

Stark reality of Natal Command

Researched and written by Udo Richard **AVERWEG**



Introduction

The military history of Natal (now known as KwaZulu-Natal) includes the participation of its army units in different wars, battles, skirmishes and in peace-keeping efforts. Natalians have therefore been members of many honoured South African (SA) Army units which were involved in and played a significant role in South Africa's chequered military history of soldiering. As a former Officer Commanding of Natal Command (Brig J H Pretorius SD) notes 'soldiering has come naturally to the men of Natal'.

As the history of Natal evolved, so too did soldiering in the province. On 11 September 1969 saw the establishment of Group 9, 10 and 11 Headquarters. These 'groups' resorted under the authority of Natal Command which then exercised operational control over a number of SA Army Units in the province. For example, in later years Group 10 Headquarters had two SA Army Citizen Force units (Congella Regiment and Durban Regiment) and six Commando units (Durban South Commando, Durban North Commando, Highway Commando, Oribi Commando, South Coast Commando and Umgeni Commando) under its command. Soldiering in KwaZulu-Natal was thus widespread and Natal Command served at the apex of the SA Army organisational structure. The Headquarters of Natal Command remained situated along Durban's Snell Parade (S 29.50.14 E31.02.05).

The military history of Natal comprised soldiers from different population groups who were engaged in varied facets of soldiering (in-service on a full-time basis, in-service on a part-time basis and service on a volunteer basis). This soldiering had one objective, namely to protect the territorial integrity and also to maintain the security and safety ‘for the peaceful development of all the peoples of South Africa’. Many of the SA Army units in Natal existed until after the turn 21st century whereafter the new political dispensation resulted in their disestablishment.

These former SA Army units were not only the casualties during this attrition-process – Natal Command itself was also closed down. Nowadays only the white-peeling and yellow-tinged façade of the former entrance building still stands.



(Image 1: White-peeling and yellow-tinged façade of the former entrance building of Natal Command)

The former military buildings (with the exception of the chapel) inside the military base no longer exist. The Natal Command site (which was granted by the City Council of Durban of Durban on behalf of its citizens, to the Department of Defence on 12 February 1937) stands vacant. The area is almost forlorn and lifeless-looking except for the few Hadidas ibis (*Bostrychia hagedash*) foraging in this historical soil. But this land, its former military buildings and barracks contain much forgotten history. And they also contain an armoury of human stories. So, the question arises: Who were some of the most senior in-service full-time SA Army personnel who were stationed at Natal Command until it officially closed down on 23 November 2000? Answering this question with a brief discussion of the respective military *Stark reality of Natal Command* article published on 14 March 2019 in the *Daily News* newspaper Page 2 | 10

careers and highlights of these personnel during their tenure at Natal Command, is the aim of this article.

For the purposes of this article, the two most senior ranking military personnel (commissioned officer and non-commissioned officer) during this period, were:

- The General Officer Commanding (Maj Gen C E le Roux SD SM MMM); and
- The Command Sergeant Major (WO1 J M Goodrich PMM MMM).

Fortunately during 2018 both these former military soldiers could easily be contacted for interviewing purposes. This resulted in their respective oral histories and some of their memorable command functions at erstwhile Natal Command being accurately recorded and documented.

Purpose of the article

Against the introductory backdrop, the prime purpose of this article is therefore to document some of the military history records of two selected senior ranking military personnel. It is felt that they would both be in favourable positions to furnish the reader audience with a meaningful perspective and insight of some of Natal Command's history prior to its closure on 23 November 2000.

A secondary purpose of this article is to persevere some military history. An Internet scan of the records of archives yields little information about the history of Natal Command, under the command of these two senior ranking soldiers, during the period prior to its closure. This article thereby endeavours to 'close' this military history information gap using oral history as the appropriate and selected study approach. Oral history is a field of study and an accepted method of getting, preserving and interpreting the meaning of people in past events.

From the interviews and follow-up interviews, below is a career summary of the two interviewees with a specific focus on their respective military careers and some career highlights at Natal Command until its closure. On this closure-day on 23 November 2000, a combined medal parade and closing parade were held in front of the white façade building of Natal Command, Snell Parade. The Natal Command Headquarters' flag was then ceremoniously lowered for the *last* time.



(Image 2: *Last* ceremonial lowering of the Natal Command Headquarters' flag on 23 November 2000)

By the lowering of the flag, the well-known military landmark building of Natal Command dating back to after 1937, suddenly no longer 'existed'.

General Officer Commanding: Maj Gen C E le Roux SD SM MMM

Christoffel (Chris) Erasmus le Roux was born on 20 April 1946 in Dundee, northern Natal. At an early age, his parents relocated to Pinetown. He attended Pinetown Boys' High School and matriculated in December 1963.

