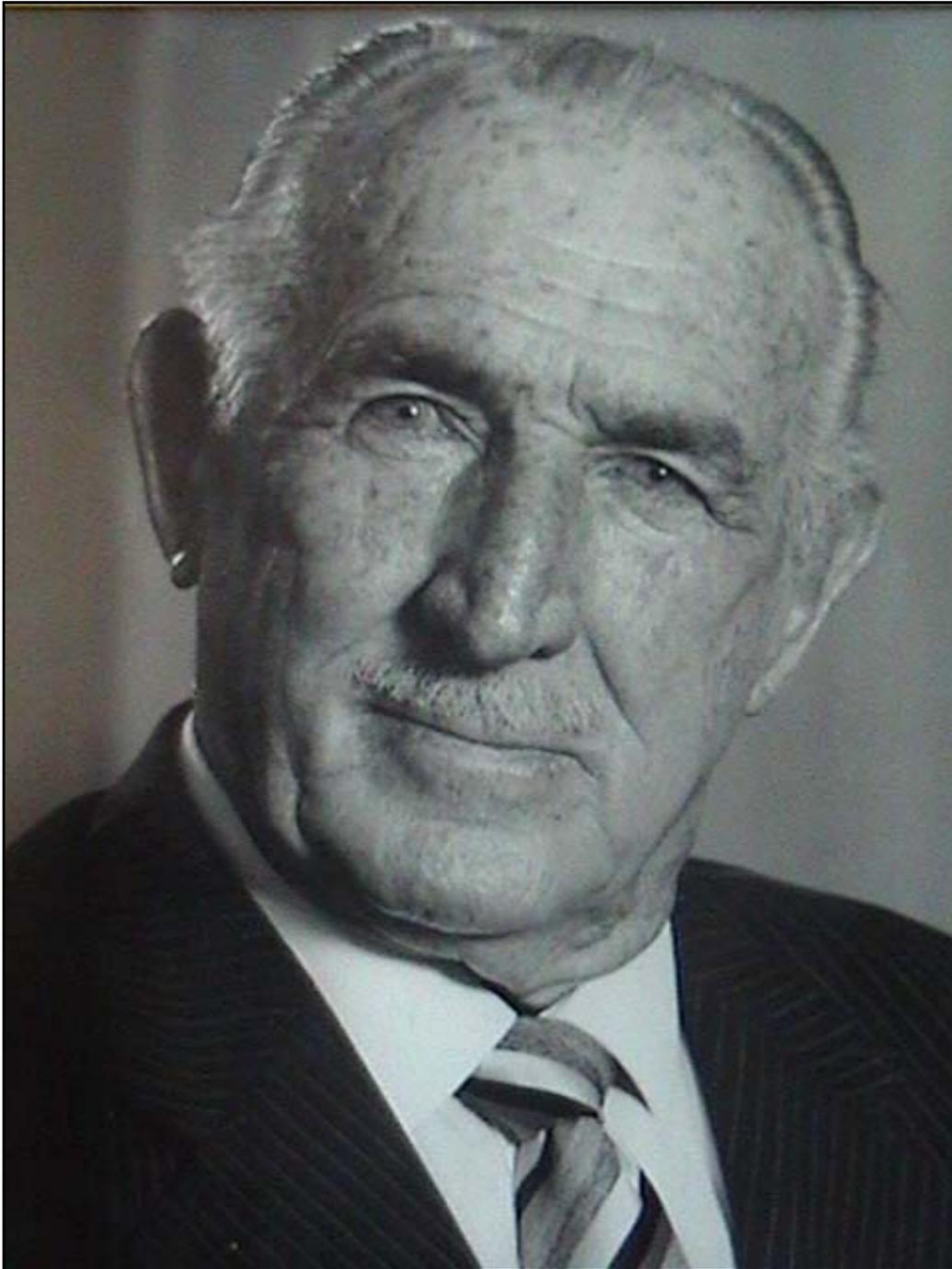
His patrol one day encountered the two men maltreating a little donkey. It was so small, and they were so big, that their feet scraped the sand while the poor animal all but collapsed under their weight. Pieter reversed the situation without further ado. He removed the two scoundrels and forced them to carry the donkey back home!

This sense of righteousness and integrity later came under the guidance of God, and he lived the life of a saint. His dynamic personality led him to one of his favourite utterances, *"I'd rather cool a fanatic than raise a corpse"* – a reference to people who did not appreciate the fullness of God's work of salvation through his Son. He became one of the most well-known evangelists in South Africa, labelled "the prince of evangelists" by a later moderator of the PPC. He worked unceasingly, mentoring young pastors, building churches and assemblies, and finally becoming the moderator of the PPC. At the age of 83 and afterwards he released two CD's and continued preaching across the country until he was 85.

After a tremendously full life, he died, peacefully at 86. At his burial service in Krugersdorp, and at the cemetery, a bagpiper, true to tradition of his old regiment, greeted him for the last time.

He was a most remarkable man who became victorious through prayer and mercy. We pay tribute to an outstanding soldier and gentleman and to a proud and exceptional SPRINGBOK, who would later also live a life as a civilian – a life that touched ten thousands of people.

His life has indeed created a difference and made the world a better place.



**Peter Johannes Jacobus Snyman - 6 April 1919- 30 April 2005**

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**Translation: JC Hough & MJ Conradie**