While at high school, Chris excelled at competitive sport and actively participated in the school's cadet program. One of his earliest school cadet outings (in 1959) took place at Natal Command Headquarters. On that program the young teenager never imagined that one day, a school cadet from Pinetown High School, would be posted to these headquarters and serve as Natal Command's *last* General Officer Commanding (GOC).



(Image 3: Teenager Chris le Roux (top row, right) attending a school cadet outing in 1959 at Natal Command)

Following completion of his schooling, the seventeen-year-old teenager joined the South African Defence Force (SADF) - as it was then known as. After he completed his infantry training he was selected to attend the Military Academy in Saldanha. In 1967 he graduated with a B Mil degree from the University of Stellenbosch. On 21 November 1967 he was commissioned as an officer in the SADF with the rank of lieutenant. He qualified as a paratrooper on 9 October 1970. During his career years serving the SADF, he held various military appointments and postings in South Africa. One such appointment and posting was as Officer Commanding, 1 Parachute Battalion, Bloemfontein during the period 1984-1988.

On 18 February 1995, Brig le Roux was appointed Officer Commanding Natal Command. On 1 January 1996 he was appointed GOC Natal Command with the rank of Maj Gen. He served as GOC until Natal Command closed down.

He left the service of the South African Defence Force (SANDF) on 31 December 2000.



(Image 4: The *last* General Officer Commanding Natal Command, Maj Gen C E le Roux SD SM MMM)

During interviews (by the author) in 2018 of Gen le Roux, he remarked that during his tenure (1995 to 2000) as OC/GOC Natal Command, he recalled three significant highlights of his military career:

- conducting a continuous peace-keeping operation during times of political conflict between the ANC and IFP political parties and supporters in KwaZulu-Natal;
- planning and executing the SANDF Day parade through the streets of the City of Durban on 29 April 1995; and
- actively participating in the restructuring of the SANDF (this process was an amalgamation of eight different defence forces). The SANDF was reorganised according to modern-day organisational principles and this restructuring process eventually led to the closure of Natal Command.

During his distinguished 36-year career with the SADF/SANDF, Gen le Roux completed more than 300 parachute jumps and was decorated with ten medals. He and his wife Marlyna reside in Durban. Their two married sons currently reside abroad.

Command Sergeant Major: WO1 J M Goodrich PMM MMM

John Methven Goodrich was born on 12 September 1945 in Pretoria, Gauteng. He completed his school career at Hoërskool Hentie Cilliers in Virginia, Free State in 1963.

He also joined the SADF in 1964. In 1965 he attended an instructor's course in Oudtshoorn.

Stark reality of Natal Command article published on 14 March 2019 in the *Daily News* newspaper Page 6 | 10

During his career years serving the SADF, WO1 Goodrich also held various military appointments and postings in South Africa. One such appointment and posting was as Formation Sergeant Major, SA Army Battle School, Lohatla during the period 1988 to 1993.

On 1 November 1993, WO1 Goodrich was appointed Command Sergeant Major, Natal Command. He served in this Command Sergeant Major appointment until Natal Command closed down. He also left the service of the SANDF on 31 December 2000.

During interviews (by the author) of WO1 Goodrich, he remarked that during his tenure (1993 to 2000) as Command Sergeant Major, he recalled three significant highlights of his military career:

- training and overseeing 114 military parades (at the old Durban International Airport, Reunion) to welcome heads of state to the *12th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement* held during the period 29 August to 3 September 1998;
- organising the parade on 11 November 1999 at Stella Cemetery for the Canadian Prime Minister, The Right Honourable Jean Chretien, who laid a wreath at the Graves of Canadian Airmen who died during training in World War 2; and
- being involved with the welcoming parade for Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II during her visit to Durban in November 1999.

During his exemplary 36-year career with the SADF/SANDF, WO1 Goodrich was decorated with nine medals. He was also awarded the German CSM Muster Badge Bronze.



(Image 5: The *last* Command Sergeant Major Natal Command WO1 J M Goodrich PMM MMM)

John is widowed. He and his late wife (Sandra) have three daughters residing in South Africa.

Some concluding remarks

Both these senior ranking military personnel from the erstwhile Natal Command, are currently in their early seventies.



(Image 6: (l-r) Gen (rtd) Chris le Roux, W01 (rtd) John Goodrich and the author, Udo Averweg – photo taken on 19 February 2019 during final interview sessions)

Preserving their respective oral histories is important as their memories are at risk of being lost to the passage of time. During the interview processes of both of them, the author endeavoured to serve as a well-informed interviewer so that the prime purpose of adding to the historical record (of Natal Command) was fulfilled. With this approach, the secondary purpose of this article was also achieved.

When one reflects on the above constructed and documented oral history, the military era of Natal Command and its associated human stories of military career highlights, are almost forgotten. The stark reality is that Natal Command formally closed down more than 18 years ago and its history is now shrouded in a bygone era during a former political dispensation. Nevertheless, Natal Command as part of the SA Army, had in many ways accepted its role to guarantee the territorial integrity by upholding the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. It was committed, via its varied facets of soldiering, in ensuring that the internal stability, safety and welfare of KwaZulu-Natal and all its people were safeguarded. This is

noteworthy and one has a sense that soldiering *did* come naturally to the men (and women) of KwaZulu-Natal.

From these military commitments of yesteryear, present day oral history accounts now serve to safeguard the presentation and interpretation of past memorable events executed by Natal Command. Human stories, particularly in the context of military history, still resonate with some citizens in the City of Durban. The white-peeling and yellow-tinged façade of the former Natal Command entrance building also serves as a gentle reminder.

Bibliography

Anonymous (September 1990). *Natal Command: The Military History of Natal 1486-1990*. Unpublished manuscript, 558 pages.

Anonymous (Printed 1995). *Natal Command in Focus*, 91 pages.

Notes

- Udo Richard Averweg served as a commissioned officer with SA Army Citizen Force unit, Congella Regiment, based in Durban. He often visited Natal Command on official duties.
- He is a member of the South African Military History Society (KwaZulu-Natal branch). This article was penned in his personal capacity and for the common good of citizens of the City of Durban.
- Udo's eMail address is udo.averweg@gmail.com

MEMORIES



THE last ceremonial lowering of the Natal Command Headquarters' flag on November 23, 2000.



TEENAGER Chris le Roux, top row, right, attends a school cadet outing in 1959 at Natal Command.



THE last general officer commanding Natal Command, Major-General C.E. le Roux SD SM MMM.



THE last command sergeant major Natal Command WO1 JM Goodrich PMM MMM.



THE white-peeling- and yellow-tinged facade of the former entrance to Natal Command building.

Stark reality of Natal Command

The Durban site of the former military base stands vacant and its human stories are almost forgotten

UDO RICHARD AVEREG

THE military history of KwaZulu-Natal included the participation of its army units in different wars, battles, skirmishes and peacekeeping efforts. KwaZulu-Natalians have therefore been members of many honoured army units which were involved in and played a role in South Africa's chequered military history of soldiering.

As a former officer commanding (OC) of Natal Command, Brigadier JH Pretorius SD, noted, "soldiering has come naturally to the men of Natal". As the history of KZN evolved, so too did soldiering in the province.

September 11, 1969, saw the establishment of Group 9, 10 and 11 headquarters. These "groups" resorted under the authority of Natal Command which then exercised operational control over a number of SA Army Units.

For example, in later years Group 10 Headquarters had two SA Army Citizen Force units (Gongella Regiment and Durban Regiment) and six commando units (Durban South, Durban North, Highway Orbs, South Coast and Umgel) under its command.

Soldiering in KZN was thus widespread and Natal Command served at the apex of the SA Army organisational structure. The headquarters of Natal Command remained at Durban's Snell Parade.

The military history of Natal comprised of soldiers from different population groups who were engaged in varied facets, to protect the territorial integrity and also to maintain the security and safety "for the peaceful development of all the peoples of South Africa".

Many of the SA Army units in Natal existed until after the turn of the 21st century. The new political dispensation resulted in their disestablishment.

These units were not the only casualties during this attrition process - Natal Command was also closed down. Today, only the white-peeling, and yellow-tinged facade of the former entrance building still stands. The buildings (except the chapel) on the military base no longer exist.

The Natal Command site (which was granted by the City Council of Durban on behalf of its citizens, to the Department of Defence on February 12, 1937) stands vacant. The area is almost forlorn and lifeless-looking except for the few hadda ibs (*botrychis hagedash*) foraging in this historical soil.

But this land, its former military buildings and barracks contain much forgotten history. And they also contain an armoury of human stories.

Natal Command officially closed on November 23, 2000. On this day, a combined medal and closing parade was held in front of the building. The Natal Command Headquarters' flag was then lowered for the last time.

The two most senior ranking military personnel (commissioned officer and non-commissioned officer) during this period were: the general officer commanding (GOC) (Major-General C.E. le Roux SD SM MMM) and the command sergeant major (WO1 JM Goodrich PMM MMM).

I: GOC: Major-General C.E. le Roux SD SM MMM
Christoffel (Chris) Erasmus le Roux was born on April 30, 1946, in Dundee, northern Natal. He and his parents



CHRIS le Roux, left, John Goodrich and Udo Avereg.

relocated to Pinetown. He attended Pinetown Boys' High School and matriculated in December 1963.

Le Roux excelled at sport and participated in the school's cadet programme. One of his earliest school cadet outings (in 1959) took place at Natal Command Headquarters.

After school, the 17-year-old teenager joined the SA Defence Force (SADF) - as it was then known.

After completing infantry training, Le Roux attended the Military Academy in Sandanha.

In 1967, he graduated with a BMil degree from Stellenbosch University.

On November 21, 1967, Le Roux was commissioned as an officer in the SADF with the rank of lieutenant.

He qualified as a paratrooper on October 9, 1970. He held various military appointments and postings. One was as officer commanding, 1 Parachute Battalion, Bloemfontein, during 1984-1988.

On February 18, 1995, Le Roux was appointed OC Natal Command.

On January 1, 1996, he was appointed as GOC Natal Command with the rank of major-general.

He served as GOC until Natal Command closed down. Le Roux left the service of the SA National Defence Force (SANDF) on December 31, 2000.

Le Roux recalled three significant highlights during his tenure (1995 to 2000) as OC/GOC Natal Command:

- Conducting continuous peacekeeping operations during political conflict between the ANC and IFP supporters in KZN.
- Planning and executing the SANDF Day parade through the streets of Durban on April 29, 1995.
- Actively participating in the restructuring of the SANDF (this process was an amalgamation of eight different defence forces). The SANDF was reorganised according to modern-day organisational principles and this restructuring process eventually led to the closure of Natal Command.

During his 36-year career with the SADF/SANDF, Le Roux completed more than 300 parachute jumps and was decorated with 10 medals.

He and his wife Marijna live in Durban. Their two married sons live abroad.

2: Command sergeant major: WO1 JM Goodrich PMM MMM

John Melville Goodrich was born on September 12, 1945, in Pretoria. He completed his schooling at Hoërskool Henric Colliers in Virginia, Free State, in 1963.

He joined the SADF in 1964. In 1965, he attended an instructor's

course in Oudtshoorn.

Goodrich held various military appointments and postings. One was as formation sergeant major, SA Army Battle School, Lohatla, during 1988-1993.

On November 1, 1993, Goodrich was appointed as command sergeant major, Natal Command. He served in this appointment until Natal Command closed down.

He left the service of the SANDF on December 31, 2000.

Goodrich recalled three significant

highlights of his tenure (1993-2000) as command sergeant major:

- Training and overseeing 114 military parades (at the old Durban International Airport, Reunio) to welcome heads of state to the 12th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement held from August 29 to September 3, 1998.
- Organising the parade on November 11, 1999, at Stella Cemetery for the then Canadian prime minister, Jean Chretien, who laid a wreath at the graves of Canadian airmen who died during training in World War II.
- Involved with the welcoming parade for Queen Elizabeth II during her visit to Durban in November 1999.

During his 36-year career with the SADF/SANDF, Goodrich was decorated with nine medals. He was also awarded the German CSM Muster Badge Bronze.

Both these military personnel are currently in their early seventies.

When one reflects on this documented oral history, the military era of Natal Command and its associated human stories are almost forgotten.

The stark reality is that Natal Command formally closed down more than 18 years ago and its history is now shrouded in a bygone era during a former political dispensation.

Nevertheless, Natal Command as part of the SA Army had in many ways accepted its role to guarantee the territorial integrity by upholding the Constitution.

It was committed, via its varied facets of soldiering, in ensuring that the internal stability, safety and welfare of KZN and all its people were safeguarded.

This is noteworthy and one has a sense that soldiering did come naturally to the men (and women) of KZN.

From these military commitments of yesteryear, present day oral history accounts serve to safeguard the presentation and interpretation of past events executed by Natal Command.

Human stories, particularly in the context of military history, still resonate with some citizens of Durban.

The facade of the former Natal Command entrance building also serves as a gentle reminder.

● Avereg served as a commissioned officer with SA Army Citizen Force unit, Gongella Regiment, based in Durban. He often visited Natal Command on official duties. He is a member of the South African Military History Society (KwaZulu-Natal branch). This article was penned in his personal capacity.

PRESENTED BY

INDEPENDENT

CHAMPAGNE

WATERFALL

NEW CHAMPAGNE LOUNGE

Craft Fest EST 2011

CRAFTED TO PERFECTION!
A FESTIVAL OF CRAFT BEER, GIN, CIDER & WINE, GOURMET FOOD, LIVE MUSIC & EXCLUSIVE LIFESTYLE CRAFTS.

21 MARCH 2019, 10AM-4PM
SHONGWENI FARMERS MARKET

BRING THE WHOLE FAMILY TO OUR DEDICATED KIDS ZONE!
TICKET INCLUDES A FESTIVAL GLASS
ADULTS: R130 AT DOOR
PRESALE: R120
AGE 12-17: R60
UNDER 12: FREE
WWW.QUICKET.CO.ZA

Quicket INDEPENDENT

Drink Responsibly. Not for Sale to Persons Under the Age of 18.